

New Phase

Part 2 of 5

Series #1 in the Teach the Sky Continuity

By Robert V Aldrich

New Phase, Part 2 of 5
Copyright: Robert V Aldrich, 2014
Published: 2014/04/04

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Hayao Minase didn't drink regular water. Fountain water was too easily contaminated. And rain water was, almost by definition, made from dirt. He insisted on the purest water of all; iceberg water. The Japanese businessman, the Director of Special Projects for Eighty-Four Industries, had chunks of ice removed from icebergs and preserved just for his drinking consumption. Whole liters were preserved inside specially purified glass bottles. Hayao Minase had no interest in anything regular.

In a modest office – large enough to be impressive but small enough to be reasonable – he worked diligently but intelligently. Every piece of furniture, every article of clothing he wore, and every device he used, was limited edition if not custom-made. It wasn't about aesthetic so much as being unique, being anything but regular. On the wall behind Minase's desk hung degrees and decorations establishing his credentials; credentials that few if anyone else in the world could claim.

Opening a sealed glass bottle, Minase took a sip as the office door opened. In stepped a young woman in a sharp gray business suit with a folder held against a trusted tablet computer. "Sir," she said with a bow.

He waved for her to come in as he drank more perfect water. "The morning update," he said.

"Yes sir," she confirmed. "As I believe you know, we tracked Shotaro and Miya Kodana from Watanabe Park last night." The woman stood in the very center of the office, reciting the information from memory rather than consulting the folder she'd brought. "They stayed with a school friend of Shotaro's – one Saya Miyamura – and are still there now."

"Have there been any further uses of the device?" Minase asked, closing the glass bottle. He set it back in the chilled drawer of his desk. He walked around to take the folder from the woman.

"No sir," she said. "All monitoring has shown no power spikes from the shifter. For the moment, he's in the here and now and hasn't shifted to any other planes. Those two

times yesterday when he and his sister were evading capture were the only times he has used the device.”

Minase smiled. “It’s amazing what kids can do,” he said, reading the file.

Inoue shifted a little nervously and then summoned the strength to ask “Sir, why didn’t we apprehend them at Watanabe Park?” Minase glanced at her, curious as to her question. “We can’t track the shifter; only monitor its power usage. Once they disposed of their cell phones, we lost pretty much our only way of tracking them. Why didn’t we get them when we knew where they were?”

“Jurisdictional issues,” Minase said, shifting from one page to the next in the folder. “Our chasing the kids through the mall burned a lot of our goodwill.”

Inoue visibly didn’t follow. “Then why not send the police?” she pressed.

“We don’t own the police, a fact of which more than a few police officers will be very happy to remind us,” he told her. “We know individual officers that we can...incentivize, but it’s rarely cost-effective. We can pull some strings but strings always get pulled in return.” He went back to looking through the folder thick with reports. “For every action, there is a reaction,” he more mumbled than stated. “And we MUST minimize reactions.”

Inoue accepted the explanation. “So far, the Kodana children have made no attempt to go public with the shifter,” she summed up. “They’ve posted nothing on any blogs, made no attempt to contact news outlets, nothing. Not even a text to classmates.”

“Which is both a blessing and a curse,” Minase reminded her. “Right now, they have committed no real crime. Therefore, every effort we make to apprehend them will raise more questions; questions we cannot indefinitely bury.”

“Sir, is there a chance the children will attempt to leave Tokyo?” she asked, turning as Minase paced around the room, reading. “Their father is—”

“Their father is unknown,” Minase told her. He closed the folder and addressed the woman. He smiled, like he was just now realizing she was a real person. “Inoue, right?” he asked with a smile.

The woman smiled and nodded, bowing slightly. “Yes sir.”

He grinned, like he was pleased with himself and her. “Miyako Kodana separated from her boyfriend while still pregnant with her daughter.” He read from the file. “Their father not only isn’t in the picture; it’s likely he doesn’t even know he has a second child.” He read for a moment. “Given from what we’ve turned up on the lout, it’s entirely possible he didn’t even know he had the first one.”

“We know his whereabouts,” Inoue said.

“Only because we run very thorough background checks, especially on our engineers, like Miyako Kodana,” Minase told her. “She didn’t even know we knew of her boyfriend, much less his whereabouts.” He closed the folder and handed it for Inoue to take. “The children have no one to go to. Their biological father is nothing more than a stranger. Both Miyako’s parents died in a car accident seven years ago.” Minase shook his head and looked around thoughtfully. “No, they have no one to turn to, except whatever friends they have from school.”

“It looks like they’ve already done that,” Inoue told him.

“So it does,” Minase said. He turned and faced his door. “Let us close up this last outlying matter.” He started out, Inoue following.

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Shotaro's eyes fluttered open with a big smile. The smell of perfume was deep in his senses and he liked it. The pillow he was lying on was soft and smooth, as was the bed. He heard a soft girlish giggle from the bathroom across the hall, opposite the bedroom. His eyes fluttered open and he saw a pop idol poster on the ceiling above him. There was another girlish giggle. His grin got wider.

"Can you hand me some of the pads by the toilet," he heard Saya said.

Shotaro's eyes sprang open in disgust. He sat up in Saya's bed, shivering like bugs were crawling all over him. He looked across the hall through the open door as Saya Miyamura and Miya both exited the bathroom, freshly showered and chipper. Both could see Shotaro's disgusted look. "Can't handle girl talk?" Saya teased him.

Rather than offer a pithy response, Shotaro just swung his legs out from under the blanket on the futon bed and sat there. "I didn't get much sleep last night," he said as a partial defense.

"Yeah, you two didn't sneak in until after midnight," Saya said, applying makeup in a mirror over her bedroom desk. "Sorry about my dad staying up so late. He likes the late night anime."

"I used to too," Shotaro said.

"Used to?" Saya said, staying still. She had leaned forward to see close to the mirror, but was not looking out of the corner of her eye at Shotaro. His eyes trailed to her presented hips as she bent over the desk. Noticing, she gave him a teasing wiggle, which broke him from his trance.

"Yeah," he said, looking away. "I just...I get the impression I won't get the chance to watch them again anytime soon." He looked down at his dark blue school uniform. It didn't look dirty but it felt dirty.

"It's not like you're fugitives," said Saya. Shotaro looked across at Miya who was brushing her hair in the corner. Neither one of them said much of anything. Saya, noticing, stood up from the mirror, her makeup applied liberally. "Well, how do I look?"

“Like you’re going to walk the streets,” Shotaro told her.

“You’re just jealous because you couldn’t afford a woman like me,” Saya told him with a haughty smirk. Miya, looking back and forth between the two, rolled her eyes. She went back to focusing on brushing her hair.

“Where are your parents?” Shotaro asked.

“At work,” Saya said. “I left for school, circled the block, and came home.” She cocked one hip out and looked expectantly at Shotaro. “So what happened? Your locker was searched and all your stuff got taken.”

“By the police?” Miya asked with a panicked tone. She looked across the room at Shotaro and whimpered “Your record!”

Both Shotaro and Saya looked back at her, astonished that she could miss the point of the discussion. “Were they the police?” Shotaro asked Saya.

“I assume so,” she said. Giving it some thought now, her certainty dwindled. “I mean...maybe?” She looked back at Miya, then to Shotaro. “Who else would it be?”

“We went by our place last night, before coming here,” Shotaro told Saya. “There were Eighty-Four Industries security guys all around our apartment building.”

“Eighty-Four Industries?” Saya repeated. “What happened?” she practically pled. “You guys didn’t say much last night, except that your mom got in trouble with the company she worked for, told you to run, and then you guys hid out all over the city or something?”

“Our mom didn’t get in trouble; she’s IN trouble,” Miya told Saya even as she looked away, like facing Saya was facing the matter at hand.

“What kind of trouble is she in?” Saya asked.

“We don’t know,” Shotaro told her. “She just...she sent me that text.”

“She sent it to me too,” Miya said a little too eagerly. But then she cast her eyes down. “I just didn’t check my phone until later.”

“And she left me this...thing,” Shotaro said, holding up his hand. On his left hand was a watch-like device resting on the back of his hand, almost like a glove.

“Why did she leave you that?” Saya asked, approaching the device.

“It—” Miya began to divulge.

“—isn’t clear what it is,” Shotaro spoke over her. “It doesn’t do anything. It doesn’t keep time or anything.” He made a half-hearted show of showing Saya the back-of-the-hand watch-like device but didn’t hold it for her to see.

“It’s got a dial,” Saya observed about the blue-and-black device. She reached for it but Shotaro pulled his hand away. “What kind of engineer was your mom?”

“Communications and stuff,” Shotaro said, now half-hiding the device against his leg. “Look, we need to figure out what’s happened to mom.”

“We NEED help,” Miya said firmly from the corner of the small room.

Saya looked at Miya sympathetically but said nothing. No one did until Shotaro, looking down at the futon he still sat upon, ventured cautiously “Do you remember when your mom was sick?” Saya turned slowly to Shotaro, the look on her face warning him to tread lightly. “How did you guys find the doctor that did the surgery?”

“What?” Miya asked aloud. “Your mom had surgery?”

“On-line,” Saya said very guardedly in a curt tone. She glowered at Shotaro for even broaching the topic.

“Yeah, but how did you find THAT doctor? I mean, come on. No one gets their appendix removed in a veterinarian’s office,” Shotaro said to Saya.

Saya hid her growing fury very well, but Miya was oblivious to it. “What?” the young girl asked again. “Why’d your mom have an appendectomy done in a—”

“Because we couldn’t afford it!” Saya unloaded at Miya.

“Hey!” Shotaro yelled, standing up and stepping to Saya.

“Don’t bring my mom into this!” Saya warned Shotaro, her finger in his face.

“I’m not!” Shotaro yelled.

“Stop screaming!” Miya yelled futilely.

“Look,” Shotaro said softly in an effort to calm things down. “This isn’t about your mom, about the surgery, any of that.” Saya still glared at Shotaro. “It’s about getting to somebody who knows something about what’s going on.”

“Since you know so much, why don’t you figure it out?” Saya said violently. “You’re the one that knows people.”

“I know guys who sell bikes and cigarettes and stuff,” Shotaro told her. “This is different. This is…” He shook his head. “This is real. And I know your dad didn’t know the vet that did the surgery. You guys found him somehow. YOU found him. How?”

Saya looked away from Shotaro, flushed with rage. Her eyes traveled to Miya. Seeing the younger girl in the corner, Saya’s anger was blunted with sympathy. “I-I’m not supposed to talk about it,” she said, averting her eyes as she spoke.

“What, did you find him through that guy that sells your panties?” Shotaro asked. Saya slapped him.

“No, you ass! And I only did that a couple of times. And one of those times was to keep you from losing your teeth, you ungrateful bastard!” She turned entirely from Shotaro and crossed her arms.

“Are you going to hold your breath now, like when we were kids?” Shotaro said. Saya elbowed backwards, catching Shotaro right in the stomach. He doubled over in pain, gasping to keep from shouting.

“Would you two quit it?!” Miya yelled, standing defiantly at them. She focused on Saya entirely. “Look, I know my brother’s an ass but we need help. Please!”

Saya melted before Miya's plea. She sighed in frustration and took out her phone, sitting down in the rolling chair at her desk. She quickly called up an image and showed it to Miya. "See this?" she said, showing Miya the image of a serpent wrapped around a pole.

"Yeah," Miya said. "It's a medical thing."

"It's called The Rod of Ak...Asclepius," Saya said, having some trouble remembering the exact pronunciation. "It's a..." Her words trailed. She looked at Shotaro who was recovering from her strike to his stomach. "It's a symbol of what's called the Medical Underground."

"The Medical Underground?" Miya said. "What's that?"

"All I can give you," Saya said.

"What?" Shotaro griped. "That's it? What the hell!"

Having gone back to looking at the picture, Miya realized, "Hey, near school, isn't there a—"

"Yes," Saya confirmed immediately, looking Miya in the eyes.

Miya smiled with realization. "Got it," she said.

"What's going on?" Shotaro asked, lost in the discussion.

"Girl-to-girl telepathy," Saya told him condescendingly. "Didn't you know all women can communicate directly? That's how we share gossip about little boys who pretend to be men."

As she teased/insulted Shotaro, Saya's phone gave off half a ring, startling all three kids. She snatched it up and flipped it open. "Was that a text?" asked Miya.

"That's one of your alarms," Shotaro recognized.

"Alarms?" asked Miya.

“I set up some motion sensors and cameras. It’s disgusting the guys that try to sneak a peek through my window...” Saya’s voice trailed off. Panic filled her eyes and she turned her phone so Shotaro could see.

A man in combat black attire with a tazer was crouching down in the back of the alley. Down the alley, Shotaro and Miya could both see more men at the rear of the house. Miya gasped and looked to the window that she now realized was just above the head of the man outside.

Shotaro looked at Saya and shook his head. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

Still terrified, she nodded. She took a tear-soaked breath and said, “When you get the chance, run.” Before Shotaro could say anything, Saya stood and crossed the room. She exited and went to the front door, throwing it open. Shotaro and Miya could hear her yell “Run, Shotaro, run!” out the front door, like he was a street over. “Run—” Her words were cut off when she was yanked out the front door.

Miya and Shotaro both heard running from the alley and a glance at Saya’s phone revealed the alley had been vacated and cleared. “Let’s go!” Shotaro said, opening the window in a flash and vaulting out.

He landed in the narrow alley separating Saya’s apartment building from its neighbor. He glanced down either side and then turned back to Miya as she tossed their school bags through to him. He didn’t bother catching them but let them slam against him and fall to his feet, then helped Miya out of the window. “Which way?” she asked.

“This way,” Shotaro said, taking her hand and running towards the rear of the apartment building. Their shoulders rubbed against the narrow space, barely wider than a sidewalk, and they skidded to a halt at the edge. Shotaro peeked around the corner to his right and saw a Tokyo police officer waiting by a squad car, turned away and on the radio. To his left, Shotaro saw nothing but a morning street whose post-workers-and-school-kids-leaving-for-the-day activity was tapering off like a shift change was underway.

“What do we do?” Miya asked.

Shotaro glanced at the police officer again. “We can’t stay here,” he whispered to himself. He glanced back at Miya and said “Stay calm.” He turned the corner, walking slowly in the direction away from the apartment building and parallel to the police officer.

“Shotaro...” Miya whispered, averting her eyes from the direction of the officer. “What are you doing?!”

“Don’t hide,” Shotaro told her. “Make eye contact, smile, wave, do whatever.” The police officer looked up from his radio and turned partially towards them. Miya grinned and gave a huge, friendly wave. “Not THAT much!” Shotaro whispered at her through grinding teeth. He risked glancing at the officer. The uniformed cop broke away from his car and was approaching them.

“We’re still in our school clothes. Maybe he just thinks we’re truants,” Miya whispered hopefully.

“We’re not finding out,” Shotaro said before breaking into a run. The cop was left stumbling to keep up as Shotaro and Miya ran to an alley and darted inside. “He’ll radio somebody,” he said quickly, looking down the alley they were racing down.

“We can’t just keep running away forever!” Miya begged, already exhausted.

Shotaro glanced back and saw the long morning shadow of the police officer falling over the entrance to the alley. At a loss, Shotaro turned the dial on his mother’s device to 2 o’clock and grabbed Miya’s hand. Before she could protest, he slapped the display down with her hand.

Searing pain like she’d never known came over Miya. Too much agony than she could even comprehend overrode her entire being, keeping her from screaming or even moving. Her eyes clamped shut as she clung to Shotaro’s hand, practically crushing it, like her body was in desperate need to share even the tiniest part of the agony she felt.

The police officer entered the alley. Seeing no sign of the two teens, he spoke into his shoulder-mounted walkie-talkie as he returned to his car. As soon as the officer disappeared from the alley entrance, Shotaro broke free of Miya to redial the device back to

12 o'clock. Once contact was broken, Miya was nearly shattered again as the intensity of the agony renewed. She was violently thrown out of the purple world and returned to the golden light of the normal morning. She fell onto the pavement of the alley and curled into a painful ball, shaking.

"Miya!" Shotaro exclaimed quietly after returning to normal. He knelt down next to her and tried to sit her up. "What, are you okay?" Miya was crying in pain. She grabbed his jacket and clutched to him. "It's okay," he told her blindly, hoping for once in his life he was right.

"It hurt," Miya whispered between frightful sobs. "Oh god, it hurt!" She yanked Shotaro down to her, looking him in the eyes desperately. "Please don't ever do that again!"

"I won't, I won't!" he promised her. As she released him, she saw the device on his hand and instinctively crawled away from it, and from him. Shotaro stood up, hiding his left hand behind his back. "Can you walk?" he asked.

Miya wiped her tears away and nodded, releasing a few final sobs. She got to her feet and brushed down her uniform skirt, trying in vain to make herself look presentable. "We can't keep running away," Miya insisted, demanding now. "Where are we going?"

"That symbol Saya showed you," Shotaro said. Saying his friend's name out loud filled Shotaro with worry, but he pushed it aside. "You remember, the staff-thingie?"

"The Rod of Asclepius?" Miya said.

"Sure," Shotaro agreed immediately. "You said there was a place near to school that had that symbol." Miya just stared. "That's where we're going."

Shotaro expected her to argue, to protest, to give some resistance of some kind, but instead Miya nodded and said "Okay."

So surprised, all Shotaro could say for a moment was "Okay". He finally looked up from the trash bin and glanced to the street. Two police cars went driving by, just as he looked up. He dove back down and thought for a second. He swung his backpack off his

shoulders and handed it to Miya, saying “I’m going to check the way, okay?” Miya fearfully nodded and hugged their backpacks.

Shotaro adjusted the dial on the watch to 2 o’clock and pressed the digital display. The sun turned purple and the world took on the same shade as he lifted up from behind the bin. He glanced back at Miya, mindful of the pain he’d caused her just a moment ago. Seeing her huddled down, almost invisible against the dumpster, he felt a very real pang of guilt. Putting it aside, much like his worry for Saya, he walked carefully out of the alley and glanced down the street. The sidewalks were as bustling as the street but he saw no sign of police activity, nor any evidence of Eighty-Four Industries operatives.

Shotaro turned back, ready to retrieve Miya from her hiding spot, when he realized he wasn’t being jostled. The sidewalk was packed with people going to and fro, but a small oasis had opened in the thoroughfare. The people were moving around him, making room, even though they clearly didn’t acknowledge his existence.

Shotaro was tempted to return to normal space right there and see what would happen, but elected against it. He slipped back into the alley, just in time to see a man in black combat attire come around the way he and Miya had run. Shotaro couldn’t tell if he was in the real world or the purple domain, but when the man glanced down at the bin and spotted Miya, it was clear enough.

“NO!” Shotaro yelled as the man moved for Miya. Shotaro ran at him and swung with his right fist. Not unaccustomed to physical violence, Shotaro caught the man across the face. Shotaro’s hand warped at impact and the pain was intense. He leapt back and grabbed his hand, but the man stumbled back only half a step, surprised but hardly injured, like he’d been struck by an unexpected breeze.

At the bin, Shotaro glanced at Miya as he held his throbbing hand. She was cowering behind the bags, as though they might still offer her some protection from being caught. Shotaro looked around for something, anything he could use to fight with. At his feet, he spotted half a brick. He reached down and grabbed the fist-sized fragment.

The sensation was like pulling a plate out of mud. The fragment of brick was impossibly heavy for something so small and it seemed to actively resist being lifted or moved in any way. And yet, once Shotaro had his hand around the thing and removed it from the ground at all, it felt like normal. Armed with the primitive weapon, he turned to the guard.

The man had noticed the abrupt disappearance of the brick. He was staring where the brick had been, not where it was in Shotaro's hand. He was staring not with fear or confusion, but realization. He grabbed at the microphone at his shoulder, strapped into his uniform, and began to look frantically around the alley. "The boy is using the shifter. I repeat, the boy is using the shifter."

None of that made sense to Shotaro as he moved on instinct. He rushed at the man and slammed the fragment of brick at his head. The impact was clear, but it was like striking a wall with a piece of paper. The man noticed and was hurt, but was hardly injured at all. He swung wildly with his fist and Shotaro slipped around it. Shotaro pegged him in the head again, in the same spot, and the man fell to the ground. Shotaro struck him once more and the man went down, dazed but not entirely unconscious.

With the man dazed, Shotaro shifted back into the normal world, startling the terrified Miya. He tossed the brick aside and grabbed her hand, saying "Come on." His other hand throbbing in pain, they ran out onto the street and disappeared into the crowd.

Minase leaned forward over Saya's bed, his head tilted so that he could see the poster of the pop star on the ceiling over her bed. "How did she even get that up there?" he wondered for a moment.

Inoue entered the teen girl's room with some critical appraisal of the girl's style. She dismissed her opinion and said, "Sir, we just had usage of the Kodana's subway passes." Minase turned from the poster to Inoue. She handed the tablet to him and said "It would appear they're heading to school."

“School?” he wondered aloud. “Why would—” He fell silent as two police officers walked by the doors to the room. “Why would they go back there?”

Inoue looked back at the door, making sure the officers weren't listening. “I don't know. But we do know the Tokyo police are growing impatient. We cannot continue to utilize them.”

“I'm truly surprised the kids haven't gone to the police,” Minase said, returning her tablet.

“Every projection based on this and similar scenarios – where unauthorized technology is leaked early in a non-commercial fashion – plays out with the evading subjects seeking public assistance, from either the police or the media,” Inoue all but quoted. “We have no scenario where they just...go on the run.” She spoke with near-awe of the insanity of it. Minase said nothing; he just looked around at Saya's room. “Over ninety percent of our resources are rooted in anti-media and intra-social services scenarios. We just don't have the manpower and persuasive infrastructure to track these children if they keep evading us.”

“They can't run indefinitely,” Minase said, clearly playing devil's advocate.

“And we don't have indefinitely to get the shifter back,” Inoue said, hugging the tablet to her chest. “We're already behind our...” She glanced at the door nervously. “Behind our competitors.”

Minase thought about that for a moment, then smirked at Inoue. “My my, you HAVE read up on everything,” he praised. She blushed and bowed a little, nervously brushing her bangs behind her ears. “Don't worry,” Minase said, getting back to business. “Projections don't always hold up to fact. It's for that reason we have contingency plans.” He began to walk out.

Inoue started in surprise. “W-we have contingency plans?” she asked, following him.

The Rod of Asclepius was spray-painted into the corner of a sign that simply said ‘Sweets’ that sat atop a candy shop. Little more than an indoor kiosk, the tiny shop had

barely enough room for one person to stand in. Candy was hanging from numerous pegs that practically covered the entire counter/storefront.

“What the hell is this?” Shotaro asked, staring up at the sign to the candy shop.

“This is where all the middle school kids get their candy,” Miya said. “It’s way cheaper than the boutiques in the mall.” She looked strangely happy. The circumstances notwithstanding, as she stood before the candy shop, she almost seemed like a kid enjoying a day playing hooky from school. “Plus, he usually buys stuff for the fundraisers.”

“You know him?” Shotaro asked as he began to walk towards the candy shop. It was up a waggling street that was little more of a wide bike path, and steep enough to almost be a set of stairs. Small, two-story apartments dotted the area around the sweets shop while larger buildings loomed just behind them. It looked less like a real business and more like a scam somebody had built in a crack in the building no one had sealed properly.

“I mean, I buy candy from him,” Miya said. She was hugging Shotaro’s arm. She’d squeeze his throbbing hand from time to time, but he didn’t let on the pain it was causing him.

They reached the store and could see a man sitting behind the counter, reading a cheap paperback novel. He was an older man, probably in his sixties or even older, in a white t-shirt that was way too old and light blue pants that had seen better days. He looked more like a well-cleaned hobo than a real business owner, much less anyone who should be around kids. “Yes?” he asked, not even putting his book down. “What do you want?” He had a smoky voice, like he’d lost his voice a few decades ago and it had never quite returned.

A million lies and fears went through Shotaro’s mind as he tried to think of the smoothest way to ask this man about possible connections he might have to some underground network of possibly illegal information. Thoughts of seedy connections and trench coat-clad men handing packages wrapped in brown paper bags filled Shotaro’s mind. And as he was trying to think of the best codeword he could use to communicate with the man, Miya went with the direct root.

“We’re in trouble with a giant corporation that’s chasing after us because of some invention our mother invented or helped develop or something that makes people disappear and we’re trying to rescue her because we think they kidnapped her and a friend of ours whose mom had illegal surgery on her appendix was able to get help from you so we were hoping you could help us somehow.” Miya smiled hopefully at the man.

Shotaro facepalmed.

The man looked at the two kids like they were crazy. “Come around back,” he said slowly.

Shotaro looked at the store about as wide as a closet door. “How?” he asked. The man gestured to a door without a handle, just to their left. Shotaro had noticed the door, but had honestly thought it was just so much scrap and rubble lying around. That it was a real door that led somewhere seemed impossible. As he reached for where a handle might be, the door popped open just a little, startling Shotaro and Miya.

“Well?” asked the man, who’d walked around to let them in. He held the door for them as they stepped down two steps made out of cinderblocks into a long, wide room that was maybe four feet tall. “Welcome to my home,” said the man, gesturing to the large but oppressively narrow space.

“You live here?” Shotaro marveled, tilting his head and bending over. There was a military-style cot in the corner, with an array of pictures taped around it. A bunch of books sat on the dusty floor that looked prone to flooding but was currently just dusty.

“I live where I can,” the man said. He walked back towards an opening – not quite a doorway – that led into the candy shop. It was a spot on the wall that, looking in, Shotaro had mistaken for a storage space into a closet. “So...what do you want?” he asked bluntly.

Shotaro cupped the shifter on his left hand, turning the dial nervously. He left the popped up display extended. “I’m—” Shotaro began.

“I don’t want names,” the old man started off making very clear. “And I don’t want to see you again. Ever.” He looked at Miya. “Either of you.”

Something about the old man had changed to Shotaro. Sitting now, with his back to the light rather than facing it, the old man's eyes looked far older. Something horrible was in this man's past, the likes of which Shotaro couldn't understand. It haunted him like a ghost, keeping him connected to some tragedy. And it wasn't a horror in the truest sense, but something far more nefarious and evil. Something had happened to him, something had been done to him; something had been taken from him by someone or something he trusted. He hadn't been hurt or harmed, but betrayed. And he had never recovered.

"Our mother..." Shotaro started and rethought. "The Eighty-Four Corporation...Industries, whatever. They did something to our mother." Shotaro held up the shifter on his hand. "And it has something to do with this."

The old man looked at the device, then at Shotaro. "That's what makes you disappear?" asked the candy shop owner. Shotaro nodded. "Do you know what that is?"

"Do you?" Shotaro said back.

The old man's face didn't move, and yet somehow his expression changed. He almost smiled. "Lemme see it." He gestured at Shotaro like he was summoning a stray dog. The nature of the gesture not lost on Shotaro, he grudgingly stepped forward and extended his left hand. The man studied the primed device for just a second, focusing mostly on the digital display.

After only a moment, Shotaro asked "What do the numbers mean?"

The old man didn't respond. He instead asked "What's it look like when you disappear?"

Shotaro stared for a moment before he said "Purple."

"How many settings does it have?" the old man asked curtly. "How many clicks around the dial?"

Shotaro looked increasingly irritated. "Six."

That number seemed to surprise the old man. "How many have you tried?"

“What IS this?” Shotaro demanded.

The old man looked at Shotaro like he was a child. “To answer your first question, those numbers are status symbols. Percentages. See how it shows 99:99?” Shotaro looked at the device, with Miya standing on her toes to peer over his shoulder. “One number is energy. The other is materials. The thing is powered by you and your movements.”

“A friend of mine has a watch like that,” Miya said, like she was desperate to contribute to the discussion.

“In much the same way, it collects things like oxygen and radon that it needs to...” The old man smirked a little, realizing he was getting ahead of himself. “As for your second question, son, do you know what a free radical is?”

Shotaro shrugged blankly. “A kind of political terrorist?”

“It’s an oxygen molecule,” Miya piped up a little cheerfully, like she was back in school. “It’s a free oxygen molecule that breaks off in chemical reactions in the body.”

“No,” the old man told her with far more authority than Shotaro would have expected. “It’s an atom or molecule that has an incomplete electron shell. Hydroxyl, carbene; these are free radicals. They can be found in the body,” he said like an encouragement to Miya. “And they can be carcinogenic.” He looked at Shotaro and said “That means they can cause cancer. They’re dangerous,” he summarized a little condescendingly. He pointed at the device. “That – or at least its developmental predecessors – was a free radical screening invention.”

“A what?” Shotaro stumbled.

The old man sighed, like Shotaro was living, breathing justification for his pessimism at the future of the world. “It was a gizmo that, when turned on, helped keep people from getting sick,” he said it in a monotone saturated with disapproval. “Eighty-Four Industries – allegedly – was developing alternative uses for it.”

“You know this because you’re part of the medical underground?” Miya asked, inquiring like she was addressing a celebrity.

The only confirmation the old man would give was to say “Any doctor who has license taken from him would be part of the underground.” He turned to his book on the counter of the candy stall and shifted it, like doing so was allowing him to mentally restart, putting away the rage that question had brought up. “There’s been a lot of work recently on using quantum mechanics to address free radicals. Some of the early papers being published suggested the use of big machines, that thing’s predecessors,” he said, pointing at the shifter. “They didn’t so much fire a laser through a person as put them in a state that was just slightly outside of regular space-time.”

“Space-time,” Miya repeated. She looked at Shotaro, suddenly more worried about him.

“Space-time?” Shotaro also repeated. “Like, another dimension?”

The old man just sort of shrugged. “That’s not inaccurate, but then, I don’t know the physics. I don’t know anything about plane-shifting and stuff. I just know that this thing started as a medical scanner, and companies like Eighty-Four Industries took it in a new direction.”

“Would you like to use it?” Miya offered.

“Miya!” Shotaro complained.

“Just to show him what it’s like,” Miya insisted, like she was being polite.

“Thanks, but no,” the old man told them briskly. “I’ll wait for the commercial model.”

“It’s safe,” Miya maintained. “Our mom helped build it...we think.”

“What did your mother do?” the man asked.

“She was a communications engineer,” Shotaro said. “She didn’t do research and stuff. She worked with satellites for cable TV and stuff.”

“I don’t know,” the old man said, his voice wheezing a bit. “It’s been my experience,” he shared “that people can end up working on projects without even knowing it. Maybe your mom thought she was working on a TV watch or something and stumbled onto the truth.”

“So she might not have known what she was doing,” Miya said, with a mix of fear and hope, the two emotions ebbing to gain control of her.

“But she gave it to me,” Shotaro whispered. “She said ‘Don’t trust them, they aren’t our friends’.” As Shotaro said that, he looked at the old man he didn’t know with a new level of paranoia.

The old man’s eyes grew distant. His lips drew tight and thin, like a doctor about to deliver bad news. “Have you seen your mom?” he asked cautiously. “Have you heard from her?”

“I texted her all last night,” Shotaro said.

“You’re being chased by a big company and you’re still carrying your phones?” the old man asked.

Shotaro leveled a disapproving glare at the man. “I’m not that dumb.”

Again, the old man didn’t smile but showed some imperceptible sign of approval. “Well, since I’m guessing she didn’t respond to any of those texts, did she tell you anywhere to meet her when she left you the phone?”

“Yeah, Wa—” Miya started.

“Yeah, she did,” Shotaro said over his sister.

The old man looked resigned again. “I think you two need to face the likelihood that your mom may very well be—”

“No,” Miya said quickly and forcibly. “No!” she said loudly, practically shouting it. Her face was angry but in an instant, her eyes had spilled over with tears that were draining down her cheeks and dripping off her chin.

“She’s fine,” Shotaro insisted, hugging his sister supportively. “She’s alive.”

“Yeah, see?” Miya practically yelled at the old man. “She’s ali...she’s fine!”

His disbelief was obvious, but the candy stall owner finally just nodded. “Okay,” he allowed guardedly. “If you say so.”

Shotaro nodded, like he and the old man had reached some agreement. “What can we do?”

“You can return the device,” the old man suggested calmly. “Technically, it is the property of that company, of Eighty-Four Industries. Your mother did steal it.”

“She wouldn’t have done something like that without good reason,” Shotaro insisted. “Our mom’s not like that. She’s never stolen anything in her life.”

“Until now,” the man said with a glance at Shotaro’s left hand. “You could go to the police.”

Shotaro and Miya both looked at one another. “Would they help us?” Miya asked.

The old man gave it only a bit of thought. “For a moment. But then you’d become part of the machine,” he seemed to concede with angst. “And the machine is susceptible to subtle pressure. And applying subtle pressure, and not-so-subtle pressure, is where these companies excel.” He shook his head, like he was acknowledging the weakness of his own suggestion. “The point remains, you have stolen property from a large corporation that wants it back.”

“We’ve got to find our mother,” Miya insisted.

“Yeah,” Shotaro agreed.

The old man looked at them both and then shook his head with a shrug. “Sure. Yes. Go find her. Do you know where she is?” Neither child responded. “Do you know how to find out where she is?”

After a moment, Miya asked sheepishly, “Do you?”

“No!” the old man exclaimed. “Of course not! I run a damn candy store.”

“But you’re...part of the...the underground thing!” Shotaro countered loudly, like volume would make up for certainty.

“You know what the underground is?” the old man told them. “It’s a website. That’s it. It’s not even a website; it’s a bunch of super-specific-yet-vague forums on a handful of different websites. That’s what it is, and that’s what I do: I post on a damn forum.”

Shotaro at a loss, Miya asked “Well, can you post about us?”

The old man asked indifferently, “What about you?”

“We need help,” she said.

“Doing what?” he asked her. “Evading capture for industrial espionage? Theft?”

“They wouldn’t want this back if it wasn’t important,” Shotaro said, holding up the shifter.

“I don’t doubt it,” the old man said. “It probably cost them a lot of money to develop it. They want it back.” But he shrugged in the way only an ambivalent old man can. “I’ll post about you, sure. What do you want me to say?”

“That we need help rescuing our mom,” Shotaro said quickly. “If we can get her back, maybe we can figure out what to do with this thing.”

“Okay, sure,” he said, clearly indulging them. “How do you want anyone to get in touch with you? You got rid of your cell phones, right? Want me to post your new number? Posting your names is out of the question because they’ll find it. Odds are, they

can probably track the device itself.” The old man seemed to realize something. “And that means your corporate enemies are probably on their way here right now. They’ll probably want to talk to me.” He looked at Shotaro and Miya like they’d tracked mud into his home. “You need to go.”

“But we—” Shotaro began to say but the old man stood. He began to shoo them like they were unruly cats. They backed into the low-ceilinged room and to the door that was almost invisible to the outside world. “We need to know what’s happening.”

“Fine,” said the old man, opening the door and all but shoving them out. “Find out. Somewhere else.” He pulled the door closed, leaving Shotaro and Miya standing together in the alcove alone. The two teens waited for a moment, wondering what would happen next.

As it would turn out, very little.

“What do we do now?” Miya asked Shotaro. She looked to the mouth of the alcove, brushing her hair back as she did. “Where do we go?” Shotaro shook his head, turning now as well. Together, they faced the street. “Maybe we could—”

“You’re not going anywhere,” said a hard voice as a strong hand landed on Shotaro’s shoulder.

The two kids turned in shock to find a man in a suit right behind Shotaro, standing between him and the candy man’s door. “Where’d—” Miya exclaimed, but Shotaro kicked the man’s foot and tried to shove him away. The suited man didn’t seem too bothered by the kick and when Shotaro shoved him, the man whirled expertly and slammed Shotaro into the wall next to the candy stall. Shotaro hit hard and exclaimed in pain.

“That’ll be enough of that,” the man told Shotaro. “Unless you want your sister to get roughed up.” As he spoke, he looked back over his shoulder at Miya. The young girl was suddenly between two more men, both in suits and both wearing shifters on their wrists.

“Now, first thing’s first,” said the man. He grabbed Shotaro’s left hand and studied the shifter for a moment. “Device is confirmed,” he said, like he was checking off a list. He then took Shotaro’s hand and held it so he could see the digital display. He compared it to a

shifter of his own, a watch instead of a back-of-the-hand sort of deal like Shotaro's shifter. "System is functional," he also checked off. He pinned Shotaro's arm to the wall and began to trying to yank the shifter off Shotaro's hand.

"NO!" Shotaro screamed, wincing as the man contorted his hand trying to remove the device.

The suited man elbowed Shotaro in the chest, trying to force him to submit. "Stop squirming, you little—" Shotaro managed to slap his own hand back against the wall that the goon had pinned him against. In doing so, he pressed down the primed display. Suddenly, the world was purple. Shotaro had half a second before the man who'd been standing in front of him reached for his own shifter. Shotaro watched him turn the dial all the way around and then press the display. In a second, he was cloaked in purple light and Shotaro realized he'd joined him in the plane.

"You're making this so much harder than it has to be," the man said. "Just let us—"

Shotaro shoved the man and knocked him back. The man stumbled down the uneven street and stumbled into one of the men who had secured Miya. The impact didn't bother either man but the one in the regular world noticed. He and his partner both shifted their devices and joined Shotaro. Outnumber three to one, Shotaro began to back away.

"This is your last chance, kid," the lead man of the three warned him.

"Not really," Shotaro said. He turned the dial one click back to normal and pressed the display. He was immediately returned to the regular world, Miya just standing in confusion. "Run!" Shotaro said, the three men already reappearing out of thin air. Shotaro and Miya began to race for the exit of the street, but a car pulled out of the road.

Out from the passenger's seat stepped Hayao Minase.

"Shotaro Kodana," Minase said as more cars arrived, clogging the exit of the alcove. "Please quit running. It's getting very tiresome."

Shotaro stepped back, Miya clinging to him. He looked back up the alcove to see the three men approaching, boxing them in. Shotaro turned the dial of the device, almost

like he was threatening his own disappearance. This prompted Minase to subtly hold out his hands, wordlessly ordering the men to give them room.

“Please come with us,” Minase told him, sounding genuine. “Right now, you are wanted for the theft of stolen property and industrial espionage. And not just you, but your mother as well. Come with us, now, and we’ll get this all—”

“Where is our mom?!” Miya yelled at Minase.

Minase smiled at the young girl. “I tried to tell you at the school, but you didn’t listen. Your mother has been in an accident. She’s being treated as we speak. We needed you to come with us to see her.”

“If she’s hurt, then how did she get this to me?” Shotaro asked, holding up the shifter.

“The injury wasn’t physical,” Minase told Shotaro. “She has radiation poisoning. It isn’t life-threatening but it has impaired her judgment.” Minase stepped towards the two kids, this time not having them back-up. “Shotaro, we’re not the bad guys. We’re not trying to hurt anyone. Your mom needs you. We’re trying to take you to her.”

Everything inside Shotaro wanted him to believe it, but the image of his mother’s text to him was overwhelming. ‘Don’t trust them. They aren’t our friends.’ Thinking quickly, Shotaro said “Let me talk to my mom. If I can talk to her, I’ll hand over the shifter right now. I’ll come with you right now.”

Minase chortled. “Shotaro, it doesn’t work that way. You have stolen property.”

“I talk to my mom or I walk,” Shotaro said.

“It doesn’t work that way,” Minase repeated more forcibly.

Shotaro readied to speak but fell silent. He was mesmerized by Minase’s expression and the intense coldness he saw in his eyes. And the words just dribbled out of Shotaro’s mouth. “Mom’s dead.” He didn’t really speak; the words just sort of escaped. Minase didn’t confirm anything but his mouth subtly warped like melting wax. Miya looked at

Shotaro, desperate for him to realize it was a ruse, for him to realize their mother still lived. Shotaro, struggling to maintain control of himself, told Minase, “We’re not coming with you.”

Minase sighed, like he was facing a minor annoyance. “Then your safe apprehension ceases to be our priority,” he promised Shotaro.

Just as Minase spoke, a gunshot rang out in the quiet neighborhood. Men in suits, Shotaro and Miya, all of them dropped in a crouch. All eyes turned to the old man who ran the candy stall as he walked towards Minase. He held a pistol in his hand, the weapon aimed straight up in the air.

“Who are you?” yelled Minase as his men rose onto their haunches.

“A victim,” said the old man, walking right at Minase. He lowered the gun and turned the handle towards Minase. “And I’m surrendering to you.” Minase looked down at the gun, stunned and unable to understand what was happening. “Take it,” said the old man. When Minase hesitated, the old man yelled “TAKE IT!”

Minase, by shock alone, reached out and grabbed the gun. And when he did, the old man pressed the trigger.

There was a loud pop, far too loud for something with so high a pitch. There was no splatter of blood or shower of insides; just the echo of the gunshot for a moment and the stillness that followed. A flicker of flame caught on the old man’s t-shirt, which he instinctively batted down with his hand. But on the third or fourth slap, there was a wetness to the slap. Everyone looked down at his chest and saw a tiny spot growing. It wasn’t red but an ugly brown. The old man looked at Minase, who was shocked.

“You killed me,” the old man said. He smiled with tremendous pride. “Explain that to the cops.” He collapsed, dead before he hit the ground.

Minase looked at the gun in his hand, then dropped it, shaking. He looked at the other three men in suits, all of them just as surprised. And the four of them realized in unison that Shotaro and Minase were nowhere to be seen.