

New Phase

Part 3 of 5

Series #1 in the Teach the Sky Continuity

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New Phase, Part 3 of 5
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The old man was bleeding out of his chest.

His grimy white t-shirt, one he seemed to wear everyday, was burned just a little and the brown stain was spreading over his lumpy stomach. On the shirt, it looked like the same color as furniture varnish. The old man was staring forward, with a smile like he was happy to be dying.

Miya's eyes flickered open. She sat up abruptly, shivering in the morning cold. She'd been lying on a refrigerator box. Her blanket had been a half-blanket stolen out of a hospital dumpster. Her backpack was her pillow. And she was alone.

She stood, looking around in the cramped, trash-filled alley. The dumpsters were overflowing with trash bags, many of which weren't even tied shut, causing the contents to spill onto the pavement. The smell of burnt and overcooked vegetables saturated her and clung over her skin like oil atop water. She felt filthy just being in the presence of the awful odor.

Miya's throat burned, she was so thirsty. Her normally straight hair was a tangled mess. She was wearing the same clothes she'd worn for the last four days, ever since she and Shotaro had gone on the run, trying to escape Eighty-Four Industries. Her stomach grumbled, but she'd grown used to the sound.

"Shotaro?" she whispered, her throat painfully hoarse. "Shotaro?" she repeated, standing up now. She straightened out her school skirt and adjusted the uniform blouse. She had several stains on the shirt, the result of sleeping on the street these last two nights. "Shotaro?" she called again. Doing so made her cough.

"Yeah?" she heard him say. She walked towards the front of the alley where she found him sitting on a plastic milk carton. His arms were crossed, the shoulders of his school uniform jacket ripped and exposed. "Everything okay?" he asked.

"You fell asleep again," she said. Her voice was raw. Her throat hurt.

"Just for a second," he apologized. He sat forward, his back popping. Miya couldn't help but wince at how stiff he looked. "Sorry," he said. There was a loud gurgle, like a drain

emptying. “Was that my stomach or yours?” he asked with a chuckle. Miya tried to smile, but barely managed. Shotaro stood and slung his backpack onto his shoulders. It was early. The smoky sky was still more purple than orange. The sounds of traffic were distant, but were getting closer to the suburban shopping district where they’d gone to sleep. “What shall we have for breakfast?” he asked Miya, leading her out of the alley.

“I don’t care,” Miya said softly, devoid of the energy to walk quickly. “I just need something. Anything!”

“Not a problem,” Shotaro said, overcompensating for her lethargy. “How about some rice balls and maybe some soup?”

“Oh,” Miya swooned. “Some hot soup would be so good.”

“Some soup, coming right up,” Shotaro told her. “Now wait here.” Miya hadn’t realized that he’d walked her right to the front of a store. She stood, rather agog, as he strolled in through the brightly-lit storefront and into the market like he owned the place. His uniform ragged and smelling of refuse, all of him clearly looking disheveled, and yet he had no qualms about walking right into public. Miya felt she’d die of embarrassment on his behalf alone.

Shotaro walked down the main aisle of the store, noting several cups of instant soup. He picked a few up and strolled towards the counter at the mid-point of the store and laid them down. “These look delicious,” he told the older woman behind the counter. “Have you had them?” he asked as he fished through his pockets. After a moment, he produced nothing. “Oh crap,” he said urgently. He looked at the woman, mortified. She cocked an eyebrow at him. “I th-think I forgot my money.”

“I’ll bet,” she said sarcastically.

Shotaro promised her “I’ll be right back,” and darted out of the store. He met up with Miya and quickly urged her down the sidewalk.

“What were you thinking?” she asked, embarrassed beyond belief. “You know we don’t have any money!” Her throat hurt worse yelling at him.

“We didn’t need money,” he said. He smiled at his little sister as he held up two candy bars. “Your big brother is a master thief.”

Miya’s eyes shone with hunger. She swallowed and licked her lips as Shotaro ripped open one of the chocolate bars and handed it to Miya. She quickly began to wolf it down, the jagged edges of the chocolate not bothering her enough to slow her eating. In an instant, the whole candy bar was gone and Miya was licking her lips, trying to dine on the memory alone of the bar.

Shotaro opened the second chocolate bar, and then looked down at it. He looked at Miya, appearing disappointed. “I wanted something with nuts,” he complained. He handed it lazily to her. “You want it?”

Miya’s eyes began to water. Her chin quaked and she nodded, ashamed of herself. “Hey, hey, hey,” he said as she grabbed him, hugging him. “Come on,” he said. “You’re never going to get a boyfriend looking like that.” Miya smacked him as she laughed and cried simultaneously. “Come on, eat up.” He pushed the chocolate bar into her hands.

She took it, crying more now as she stared at the bar. She looked at him and pushed the bar at him. “I can’t,” she practically begged.

“No, it’s fine,” he said. “I’m a guy; guys don’t eat candy.”

“But they need to eat,” Miya said.

Shotaro readied to make a counter argument but his stomach grumbled louder than the car driving by. He looked down at his stomach and said “Traitor,” before he punched it playfully. Miya laughed again. “Split it?” he asked her with a smile.

Tears in her eyes, she laughed in agreement.



“Now keep an eye out,” Shotaro said as he and Miya sat in the mall food court. Around them, the shops were beginning to open and the fast food stalls were readying for the first early takers for lunch. “Somebody will opt not to eat their rice or fries or something. If they throw them away or, better yet, leave them, we swoop in.”

“Got it,” Miya nodded. She could tell her voice was going. She could hear it when she spoke and she could tell Shotaro was noticing, though he hadn’t said anything yet. They were sitting in the middle of the brightly lit circular food court, waiting for patrons to start to arrive. Echoes were traveling down the hall from the mall itself, but there were few people in the food court at the moment.

“I’d like some fried chicken, myself,” Shotaro said idly after some time. “My favorite.”

“Yeah,” Miya said absently. Her head hurt, but she was trying not to let on. She knew she stank too, which was made worse by the growing fear that one of her classmates might show up at the mall. She took some comfort that most of the people she knew wouldn’t skip school.

Without realizing it, Miya asked her brother, “What are we going to do about mom?” She didn’t really know where the question came from or why she asked right now. It just tumbled out of her mouth. But now that she’d asked it, she looked at Shotaro, wanting an answer. He looked at her, not saying anything at first. “I mean, you don’t think she’s...” She didn’t want to say it. Saying it might make it possible. Or worse, true. “She’s not de...she’s not...gone, you don’t think? Do you?”

Shotaro swallowed. “No,” he said emphatically, shaking his head. “Mom’s alive. She’s alive and she’s fine. She’s just...” He looked instead at the empty food court. He thought back to earlier that week, to when he confronted Hayao Minase outside the candy shop. He thought back to the look in Minase’s eyes. As he thought, the mall grew cold to him.

“Prisoner,” Miya said, like it was an offering to help build their self-created world.

Shotaro nodded, slowly at first. “Yeah,” he said, like he was waking up. He looked at the food court, as though they now had something more substantial to be focusing on. “They’d keep her prisoner until they get this back,” he said, looking down at the shifter on his hand. “So long as we’ve got this, mom’s safe.” Shotaro’s words trembled as he lied to himself. He gasped, trying to regain control, or at least look like he was back in control. “And we’ve got...we’re going to find her, and we’re going to free her.”

Miya crossed her legs, then uncrossed them, then crossed them again. She looked around the food court but there was no sign of anyone at the moment. The shopping mall was decidedly dead. In the mid-morning, the sterile white walls were weakly lit by the recessed lights and the windows let in the cloudy daytime light that left the mall feeling unalive. “Could we go to the news or something?” she asked Shotaro.

“You know anybody at the news?” he asked her. He looked at her, both sympathetic but also adamant. “You think we can just call up a news station or a newspaper and say ‘our mom got kidnapped by a big corporation and they’re hunting us down?’” Miya shrugged defensively. “Besides,” he said, looking back at the food court. “A company this big? I bet they own the newspapers and stuff.”

“I don’t think Eighty-Four Industries is THAT big,” Miya griped, like Shotaro’s version of the truth was somehow meant as a meanness towards her.

“Big enough to build reality-warping watches on the down-low,” Shotaro countered. Miya was about to say more when Shotaro said “Wait, wait.” He looked like a hungry dog, fixated on prey. Miya looked where he was staring and saw a man entering the food court. The new arrival was a slender, lean man, just a touch on the tall side, with wiry muscles on his bare arms. Tattoos covered his left arm as he walked in a suit with the sleeves torn off. He had shock red hair and sunglasses. The collar of his suit jacket was turned up as he walked for a burger stall.

“Keep an eye on him,” Shotaro told Miya. “I’ll bet you anything he doesn’t finish his food.”

The two hungry teens watched from their secluded perch as the suited man purchased a giant burger and fries and took them with a soda to the far side of the food court. In a slight alcove, his presence sequestered from easy notice, the red-haired man began to eat while playing a game on his phone. "What a waste," Miya heard Shotaro whisper half a dozen times in the span of a few moments.

While taking a huge bite of the giant burger, the man got a call and answered it with his mouth full. He talked for only a minute before nodding and confirming something, standing already. His serving tray full of his half-finished meal, he carried the tray towards one of the nearest trash cans and tossed it casually and mindlessly at the opening. The serving tray spun halfway around the opening but the food didn't fall into the can. It lingered there atop the trash can, practically singing to Shotaro and Miya who were staring at the burger desperately.

Miya stood and started for it, but Shotaro caught her hand and kept her from getting up. She looked at him, almost about to cry. Shotaro kept her in place, watching the red-haired man head out of the food court. It was only once the man was out of sight, disappearing into the mall itself, that Shotaro removed his hand and let Miya run for the burger.

The middle school girl cleared the food court in a flash and snatched the greasy burger off the tray. She bit into it frantically, filling her mouth and biting again before she'd even begun chewing. She grabbed whole handfuls of fries and began to stuff them between her teeth as she crammed more and more food into her mouth before it could disappear before her eyes.

Shotaro joined her a second later and she handed him the remaining bites of the burger, which he wolfed down without hesitation. The two began to snatch up fries left and right, stuffing them into their full mouths before they traced their fingertips over the serving tray to collect the residual salt. In less than a minute, they were licking the paper wrappers of the burger, getting at the last bits of ketchup and mayonnaise. Anything to put in their stomachs.

The flurry over, Miya began to cough, which turned into heaving. She grabbed onto the trash can they had cloistered around. She covered her mouth as she tried to keep from throwing up, too afraid to lose even one bite. “Miya?” Shotaro said, rubbing her back. “Miya?”

“She’s sick,” said someone. Shotaro turned around and the red-haired man grabbed Shotaro’s jaw and pushed him over a table. On his back, Shotaro grabbed the man’s arm but couldn’t do anything to his strong grip. The man responded to Shotaro’s futile resistance by punching him in the stomach so hard, Shotaro thought he was going to break over the edge of the table. “Little girlie’s sick from the dust I put in the burger.” He punched Shotaro again, deafening the resulting scream with his hand over Shotaro’s mouth.

Miya, still coughing, succumbed to the drug in the burger and finally threw up on the floor of the food court. Far more than what she’d just eaten came up and she began to convulse, falling onto her side. “Aw, little girlie doesn’t look too good,” said the red-haired goon. He laughed at Shotaro, revealing two golden teeth.

“Hey!”

Gold Tooth turned around as the manager from one of the food stalls came storming out. “What’s going on?” the middle-aged man demanded. Gold Tooth just laughed at the man, like his very existence was the funniest joke ever told. The manager approached the shaking Miya and started to help her up. Once she was upright, she was able to breathe and seemed to get some control over her own body. But as the man helped her sit up, Gold Tooth skipped into a kick and struck the manager right in the mouth, dislocating his jaw and knocking him out instantly. Gold Tooth began laughing even more hysterically now, like the manager plus sudden and unexpected violence was even funnier.

In the instant Gold Tooth was turned away, Shotaro turned the watch’s dial one click to the right and he hit the digital display, purple light suddenly filling the world. Gold Tooth turned back to the table, stunned by Shotaro’s disappearance. He began to look around the cheap table of the food court where Shotaro had laid sprawled out.

Shotaro rolled off the table, causing it to rock some. This prompted Gold Tooth to kneel down, looking under the table. Deciding turnabout was fair play, Shotaro kicked Gold Tooth in the face. It was like kicking a telephone pole but the strike landed with enough force and was unexpected enough to still knock Gold Tooth off his feet and startle him.

Shotaro deactivated the shifter, appearing out of thin air before the stunned Gold Tooth. He grabbed Miya's hand and both began to run, sprinting out of the food court. "If I have to disappear again," Shotaro told Miya as they ran "You run; I'll stay with you and run interference." Miya didn't have the wherewithal to respond; she just allowed herself to be pulled forward by her brother.

They reached the thoroughfare of the mall and Shotaro started to run to the right. He instantly regretted the decision when he saw a man in black leather biker gear with a Mohawk and tattoos over his hands and forearms. The man sneered at Shotaro and started towards him and Miya. "Run!" Shotaro told her, shifting into the purple realm again.

Mohawk was clearly stunned to see Shotaro disappear, but he thought to grab for Miya as she ran passed him. Mohawk grabbed Miya's right arm but Shotaro, staying with Miya, punched his hand. More shock than impact, Mohawk yanked his hand away. He skipped back a few steps across the polished mall floor as Miya continued to run.

Watching the foot chase through the mall on video monitors, Inoue stood behind Minase. The two were in a crowded company van, using surveillance equipment that was taped into the mall's security feed. Minase was half-crumpled onto one side, his elbow on the chair's armrest, his chin against his knuckle. He was in a dark blue suit, like always, but didn't seem quite as unflappable as usual. Several other Eight-Four Industries' technicians worked at the various stations, all working quietly as they tracked the Kodana children.

Inoue brushed down her gray suit, feeling self-conscious with the most recent evasion of the children. "Sir," she suggested, having to repeat herself when she spoke too softly the first time. "Sir, wouldn't it have been more prudent to use our own forces?"

“No,” Minase told her. Despite the monosyllabic response, he didn’t sound particularly angry or mad; merely focused. “We took enough flak for that joint raid on Shotaro Kodana’s girlfriend’s house. But after the death of...whatever that old man’s name was, the police have all but pulled their support from Eighty-Four Industries. All their ‘professional courtesies’ have dried up. In fact,” he said turning just for a moment away from the monitor so he could look Inoue in the eye “We’re not even allowed to operate outside the borders of our own facilities.” He turned back to the screen.

“Our only remaining option,” Minase resumed “would be to resort to black mailing key civic officials, and that’s really not something I want to employ for such a trivial matter. Freelancers, on the other hand,” he said, gesturing to the men they were tracking on the screen. “By using freelancers, we can avoid many of the headaches that come with getting permission, or forgiveness.” He sighed as the one visible Kodana child again dodged one of their would-be captors. “Sadly, we also avoid a certain level of quality control.”

Miya slipped inside the door that immediately shut behind her and she collapsed to her knees. She started panting and fell onto her hands, gasping. Leaning against the door, Shotaro shifted into the regular world, the lights becoming yellow again. He was panting too, unable to even keep on standing. They were in a narrow corridor that connected two adjacent sections of the mall with one of the loading docks. The floors were tile like the mall proper, but the walls were bare drywall and the ceilings were unfinished, with a clear view of the metal girders that crisscrossed over the whole ceiling.

“I...” Miya tried to say, but she coughed. She collapsed onto one side, blood dribbling down the corner of her mouth. “I can’t...” she gasped, crying now. She curled into a ball, hugging her stomach. “I can’t,” she said again with a rasping, painful voice.

“Come on,” Shotaro said, trying to pick her up. “Come on, they’re going to...” But Miya wouldn’t move. She cried into herself, shaking from fear and exhaustion. “Miya, come on!” Shotaro pled, beginning to cry too. He tried to pull her to her feet, but she wouldn’t move. Her arms came free and he started to drag her along the tile floor. “Miya!” he begged, tugging her along.

The door burst open and there was Gold Tooth. With him was Mohawk. Shotaro released Miya's hands and she curled up again, sobbing quiet, embarrassed apologies to her brother. Shotaro looked down at his sister, and then at the two goons who were crowding in on them. He looked back over his shoulder and saw two more men. One, they'd escaped from just a moment ago, in workman's clothes and a predator's taint to his stare. The other was a tall white guy in cargo jeans and a long-sleeve t-shirt.

A million ideas ran through Shotaro's mind as his life flashed before his eyes. Every mistake he'd made in the last half-week, trying to keep Miya from capture, played in his head like a vignette of his greatest follies. "I'm sorry," he told Miya.

Gold Tooth grabbed Miya's ankle and yanked her to him. "No!" Shotaro yelled, jumping at Gold Tooth but Mohawk grabbed him in mid-air and slammed him into the wall. Workman and the American both rushed to join them.

Shotaro punched and smacked against Mohawk's arms, trying to force him to let go, but Mohawk doubled down with a shove, knocking Shotaro into the wall again with more force, causing the drywall to crack. Gold Tooth laughed far too loudly as he grabbed the crying Miya around the waist and picked her up off her feet as she weakly protested. He began to back away from Shotaro, carrying her for the door. Shotaro screamed to Miya, trying in desperate vain to reach for her. Workman grabbed Shotaro's arm and pinned it to the wall, helping Mohawk secure him. American grabbed Miya's flailing arms and yanked her forward to stop Gold Tooth's departure. He pulled back on his fist and punched Gold Tooth right in the face.

Two tiny shards of starlight came twinkling down from the impact, like something out of an exaggerated cartoon. The fragments of light turned out to be both golden teeth. They rung like tiny, high-pitched bells when they hit the hard tile floors of the mall hallway and went skittering in opposite directions.

Gold Tooth was stunned and was finally no longer laughing. His lips, cheeks, and chin were all covered in blood and more of it was streaming out as he stared in shock. The American drew back his fist again and deprived Gold Tooth of his consciousness.

The American turned to Mohawk and Workman, both of whom were too startled to say or do anything at first. The American took Workman's hand from Shotaro's wrist and pulled him free. It wasn't clear to Shotaro if Workman had even bothered to resist. But once his hand was cleared of Shotaro's, the American struck Workman three times: in the stomach, in the head, and then elbowed him in the side of the neck. Workman fell to the ground, as unconscious as Gold Tooth.

Mohawk released Shotaro and squared off with the American. Losing almost a foot in height to the taller man, Mohawk took out a switchblade and slashed at the American. It wasn't clear to Shotaro what exactly happened in response but after a sudden flurry of movement by the American, Mohawk crumpled and the knife was now in the American's hands.

The man ignored Shotaro and instead went to Miya. "Hey!" Shotaro said, finally getting his feet under him. "Leave her alone!" The American ignored him and bent down over Miya, helping her sit up. "I said—" Shotaro started to shout.

"She is sick," the American said in stilled Japanese, his words thick with American pronunciation. He turned to Shotaro and told him "Let's go."

"What? Go where? Who are you?!" Shotaro demanded.

The American looked at the three unconscious men, all of them beginning to rouse. A thousand things ran through his mind, but he could only repeat to Shotaro "Let's go!" He helped Miya get to her feet and practically pushed her into Shotaro's arms. "My name is Mr. Eric," he told Shotaro, his accent rendering the words almost incomprehensible.

He opened the door Shotaro had just shut and checked outside in the mall for just a glance before he waved for Shotaro to follow him and he started out. Shotaro glanced at Miya. She looked at him, her cheeks flush with exhaustion and her own tears. "Come on," he whispered to her, following Eric.

Inoue was silent. She didn't move, she didn't fidget, she tried to not even breathe. Likewise, the other technicians in the van with her were looking out of the corners of their eyes at Minase, even as they tried to be invisible. Even though Minase had said nothing, there was a palpable rage coming from him. He was staring at the security feed from the mall, looking down in the hallway where three men had just been beaten into unconsciousness in a matter of seconds.

Minase finally exhaled like a dragon breathing fire. "Passports," was all he said for a second. "I'm certain he's not a resident," he began to command. Inoue began to scribble frantically in her clipboard every tiny thing Minase told her. The technicians likewise broke into motion, trying to look busy and responsive. "Odds are, he's arrived here recently. Find out." His words were crisp and angry. There was no mistaking his mood now. "Get me the audio feed of this if the mall has any. Run a face-trace to see if he has any record. And, above all else, find out HOW he knew WHERE TO FIND THESE KIDS!!!" he screamed at Inoue.

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The tiny hotel room was barely bigger than the bed. A western-style hotel, the bed was raised and faced a small flat screen television screwed securely into the wall itself. There was a window, but it was barely bigger than a magazine and it didn't open and it didn't look out on anything but the wall of the adjacent building. There was a bathroom, but it was little more than a toilet and sink in a closet. The door had three locks, though.

The tall American named Eric held his phone to his mouth and spoke English into it. From the phone came an electronic voice, saying "My name is Eric. Do you speak English?" When Shotaro and Miya just stared at him, Eric repeated the sounds – though clearly not the words – with his own voice.

Shotaro just shook his head, stunned to see the large man struggling to sound even remotely comprehensible. Eric looked like he was in his late thirties or early forties; hardly old but definitely far beyond his youth. He was clearly muscular, but functionally so. He had a day's stubble on his chin and his blonde hair, dotted in just a few places with the first signs of gray, was cut very short. He was sitting on the edge of the bed where Miya was hugging a pillow, half-hiding behind Shotaro.

"<My English, not good,>" Shotaro told Eric in the best English he could manage. Eric's jaw dropped, realizing a crippling problem with how to proceed. He readied to speak again into his phone, then stopped, not sure what to say.

"<I speak English,>" Miya said, her voice raspy. Shotaro and Eric both looked at her; Eric with relief and Shotaro in surprise. "What?" Miya told her brother, wincing when she tried to swallow. "I pay attention in school because I want to get into a good college. Slacker," she scolded him with a weak smile.

"Nerd," he told her, taking her hand. She grabbed it and squeezed his fingers desperately.

"<If you speak English, then I think we have a chance to figure this thing out,>" Eric told her. Miya blinked at him, lost. "<Okay, so, when you say that you speak English, what do you mean?>"

She stared for a moment longer and said "<I...speak English.>"

Eric nodded and sighed, realizing the uphill ordeal before them now. "<I'm here to help you,>" he told Miya and Shotaro. And he took from his pocket a slip of paper that bore the Rod of Asclepius. "<There was a call for help posted on a message board that I monitor,>" Eric told them. He reached into the thigh pocket of his cargo pants and produced several printed slips of paper. He unfolded one and held it to Shotaro.

Shotaro took the paper, surprised to find Japanese written on it. "This is a distress call," Shotaro read off the page, to himself and to Miya. "I work at a..." He stiffened to realize who had posted the message. "I work at a candy store in the Itabashi City. Two kids are in trouble. They're being hunted by Eighty-Four Industries, who killed their mom. They

have world-changing technology and don't know what it is. They're on the run. Help them. Don't respond; I'll be..." Shotaro choked up, his eyes watering. "I'll be d-dead by the time this posts."

Shotaro handed the page to Miya. Her eyes were drawn to the bottom where a picture was attached, a security feed that had come from some secluded camera in the candy stall that neither she nor Shotaro had spotted. "When he did he have time to do this?" she asked. She was starting to cry.

"I don't know," Shotaro whispered, re-reading the message to himself. "I didn't even know his name."

"Me either," Miya sobbed. Her crying turned into coughing.

Eric rose and came to the opposite side of the bed where Miya huddled. "Forgive me," he said in bad Japanese. He touched Miya's cheeks, guiding her mouth open. He leaned close to her face and said "<Go Ahhhh>" and stuck his tongue. She imitated him and he scrutinized the back of her throat. He spoke again into his phone and it spoke for him. "Your sister is ill." The voice was painfully artificial and sounded genderless, which didn't match the broad-shouldered man who was speaking to Shotaro. "She needs medicine."

"We don't have any," Shotaro told Eric. The American began to adjust the settings on his phone. "No medicine," Shotaro told him more simply.

Eric stopped fidgeting with the phone for a second and said in Japanese, "Why don't we buy some?"

"No money," Shotaro told him, like he was addressing a dog.

Eric immediately produced several thousand-yen notes and handed them to Shotaro without hesitation. Shotaro took the folded bills and looked at it for a moment, then looked at Miya. Sensing the worry, Eric told him with his own words, "My sister is okay."

Shotaro stared for a moment, unable to process who or what he was dealing with. "Who ARE you?"

“My name is Mr. Eric,” he said, then shook his head like he was shaking a realization free. “My name is Eric,” he repeated a little more properly.

“Why are you here?” Shotaro demanded. Eric began to point at the forum post he’d printed out. “No, I know that, but...but why?! You just...you just read a forum post online that said ‘some kids are in trouble’ and you thought you help out so you hopped on the first plane to Japan?”

Eric clearly was stumbling with the tirade. Deciding he’d picked out enough words to know what Shotaro had said, he ventured a very unsteady, “...yes?”

Shotaro sighed, his worries not abated. “I don’t want to leave you with this idiot,” he said to Miya.

“Just because he can’t talk doesn’t mean he’s an idiot,” Miya told her brother. She pushed him on the leg, trying to smile. “Go. I’ll be fine.”

Shotaro looked at the money and sighed. “I don’t even know what medicine to buy.” He looked at Eric. “What’s wrong with her?”

“She’s ill,” Eric said in inept Japanese.

“Thanks,” Shotaro said curtly.

“I just need some cough syrup,” Miya told him. “Go buy two bottles.” She huddled up a little. “Grape-flavored, please. I don’t like cherry.”

Shotaro backed away from the bed and looked directly at Eric. “<She must be okay,>” he told Eric in the best English he could muster. Eric nodded with a solemn expression, like he’d taken a vow. Shotaro, the bills crumpling in his hand, departed.

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The door to Minase's office opened and he stormed in, glowering at nothing. Inoue followed him, keeping a professional distance. "The police want to speak with you further," she alerted him grudgingly. "They've asked your schedule be cleared tomorrow morning for the interview."

Minase smirked humorlessly. "Interview," he repeated, retrieving one of his high-end water bottles from his desk and opening it. "Interrogation." He opened the bottle and drank directly from it. "Of all the crimes I HAVE committed, they are interrogating me about one I actually didn't do?" He finished drinking from the water bottle and slammed it hard on his desk. The loud impact startled Inoue who jumped and clamped her eyes shut, trying to minimize her reaction. "And why do they care about that no-name old man anyway?" Minase asked her. "He ran a candy store near a school; I assumed he was just some pervert."

"Our teams are trying to make it look that way as we speak," Inoue reported. She consulted with a tablet computer. "The old man had a rather extensive medical library. Our clean-up team is planting illicit photographs amongst his things. When the police go through them, they'll—"

Minase stopped her. "I know how this works. I did that work for five years. What I want to know is why did that crazy old man walk right up to me and commit suicide, but frame me in the process?"

"We have his computer," Inoue told Minase. "Once we're able to crack it, we hopefully will know more."

"Good," Minase said, clearly less-than-pleased. He walked halfway around his desk when he stopped abruptly. He turned back to Inoue, puzzled. "Once you're able to crack it? What's taking so long?"

Inoue looked confused. "The encryption software is..." She checked her tablet, but found nothing descriptive. "...is proving problematic."

Minase looked puzzled by that. “Why would some old man, at a candy shop, have high-end encryption software?” Inoue pondered the question but had no real solution to offer. Minase, however, seemed to be growing more confident. “Three options: he’s just paranoid.” He shrugged, like such an allowance was within the realm of believability, though perhaps not plausibility. “Two, he and the kids were operating together.”

“Unlikely,” Inoue half-guessed, trying to follow Minase’s thinking. “If they were in cooperation together, it stands to reason they would have gone to him first rather than their school friend, if not run to his candy shop straight away the first day.”

“Then that leaves us with the third option,” Minase said, beginning to smile. “Our two wayward children stumbled onto someone with some connections.” He thought about it and it made him smile. He turned away from Inoue, his smirk growing into a pleased smile. “Make that laptop our highest priority. Once we’re in, cross-reference it with what we find from recent air travel into the country.” His eyes grew distant as he pondered the next several moves in the chess game of tracking down the kids. “Our newest arrival wasn’t happenstance. He was looking for these kids. And that old man tipped him off.”

“Yes sir,” Inoue said with a bow before she headed out. She left Minase to ponder the possibilities of these new developments.