

New Phase

Part 4 of 5

Serial #1 in the Teach The Sky Continuity

By Robert V Aldrich

New Phase, Part 4 of 5
Copyright: Robert V Aldrich, 2014
Published: 2014/06/24

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictiously.

This ebook is licensed for the personal entertainment of the reader. It is the copyrighted property of the author and may not be reproduced, copied, or distributed for commercial or private purposes without the express written consent of the author.

Eggs bubbled in the pan on the portable stove. A single metal eye sat atop a tiny range, it buzzed as it gave off heat out from under the pan. In the pan, a whole farm's worth of eggs were cooking quickly.

Miya was sitting on the edge of the bed, her hands on her knees, leaning forward to watch the eggs bubble. She unconsciously was sneering a little, less than impressed with the breakfast. She jumped a little when Eric stepped by her to stir the eggs. He was still a bit damp after his post-workout shower. Miya wasn't sure what he'd done, but he'd left with a giant hunk of iron he'd called a kettlebell and come back shortly almost completely drenched. He'd been smiling the way only exercise addicts do.

"You're really going to eat that?" Shotaro asked in Japanese. He was in the corner with his arms crossed, wedged into the tiny space between the bed and the wall. Miya thought he looked defensive. She knew he hadn't slept well so she considered that maybe he was just tired. Eric glanced back at Shotaro but didn't answer, either out of manners or just not understanding what he'd said.

The tall American scraped the eggs off onto a travel plate and unplugged the portable range. He left the pan on the eye of the stove and turned, crossing his legs so he could sit down in one smooth motion. For a man of his height and muscularity, he moved with an agility that still surprised Miya.

Eric began to wolf down the eggs, all but shoveling the green mounds into his mouth as fast as he could chew. He did this silently, his fork making more noise than he. As he ate, he looked up at the two Japanese teens who were staring back at him. "<You guys ate, right?>" he asked in English. "You ate?" he repeated in heavily accented Japanese.

"Yeah," Shotaro said from the corner. He seemed like he was waking up, even though he'd been awake for hours. Most of the night, in fact. "I went down to the corner store and got us some breakfast."

"The eating was for money," Eric said. He stopped and considered his conjugation. "The money was for eating," he said again.

“Yeah, I know,” Shotaro said. “<Got it,>” he told Eric in English. He came around to the foot of the bed and sat down next to Miya. “So what’s the plan?”

Eric held up his phone and asked “<What?>”

“What is the plan?” Shotaro asked slowly. The phone regurgitated his words and spat them out for Eric.

“The plan,” Eric said, speaking English into his phone and letting it translate into an uneven computerized voice. “I need to know what’s happened.”

“We’re running from Eighty-Four Industries. They kidnapped our mom and they…” His words trailed off. “Well, you read the forum.” He pointed at the folded pages next to the portable stove. “They…that guy at the candy store and stuff.”

“How did you find us?” Miya asked Eric, but he gestured for her to stop as the phone struggled to translate. Eric looked to her and she repeated her question.

“I was monitoring the police radio,” Eric told her. Even sitting on the floor and they on the bed, he still practically came to eyelevel with them. “They said some kind of ‘exercise’ was being performed at the mall, so I went there. I met you.”

“Why’d you come to Japan?” Shotaro asked Eric. “You’re from America, right?” Eric nodded. “So you just read a forum post by some stranger about two kids in trouble and decided to hop a plane and come over to save the day?”

Neither Miya nor Shotaro could follow what the phone was saying to Eric but they watched as his pale lips curled a bit into a smile. “I could,” he answered back through his phone. “So I did.”

“How?” asked Shotaro.

“Doesn’t that cost a lot?” Miya asked.

Eric shrugged. “I can help you, I think,” he told them.

“Are you, like, military or something?” Shotaro said it mostly as a joke.

"<Yes,>" Eric said. The phone's translated answer was a haunting echo.

"Really?" Shotaro suddenly smiled. "Like, special forces?"

"Ever heard of Navy SEALs?" Eric said with a cynical smile.

"You're a SEAL?!" Shotaro laughed. "Oh man, that's awesome!"

"I'm not any longer," Eric told him. "Listen, we need to get down to business. We need to know where Eighty-Four Industries is keeping your mother and we need to get her out of there."

"Yeah," Shotaro agreed. "Thing is, we don't know really what facility she was at. She moved around a bunch, depending on the project she was working on."

"Yeah," Miya said. "It wasn't unusual for her to stay overnight, or several nights, if she was at a faraway facility."

"Was she at such a place when you last saw her?" Eric asked them.

Shotaro looked at Miya, and she at him. Recalling the morning before it had all happened was like recalling events from a year ago. They seemed so very far away. "No," Miya said, like she and Shotaro agreed collectively. They both shook their heads unsure. "She wasn't going to be gone today...that day. It was a usual work day." Miya's words were slow, heavy with recollection of unrelated but personally important details.

"Then she was somewhere in Tokyo," Eric said, the computerized translation of his words sounding stilted and awkward. "At a facility here."

Shotaro nodded, following the logic. "She came by my school," he said. He held up his left wrist and the watch-like shifter on the back of his hand. "That's how she got this to me."

"So maybe somewhere close to your school," Eric reasoned aloud. He sat back and thought for a moment. He put the now-empty plate on the printed forum pages. He considered a lot of options, his eyes darting back and forth like he was visually sorting through various issues. "We need information," he told Shotaro and Miya. "We will only get it from the source."

Both teens were confused. "From...our mom?" Miya asked uncertainly.

Eric shook his head. "From Eighty-Four Industries." He looked at Shotaro. "What's the nearest facility to your school?"

Dressed in blue jeans and a gray t-shirt, Shotaro was leaning against the hood of Eric's tiny little rental car. His arms were crossed and he wasn't thinking. He only barely registered the phone thrown at him when it hit him in the chest. He scrambled to catch the simple disposable phone before it fell.

"Sorry," Eric said in poor-but-improving Japanese. He smiled in regret so genuine, Shotaro couldn't even get mad at him, much less stay mad. "I've already set it up," Eric said, again using his phone. "I've put your number, Miya's number, and my number in there." Shotaro nodded and checked the small women's fashion store they were parked in front of. No sign of Miya yet. "Do not go to websites," Eric told him. Shotaro looked blankly at the American. "Whatever websites you used, do not visit them. Do not log in."

Shotaro nodded and rubbed his eyes. "So how long were you in the SEALs?" he asked Eric while he looked through the cheap phone. It was nothing special but it wasn't bad either. It was a touch screen instead of a clamshell phone which bugged him.

"I was in the Marines for eight years and the Navy for twelve years," Eric told him.

"What's the difference?" Shotaro asked.

A somewhat somber man generally, it surprised Shotaro to see Eric smile. "The short answer is 'a lot'."

Both Eric and Shotaro turned when the door to the clothing store and Miya came out, dressed in new clothes. Like Shotaro, she'd selected something nice but unremarkable: light tan pants and a white shirt with a blue vest on top. She looked like a new woman, and older now that she was out of the school uniform she'd been wearing for days.

"You've got a phone," Eric said, continuing to impress with his almost-functional grasp of Japanese. He handed Miya the phone and gave her the same warning he'd given Shotaro. Miya with them, Eric asked them both, "Are you ready?"

Inoue laid down her tablet computer with the Rod of Asclepius displayed. “The Medical Underground,” she said proudly.

Behind the desk, Minase looked at her with a bored expression, then turned into his phone. “I’m sorry, I will have to call you back. I’ve been interrupted.” The jab made Inoue swallow as she shrank a little, while Minase hung up the phone and made a bit of a show turning in his desk chair to face her. “What?” he asked her with a tone belying tremendous impatience.

“The Medical Underground,” Inoue said, nervously stammering a little.

“I heard you the first time,” he told her in crisp words. “What of it?”

“The man, at the candy shot, shop!” she corrected quickly. “Shop. The man at the candy shop. The last activity on his laptop was to post on a forum that is suspected to be used by the Medical Underground.”

Minase’s hard and irritated eyes softened a bit. “What is the Medical Underground?”

“A subversive terrorist group,” Inoue said. “They’re anti-capitalist, anti-technology. The core belief is that the medical industry world-wide is stifling human prosperity and actively holding back progress.”

“Quite a long-winded way of saying ‘companies don’t share their toys,’” Minase mused as he scrolled through the tablet, skimming the report Inoue had prepared.

Inoue let him read for a moment and said, “They’re mostly active in America – specifically the United States – but they have branches everywhere.”

“And one of their branches called for reinforcements,” Minase said, handing the tablet back to Inoue.

“We don’t know WHAT the man posted,” she said for full disclosure. “Only that he did post something, just before he...before the incident. So we don’t KNOW that this American is

connected, but..." She nodded at the obviousness of it. "We at least know who we're dealing with."

"A phantom member of a shadowy anarchist group with their fingers everywhere?" Minase asked her rhetorically. "I don't doubt that something calling itself 'the Medical Underground' exists but I doubt highly that they have some kind of rapid-response team waiting for a call to action from anyone and everyone." He stood, the act making Inoue step back instinctively. "We are looking for a man, not a cult. We are looking for an identity, not an ideology. Get me a name."

Inoue nodded and collected her tablet. "Yes sir," she said with a bow before hurrying out.

Miya didn't need to tell Shotaro that she was scared. The way she sat in the backseat next to him; her fingers interlaced and buffering her knees together said it all. She wasn't looking at him, or at anything really. She was staring through the window and through the city beyond.

In the tiny rental car, Shotaro felt cramped from the inside. He had a ball of pain in the very center of his body that he couldn't get to unknot. Like some vague point between his chest and his stomach, on the middle-most point inside his torso, that fist-sized agony of stress and worry wouldn't let go.

Beyond the windows, the city was zooming by. The sky overhead was hazy, like a cloud held aloft by the tall buildings that reached, or pierced, the sky. The air was hot, even from inside the tiny car with its air conditioning. The present-but-hidden sun was reflecting off the white surfaces and windows off the offices and other buildings, creating an artificial summer heat wave in the Spring morning.

Shotaro looked out on the street and saw boys his age. He wondered if they were out of school early, or if it was a holiday, or if they were skipping. He saw the way they were laughing, like it was at some juvenile joke. He couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed like that, the last time he'd really even smiled. Their laughs were so unguarded, so untainted by the cynical fear of a world that was crashing down. His increasingly dark thoughts were interrupted by the car stopping.

Eric put the car in park but didn't get out. "The facility is a few blocks up ahead," he said with the aid of his phone. He turned in the driver's seat to look back at them. "Let's go over the plan."

"We're going to sneak in," Shotaro said, speaking slowly so Eric's phone could keep up. "We find an office computer and we'll use that to get information. We download what we can and we get out."

"What happens if we get separated?" Eric asked, glancing at Miya.

"We meet at sundown at Watanabe Park," she answered like a good school girl. "Like mom told us," she added with dwindling enthusiasm.

"Why don't I just go in there alone?" Shotaro asked again. "I can use the shifter and be in and out in no time."

"What if they have guys using shifters in there?" Eric asked, the phone struggling with the translation.

Miya asked "Why don't you take the shifter?" she asked Eric.

Eric glanced at Shotaro and could read his complete unwillingness to surrender the artifact his mother had entrusted to him. "Because I can't read Japanese," Eric said himself, not bothering with the phone. He was still looking at Shotaro, making the boy wonder if he was telling the truth or just making up a reason to not ask for the device and force Shotaro to justify refusing to hand it over. "I don't know if my phone will work in the, whatever, other phase," Eric said, relying on his phone again. "And this is no time to rely on a pocket dictionary."

"Then why not just you and me?" Shotaro asked. "Why bring Miya?"

"Hey!" she protested.

"Because the last thing we need is to leave her alone in some mall food court or something, and then be unable to find her when we slip out," Eric told him. "They already have your mother," he reminded the two, if only to signal the discussion was over. "We cannot risk them getting their hands on either of you."

With the discussion resolved, or at the very least tabled, Eric opened the door and pulled back the chair, letting Shotaro and Miya slip out. In the open air, there was a cold breeze coursing through the city, as though the wind was impervious to the heat coming off the street. Shotaro suddenly envied his little sister for her vest, but even she shivered and rubbed her arms. Stalwart Eric seemed oblivious to the cold and to its effect on the kids.

They started walking down the right side of the street, ignoring the occasional pedestrians they passed as they walked. The city streets weren't too busy at this time, too late for even the stragglers arriving late to work, but not quite lunch time yet. Even the traffic on the street was a little light for this edge of the Tokyo metropolis.

After just a block, Shotaro could see the Eighty-Four Industries facility up ahead. A manufacturing plant, it was a squat compound behind chain link fences with short buildings that all stacked into each other and interconnected. The employee parking lot was visible first as they approached, with the rest of the facility slowly unfolding as they neared.

"Be calm," Eric said in Japanese.

"Easy for you to say, Mr. SEAL," Miya whispered, her voice shaking. She was holding onto Shotaro's arm and trembling. He worried she'd look out of place, but he couldn't bring himself to say anything to her about it.

Two more blocks and they arrived at the facility. Crossing the street, they were confronted with a drive-up gate manned with an electronic keycard reader and a gate, but no guard post. "Walk cool," Eric told them without really moving his lips. He noticed the security camera without looking at it.

"They can see us," Shotaro said, trying to stay calm.

"Yes, but they won't care," Eric said, looking at the facility like he was running an errand. Shotaro wanted to argue but when they walked the entire depth of the parking lot and arrived at the nearest door and no one had addressed them, he didn't know what to say.

Eric took out his phone as they approached the door and summoned up an app. He held the phone to the key card reader next to the handle and, an instant later, the green light flashed and there was an audible unlocking. Eric opened the door and gestured the two kids in quickly.

On the other side of the door, Shotaro couldn't help but smile. "How did you do that?!" he tried to keep from exclaiming too loudly.

"You've gone where you shouldn't," Eric said with a smirk. "You know how to sneak into places."

"Yeah, but I never had...one of those!" Shotaro grinned, looking at the phone.

"It's just an app," Eric downplayed as he looked around. They were in the worker locker rooms, where the employees changed into jumpsuits. "<I doubt we'll find anything of interest in the plant itself,>" Eric said to himself in English, nodding at the door that led to the manufacturing floor. Shotaro and Miya both glanced towards said door, not sure what he meant or even what he was saying. Rather than explain, Eric turned and started towards a door to his right. He tried the handle but it didn't open.

"Can you use the phone?" Shotaro asked a little too eagerly.

"It needs a key," Miya said for Eric. "How are we going—" She stifled a yelp when the door opened.

A security officer stepped through, looking right at Eric. His hand hovered over a stun gun on his belt. "Who are you?" he asked, mostly Eric. "What are you doing here?"

Eric froze for just a second before summoning up enough Japanese to say "Hayao Minase wanted these kids." Miya and Shotaro's stomachs fell as they looked with mortified eyes at Eric.

The security guard seemed surprised and cautious, but didn't move for a second. "I don't know what you're talking about," he told Eric. His hand moved from his stun gun to his walkie-talkie. "Just stay right there." He took the walkie-talkie from the pouch on his belt.

Without any warning, Eric slammed the door into the guard. Catching his head against the door frame, Eric threw the door open and shoved the guard through it and pinned him to the wall.

Shotaro and Miya slipped through to face a long hallway with checkerboard floor tiles and tope walls. Eric only noticed no one immediately within sight, so he released the guard just long enough to punch him in the jaw. The instant knockout blow threw the guard against the wall like a sack of potatoes and he slumped to the ground.

Eric looked about frantically for a second, like a rat in a maze. He saw the security office just off the door and he grabbed up the guard and drug him towards it. Shotaro opened the door and Eric pushed the guard inside. He began to look around the office as the guard started to awaken from the punch. Just as the uniformed man rolled his head and opened his eyes, Eric began opening drawers left and right. The guard processed where he was and said “Hey—” just before Eric stabbed him in the neck with a syringe. The guard collapsed back into the seat and, within a few seconds, was snoring.

Eric looked at the syringe, impressed. He gathered the others from the security drawer and slipped them into a pocket. “<I don’t know how long we’ll have,>” he warned the two kids. Neither quite understood his words but they got his meaning all the same.

Eric turned to the computer in the security station and looked through it quickly. He shook his head, clearly not liking what he saw. He began to do stuff, leaving Shotaro and Miya watching him. “Good,” he declared in a proud, almost jovial tone. “<I’ve turned off a bunch of the...>” He realized the English wasn’t clear, he didn’t know the Japanese, and using the translator would take too long. “The cameras are down,” he grossly summarized. “Let’s go.” He slipped out of the door and started down the hall.

The trio arrived at a four-way intersection and looked down each route available to them. For a second, they saw nothing distinguishing one route from the next. After only a second, though, they heard chatter. The two kids slunk back down the hallway they’d come from while Eric remained standing. To their left, he saw three office workers chatting as they exited one door and headed up another, the sounds of their footsteps on a stairwell audible even across the distance.

“Bingo,” Eric said. He gestured for the kids to follow as he started after the office workers. Shotaro and Miya looked uneasily at one another before trustingly following Eric down the hall. He caught the door to the stairwell before it could close and kept an eye out as the two teens quickly caught up with him.

Miya slipped through first, Shotaro next, then Eric closed the door slowly and quietly. Before them were metal stairs of grating, more befitting a construction site than a mid-city production plant. “What do they make here?” Miya asked as Eric stepped around her and started up the steps.

Eric took the steps two at a time without thinking, leaving Miya and Shotaro practically running to keep up. On the second of three floors, Eric stopped and peeked out the door. He looked both ways, then slowly opened it. An office hallway was revealed, with a notice board directly across from them. Prominently featured was the schedule for the factory softball team’s practices.

Eric looked left and right, seeing only more of the same. The left route ended in large double doors, while the right ended in a hallway split. He picked left and the three started for the doors. They passed by windows looking into offices and meeting rooms. Most were occupied but the people at work didn’t seem to notice them. When they arrived at the doors, though, they were confronted by the immediate lack of door handles.

Eric stared for half a second, then looked back at Shotaro and Miya. “<Is this some Japanese thing?>” he asked in English. He started trying to dig his fingernails in between the two doors. That went nowhere fast. Shotaro moved to the other side of the door, trying to help but Eric had already given up. Miya stepped back from the doors, as though distance might provide some clue. Staying near the wall, her elbow brushed a small plastic outcropping from the wall itself. She glanced at the small gray box and realized aloud “A keycard.”

As though she’d said some magic word, the doors rumbled open, startling Eric and Shotaro. They both slipped back by the wall, trying to stay out of the way. Through the grandly opening doors came four Japanese business workers in sharp suits and expensive-looking haircuts, all of whom were talking and none of whom were listening. They all ignored or didn’t even notice the three in the hall with them.

Keeping a watchful eye on the passersby, Eric backed through the doors as Shotaro and Miya slipped inside. The doors began to close and Eric turned to see a giant room full of densely packed cubicles. Workers were going to and from the cubicles as the clack of keyboards and the chatter of scripted phone conversations filled the recycled air.

Eric glanced around while the two teens gawked, then he grabbed their wrists and pulled them towards the nearest cubicle. Finding it occupied with a sleeping worker, a spare t-shirt draped over his face as he snored, Eric aborted the entrance and slipped into the next cubicle. It wasn't just empty, but devoid of the personal and official trappings of use. All that sat on the tiny ledge of a desk was a flat screen monitor and several binders in the corner.

Eric had to crouch to keep from being seen over the top of the cubicle. He turned around and faced Shotaro and Miya. "We've got to find a computer," he whispered with the aid of his phone's translator program.

"I can see if I can find a cubicle with a computer," Shotaro suggested. "I look a little older," he added, like he was pre-empting Miya's protest. The look on her face told him he had.

"Not enough," his sister argued. Shotaro didn't have an immediate answer.

"Use the Shifter," Eric said in almost-good Japanese. Shotaro smiled and moved to shift the dial when Eric caught his arm. "<Don't get over zealous and try to do this all on your own,>" he said in English. "<Find a computer, then come back and get us. We can't be separated for long.>"

Following none of that, Shotaro looked at Miya. She hadn't understood much of it either and said, "Just find a computer and come back."

"Got it," he said as he turned the dial one click to the right. At the 2 o'clock position, the face of the watch popped up and he slapped it back down. The light quickly shifted into a purple hue and Shotaro felt a strange sense of lightness. He realized this was the first time he'd activated the Shifter without being under immediate duress and all sorts of little nuances were clear. The purple light seemed to reflect off of him, rather than be absorbed like everything in the proper phase. Moving was a little awkward because he felt like he was in half gravity. Each step felt almost like he was walking on a trampoline, except placing his foot down was almost painful, the ground was so solid. Breathing, likewise, seemed labored, like he was in an incredibly high altitude.

He left the cubicle behind and walked along the edge of the cubicle farm. The tiny half-walls seemed to make a giant maze, but standing on his toes, Shotaro could see that the cubicles were actually set up in little clusters, rather than rows and columns. He couldn't tell if the layout was brilliant or mad. Instead, focused on following the wall and the offices spaced evenly along it. Each

office was occupied, most with the doors closed and the blinds drawn. The few that had the blinds open showed older men and woman, most on the phone or in some pointed discussion with a subordinate.

Shotaro came to the corner of the cubicle farm and turned to follow the wall. As he turned, an office worker walked right at him. Shotaro froze in panic, unable to even get out of the way. His hands rose to buffer the collision. To his surprise, the woman stepped abruptly around him. She stumbled in the process and looked back at the floor, searching for what she must have tripped over. Shotaro instinctively looked around as well before he realized she'd stepped around him without processing it. "Weird," he whispered to himself. He resumed the hunt for an office.

Along the left hand side of the cubicle farm, more office doors broke the monotony of the beige wall. The fourth one down, Shotaro discovered, was empty. The door had been pulled closed but not actually shut and there was no light coming through he pulled blinds. Shotaro approached the door as casually as possible and tried the knob. It was slick and impossibly smooth and he couldn't get a grip. He grabbed the handle with both hands and clamped down with all his might. He leaned into the act of turning the door knob and managed to turn it enough for the door to swing open. Shotaro was sweating when he released the knob. He checked the office to make sure it was in fact empty before he headed back to Miya and Eric.

Shotaro reappeared without any notice, just fading into view at the entryway of the cubicle, saying "Found one.". Eric and Miya both wasted no time getting to their feet and following him down the line of cubicles and then up the long wall to the office. Once inside, Eric shut the door and locked it as the two teens turned to face him. "Now what?" asked Shotaro.

Eric looked at the computer in the center of the office and stepped around the cheap imitation wood desk. He turned on the computer and waited until a login screen appeared. He immediately sighed. When he didn't do anything for a moment, Shotaro looked at him and said "Well? Get with the hacking."

Eric looked at Shotaro, confused. "Get in!" he said, gesturing at the computer.

"How?" Eric asked Shotaro.

"You got in through the door!" Shotaro exclaimed.

“Using an app and hacking a computer aren’t the same thing!” Eric argued back in the best Japanese he’d used yet.

“So figure out the password, Mr. Navy SEAL!” Shotaro exclaimed. Eric looked at the computer and Shotaro looked over his shoulder. Both stared for a moment, not sure what to do.

Miya, by the door, looked at the office for a moment. Imitation wood shelves that almost matched the desk sat against the opposite wall, a few books and personal items amongst the empty space. She touched the shelf, noting dust under the books and on the open spaces as well. “He’s new,” she whispered.

“What?” Shotaro asked, not really looking up from the login screen.

Miya picked up the name plate on the front of the desk and turned it over. She smiled and turned it to the other two. “NishitaniA, password is 88I.” As Eric inputted the login, Shotaro smiled at his sister, impressed. She blushed in return and shrugged.

The instant Eric hit enter, the desktop appeared. Eric grinned like a fool and took out his phone. Plugging it into the computer with a USB cord, he activated an app. “What are you doing?” asked Shotaro.

Eric started to answer in English, stopped, tried with abysmal luck in Japanese, then said “Downloading files” he summarized with great inaccuracy.

Inoue practically shoved through Minase’s secretary and barreled through his door. Behind his desk, Minase looked up, ready to chew her head off. The half-dozen other mid-level execs in Minase’s office were equally angry. Inoue ignored them and pre-empted Minase’s verbal attack by practically shoving her tablet computer into his face.

Minase took one look at the tablet, his eyes going wide, and he ordered “Everyone out.” When they didn’t file out then and there, he shouted “Now!” He looked at Inoue as the others disappeared and told her “Call security. I’m heading down now.”

He reached the door to his office when he stopped and stipulated, “Security, NOT the police. Understood?”

“Yes sir,” she said immediately as they both broke off to handle their respective affairs.

Shotaro wasn't sure what Eric's phone was doing but as files and images flashed by on the screen, he could have sworn he saw a few amongst the digital deluge that looked like the Shifter on his left hand. He wanted to ask for a closer look but he didn't get the chance. The door to the office opened and a very confused A. Nishitani stepped inside and froze. Eric, Miya, and Shotaro likewise froze. For a moment, no one moved until Shotaro exclaimed with some annoyance, “This isn't my office!” He yanked Eric's phone out of the computer and began to chastise Eric for taking them to the wrong office. He shoed Miya out passed the confused Nishitani, Eric right behind him. They got out into the hall when Shotaro gave the office's real owner a quick “Sorry,” and shut the door before he could say anything.

The three started walking briskly away, offices to their right and cubicles to their left. The corner of the space was before them and they could see the exit over the cheap cubicle walls. “Get ready to use your Shifter,” Eric started to tell Shotaro as they rounded the corner. The big doors started to open. “Once nobody can see you! Use—”

Through the doors came Minase, flanked on either side by security guards. As he turned and his eyes fell on the two Kodana children, he smiled. A chortle, practically blaming them that they had brought this upon themselves, escaped his lips.

Eric caught Shotaro and Miya both by the arm and stopped them. “<Back up,>” he said, reverting to English in his panic. They backpedaled around the corner, as though they'd escape the long way around. Minase's guards rushed ahead of him and turned the corner to give chase. Minase didn't bother to hurry, even as he heard the clack of tazers and the heavy weight of spasming bodies hitting the floor. It wasn't until one of his guards went sailing backing around the corner that it dawned on him that his men might not be the ones winning the fight.

Eric came back around the corner, not even acknowledging the half-conscious guard he'd practically broken in half. He carried a weapon in his hand that Minase couldn't immediately

identify. Eric was dismantling it, though and he slapped the pieces into Minase's chest. The office exec looked down to discover it was one of the tazers the guards had carried. He looked up from the discovery to see Shotaro punch him in the nose.

The blow hot and Minase yelled as he stumbled back against the wall. Shotaro, shaking his throbbing fist, followed after Eric, Miya right behind. They passed through the big double doors that were already starting to close. As they passed, Eric punched the keycard reader, cracking the plastic casing as well as the delicate electronics inside. "Let's go!" Eric said as he broke into a trot, the two teens running after him.

They made it halfway to the stairwell they'd first come up when the door opened and two more guards came out. Momentarily surprised, the two guards weren't ready when Eric kicked the door into them, slamming them both into the doorframe itself. He leapt past the door, punching the second guard before practically spinning back around to punch the first. Both were out before they collapsed to the floor. "Let's go!" Eric yelled at Shotaro and Miya as they slowed when nearing the guards.

Back behind the door, Minase propped himself up. His nose, while not broken, was starting to bleed. He took out his phone and speed-dialed Inoue. "Assume they're off the facility grounds," he said immediately. "Deploy all mobile security to the surrounding streets." The very instant Inoue began to protest, Minase screamed "DO IT!"

The sun felt fake to Shotaro. It felt too hot for how cool the air felt. Both were trivial subtleties, though, as he ran. His lungs burned as he raced across the parking lot of the facility, aiming for the gate. He couldn't hear much beyond his own panting and the racing of his heart. He could hear his throat burning. He wasn't sure how he could hear pain, but he was doing it right now.

Up ahead, he saw two more Eighty-Four Industries guards moving to intercept them at the gate. They were armed, with guns or tazers Shotaro couldn't tell. He glanced back and saw Miya falling short, practically forcing Eric to slow down as well to keep up with her.

Facing the guards now, Shotaro turned the dial of the shifter one click to the right and slapped it down. The sun turned purple and he felt like he was running across ice, but the shocked looks on the guards was enough. He barreled into them, leaping at them like a pro-wrestler. It felt like belly-flopping a brick wall but he managed to knock them both to the ground. He started to roll up to his feet when he saw Miya and Eric both hop over what must have been a clear spot to their eyes.

“Where’s Shotaro?!” Miya panicked, starting to slow down and turn, as though to go back for her brother.

“He’s fine, go!” Eric yelled at her. He turned and saw more security beginning to empty out of the facility. “GO!” He yelled.

“I’m trying!” Miya yelled, almost crying now. Both she and Eric ran into the street, mindless of whatever cars might have been coming. “I can’t...” Miya begged. She slowed, starting to violently cough. Eric didn’t break stride but ran up right behind her and scooped her up into his arms. Shifting her onto his shoulder, the American ran like she didn’t weigh a thing.

Across two blocks they ran, finally arriving at the little rental car. Eric jumped behind the driver’s seat and cranked the car immediately. “We can’t leave Shotaro!” Miya screamed as she got into the back of the car.

“We’re not!” Shotaro yelled as he appeared out of thin air right behind her and leaping inside. Before he’d even pulled the door shut, he yelled “Go!” and Eric stepped on the gas. As they peeled out of the parking space on the side of the road, a cacophony of honks came issuing forth from the midday drivers that swerved to avoid Eric’s car or the cascade of other cars trying to avoid hitting him. Eric used their defensiveness to get across the stream of traffic and start away from the facility they’d just escaped.

No sooner had Eric straightened out then a glance in the rear view mirror made him say “Of course.” Shotaro and Miya, both out of breath, checked behind them to see two large black SUVs barreling through traffic like monsters, closing in on the tiny car.

Eric glanced to his left, spotting another behemoth vehicle up ahead. “<Two more are going to come at us,>” he whispered to himself in English. It didn’t take but a second for him to

spot the giants approaching from directly ahead. “<So they want us to turn right,>” he narrated. His irritated, almost disappointed tone got Miya’s attention. “<Talk about cookie-cutter defensive driving manuals.>”

Eric continued to gripe in English as he swerved unexpectedly to the left, shooting right at the big SUV that had been meant to herd them the other direction. So unexpected was the aggressive move, the big vehicle stood motionless as Eric zipped right by it, buzzing close enough to scrape the side window clean off the frame. “And that’s why you get the insurance!” Eric called in Japanese as Miya shrieked and Shotaro screamed. Once past the SUV, Eric opened up the accelerator and zoomed down the narrow side street, disappearing into the afternoon.

Minase was not happy. Sitting behind his stylishly modern desk, he was leaning on his left elbow, his face in his hand, his right hand holding his phone to his ear. Inoue watched from the door of his office, well aware this was not the time to interrupt. Minase was not on the phone, this was not a discussion. Minase was being talked to. And he had no leverage or place to ask for a pause.

When whatever punishments were threatened, Minase closed with a very quiet and curt “Understood,” and hung up. He looked very slowly at Inoue and she felt that, in that moment, he was capable of ordering her death just because she merely existed. Or, worse, he might not dole out the responsibility for once and he might do it himself. Still, she had a job to do.

“Sir,” she began very quietly, “The police...they are still waiting to speak to you.” Minase didn’t say anything for a moment. He just sighed and looked away, staring through the corner of his office. “I might be able to...” she tried to offer but she discovered she didn’t have any ideas of what she could do.

“Do you know if they’re planning to arrest me?” he asked, with the same casualness he might inquire about movie times. “That would be inconvenient.” Inoue offered no guess and instead remained ready to be given orders, her hands holding her tablet computer against her chest like a schoolgirl might hold a prized textbook. “This can NOT be turned over to the police.”

“You mean the Kodana Investigation?” she asked. Minase didn’t answer, but she took his not correcting her for confirmation. “Sir, it may not be up to us.”

He looked at her like he was looking at a child. He chortled derisively as he stood, buttoning his suit jacket. “Don’t say such silly things.” He walked past her like she’d lost the privilege of being worthy of his notice.

In the twilight hours, the downtown parking deck was awash with neon city lights and the dwindling rays of the sun that, long ago, had been outdone by the might of Tokyo-proper. Skyscrapers and thousands upon thousands of shops, restaurants, and anything else of the slightest interest, had banded together to banish shadow and nature alike, as though the advertising soul of the world had set out on a blood vendetta against the sun itself, dethroning it and taking over as the new king of the sky.

Such thoughts made Miya sad as she looked out through the parking deck at the city. She was standing next to Eric’s car as he unscrewed the license plate from the rear of the car. “So you’re switching the license plates because we were in a chase.”

“No,” Eric said as he worked. “I changed the plates this morning. I’m changing them back now.” The plate fell off with a tin clatter and Eric left it right there, positioning the original plate back in place.

“Because you knew we’d be in a chase,” Miya said, trying to follow.

“Turned out to be a safe bet,” Eric said. With the plate already half on, he paused and looked at her. He smiled and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. “You okay?”

She shrugged and paced a little, her cheap flats clacking on the cement of the parking deck floor. “I guess,” she said. “Just feeling a little useless and stuff.” To her surprise, Eric didn’t say anything. He just went back to securing the license plate. “I want to help,” she told him.

“I know,” he said. “And you have.” He nodded into the distance. “You’ve kept your brother sane. He wouldn’t have survived without you.”

That seemed to be less than what she wanted to hear. “I wish he wouldn’t cling to that shifter-thing,” she said. “I wish he’d let you wear it. Or take it off completely.” Eric’s lost expression spoke to how much her rant had left him behind. She switched gears, tilting her head. “Why are you helping us?”

Eric’s eyes opened in surprise. “That kind of came from out of nowhere.”

“Not really,” she said unapologetically. “You’ve come all this way, done so much, spent so much...”. She shrugged and asked again, “Why?”

Eric gave the question serious thought, more so than Miya had expected. He remained stone-still on his knees in the garage, thinking, while the sounds of a thousand cars and a million people from outside echoed throughout the parking deck.

“Because I can,” was his final answer. He just shrugged and shook his head. “That’s really it. No ulterior motive, no agenda. Just...just somebody in need, who I could actually help.” He shrugged again. “So I did. I found myself in a position where I could do something, and I saw an opportunity.” He shrugged yet again and half-smiled at her. “I saw a shot and I took it.”

Miya couldn’t ignore the sadness she saw in his smile, the melancholy that pervaded his expression like a malignant infection, but she couldn’t say anything. So she gave him a smile, every bit as morose as his own, and left it at that. “Come on,” he said, getting up off the pavement. “Let’s go get dinner.” That, she was happy to join him for.

Shotaro couldn’t stop looking at his phone.

He knew it wasn’t his old phone, with a number his mom would know. Just like when he called up the messages, there was no reason for him to think he’d see all the old text messages and voice mails. And yet, in his mind, they still existed. They were still there. Old reminders of an old life where just a click away.

‘Come home’

‘Are you going to be out much longer?’

'You missed dinner'

'Come home'

What once to teenage eyes had been overbearing efforts to dominate and control him, Shotaro now saw as fearful pleas to reconnect. He now saw a maternal desire to guard, protect, look after, take care of. And he'd made the decision to ignore that. He'd made the decision to put his momentary fixations above his mother's love. And now, there would be no more text messages. Now there would be no more voice mails. There would be no more maternal concern.

Shotaro's eyes welled up until he couldn't see. His mouth contorted as he began to sob big, heavy tears. He threw himself onto the pillows of the hotel bed, crying at the top of his lungs. He buried his screams into the pillow, hugging it like his absent mother. A mother he'd never see again.

He sat up, eyes red and cheeks stained, as the door unlocked. In came Miya first, carrying a plastic bag that smelled like heaven. "Shotaro," she called as she entered. "We got KFC." She froze the instant she saw him in his emotionally raw state. She put the food on a table and ran to him. She asked no questions but instead dove into his arms and the crying ensued.

At the door, Eric waited, unsure if he should excuse himself for a moment. Like the previous night, they were sharing the hotel room, so he had no real option but to shut the door and look around the absolutely garish decorations of the love hotel. Rented by the hour, the room was the valentine suite, decked out in red and white with hearts and little anime cherubs in every conceivable location. Even the mirror on the ceiling was shaped like a heart.

The sibling embrace slowed and Miya asked "Are you okay?" as she cupped Shotaro's cheeks in her hands, like she needed to study every detail of his face. He nodded and seemed visibly better, having finally cried it out. Or at least some of it.

"She said you liked the Colonel," Eric said as he began to distribute the modest meal. He tried to smile, to give some hope, but he felt disingenuous doing so. They ate in relative silence in a circle on the floor of the amorous hotel room, then Eric asked "Did you find anything?"

“Actually, yeah,” the teen boy said, sounding surprised. He turned around to the heart-shaped bedside table and got Eric’s phone. “Okay, so, most of what you downloaded was useless. Or at least unrelated.”

“Well, it was a file dump. I was getting everything,” Eric said unnecessarily.

“But I found this.” Shotaro handed the phone past Miya’s curious eyes to Eric.

Eric looked at the phone for a second, then scrolled through the images. “This looks like your shifter.”

“Except it’s a watch,” Shotaro said. “And it only has one setting.” Eric grew more interested as he kept flipping through schematic pages. “I found four designs: the Alpha model, the Sigma model, the Chi model, and the Mu model.”

“There’s more in here than just those four,” Eric said, Miya leaning over his shoulder to see the screen.

“Yeah, a lot more,” Shotaro said. “Those four are the only ones that ‘worked,’” he explained. “The others either didn’t work or they couldn’t figure out how they worked. Except one.” He leaned forward to show Eric and Miya. When he couldn’t quickly find it, he took the phone and took too long digging up. He finally held the phone back to them, showing just scribbles that had been scanned. “They call it ‘the Kappa Theory’.”

“Why?” asked Eric skeptically.

“Because they’ve clearly got a thing for Latin letters,” Shotaro said. “The point is, they had four models that worked and a fifth they thought could work. But they couldn’t integrate them.” Eric stared blankly at Shotaro. “They couldn’t get them all to work in once device.” He held up his left hand and the shifter upon it. “Mom found a way to integrate them. She made ONE prototype, with no reference notes. That’s why they want this back; so they can reverse engineer how she made one shifter that can do all of it.”

“Have you used all of them?” Miya asked. Eric shook his head.

“The last one might not work,” Eric guessed. “Or, worse, it might. I wouldn’t try it.”

“They talk about what they all are,” Shotaro said. “I didn’t understand it, but I know the Alpha one is the first click.” He demonstrated by turning the dial of the shifter to the 2 o’clock position.

Eric didn’t bother to say anything; he just put his hand out demonstratively. Shotaro put the shifter back to noon and pushed the dial down. “Anyway, it’s apparently powered by kinetic energy.” He held the dial face of the device for them to see the numbers. “That’s apparently what the numbers represent.”

“Where was it manufactured?” asked Eric, still looking through the images and bypassing the words.

“Maebashi,” said Shotaro. Eric and Miya both looked up, both with very different looks of confusion.

“Where’s that?” asked Eric.

“Mom never worked at Maebashi,” Miya said.

“I know,” Shotaro agreed with his sister. “Maebashi is north of here, in the Gunma Prefecture.”

Eric nodded. “And your mom never worked there?”

Both Shotaro and Miya shook their heads. “She worked at some remote places and stuff. She worked at Osaka, like, two or three times a year. But never Maebashi. Not that I remember, anyway. And not recently, to be sure.”

“And it’s a long ways away, even by train,” Miya said. “She wouldn’t have had time to leave the shifter in Shotaro’s locker.”

Eric nodded, seeming in sympathy, but that didn’t stop him from saying “We can’t follow what we think; we have to follow the facts. Now that we have some. And, right now, the facts say Maebashi.” Eric shrugged and said “So we go to Maebashi.”