

New Phase

Part 5 of 5

Serial #1 in the Teach The Sky Continuity

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New Phase, Part 5 of 5
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In the early morning, before even dawn, the bright lights of the station for the Japan Railroad Ryomo Line burned Miya Kodana's eyes. She rubbed them with the back of her hand as she walked through the crowd of people. She yawned, trying and failing to stifle it. The yawn turned more epic and she slipped over to the side of the walkway and had to lean over, the yawn threatening to engulf her.

Once Miya had regained some composure, she looked around and realized she was alone. There was no sign of Eric anywhere in the growing tide of people who walked past her at a brisk pace. Miya, in jean shorts and a hoodie meant to blend in with other teens, stood out against the office workers and wage workers passing her by. Even more than her age and her clothes, many of the faces bypassing her weren't Japanese or even Asian.

Miya began to panic. She started to breathe heavily, then pant, then hyperventilate. She began to look back and forth down the walkway between platforms. The low ceiling contrasted with the wide hall, just as the bright modern lights stood out against the burnt-red tile floors and white tile walls with posters of out-of-date advertisements. Miya pressed herself against the wall, growing dizzy from her own gasping. She began to feel faint.

A subtle pressure around her right wrist caught her attention. She forgot momentarily about her isolation and instead lifted her wrist to look at it. Doing so felt like she was tugging against a rubber band. Her wrist was fine, however, and nothing constricted her. The sense of pressure shifted and she felt a subtle but unmistakable pull down the walkway. Miya smiled and whispered, "Shotaro?" Her wrist was squeezed twice rapidly and tugged her forward. She followed the pressure freely, letting herself be guided.

In the phase Shotaro now knew as the Alpha Phase, all light was purple. Coming down from the recessed lighting that made up every three ceiling tiles overhead, the purple was thick and artificial, like a cheap bulb from a second-rate party store. It made Shotaro feel greasy just walking through the light.

He looked different than everybody else. Whereas they seemed to absorb the light, he seemed to reflect it. He was as purple as they, but it was clear he didn't belong there. Likewise, it

was clear he couldn't stay. It was hard to breathe in this phase, with each inhale and exhale a labored act. Just a few minutes spent in the purple world was exhausting. Add to it pulling Miya along was like trying to pull a downed telephone pole. Just grabbing her wrist would go unnoticed, so he was squeezing her wrist hard. And just pulling her, too, was too subtle. He had to yank and yank hard and not let go.

The one upside was that everyone got out of their way. They couldn't see him or hear him, yet wherever he walked, people parted as if of their own accord. Shotaro didn't understand why and didn't care. He just focused on leading Miya to the proper platform.

Down a flight of tile steps that clacked with every footfall, they arrived at an open-air platform that was a little less crowded. A chilling breeze was blowing through the station, as though the weather had forgotten it was Spring. Miya squealed at a gust of cold, which got a few people's attention, including Eric's. He rushed to the steps and stopped two steps in front of Miya. In the Alpha Phase, Shotaro could see straight into the tall American's eyes. A radically unique perspective, it made him smirk.

"You okay?" Eric asked in Japanese, taking Miya's hand. He still had a thick accent that warped the words almost to the point incomprehensibility, but he'd all but ceased needing his phone to do any translating.

Miya accepted his hand and descended the steps to come to the platform. "Yeah," she said as they took their places at the far end of the platform. She shivered against the cold and looked down the line. "I've never been to the Ibaraki Prefecture before." She looked around again. "There are so many..."

Eric waited for her to finish her sentence before suggesting "White people?" To his surprise and amusement, Miya nodded.

"They're not white; they're Latino," said Shotaro, inserting himself into the discussion as he walked up behind Miya. She latched onto him, hugging him. "They're mostly South Americans, right?" He aimed the question at Eric, but Eric just shrugged.

"Why'd we have to come to Yuki if we're going to Maebashi?" Miya complained after another shiver brought about by a gust of cold air.

“Because they’re probably watching all the trains going between Tokyo and all the places mom worked,” Shotaro reminded her with a whisper.

“Precisely,” agreed Eric. “This is a detour, to hopefully give us some breathing room. Unfortunately, that means traveling along the two legs of the triangle instead of the hypotenuse.” Eric watched as the middle school girl and her high school brother struggled to remember math class. He considered clarifying but opted for an exhausted sigh instead.

His sigh seemed to turn into a gust of wind, only this time it was unseasonably warm, the type of wind that only comes off metal machines. Behind the cusp of the hot wind came rushing in the silver bullet train. The doors opened automatically and passengers began to disembark. “Here we go,” Eric said, taking Miya’s hand. She took Shotaro’s hand, and the three boarded the train as one.

Hayao Minase looked catatonic. As Inoue sat across from in the luxury transport – part armored car, part limousine – she wanted to work on her tablet, but couldn’t bring herself to look away from him. Sitting there in his dark gray suit with a blue tie, his left arm across his waist and his right hand supporting his chin, he was absolutely motionless. It wasn’t until he asked her “Yes?” that she realized she was starrng.

“S-Sorry, sir,” she said, going back to her tablet, desperate to find something to be doing. Suddenly, the long list of things needing her immediate attention seemed woefully inadequate. “I was just...” She didn’t know what to say. “Everyone I know is always so busy.” She smiled at him. “It was nice to see someone taking some time away from working.”

Minase smiled but it wasn’t a pleased smile, more like an indulging smile meant to make Inoue feel better about her shortcomings. “I was working.” Inoue tried not to look confused by

the way Minase smirked, but she could tell she'd failed. "My job is not to type," he said with not too condescending of a look at Inoue's tablet. "Nor is it to calculate or keep track of things. My job is to get results, on whatever tasks are set before me. My productivity is not measure on how long, hard, or tool-intensive I work," he said with another glance at her tablet.

Inoue smiled, like she was playing a game of riddles. "So you're paid to think?" she asked, almost like she was teasing him.

He smiled again, in that way that told her the conversation was becoming even more of a burden. "My job and what I'm paid for are two different things. And my job is not to think, but results. NOTHING matters except results."

He let the declaration speak for itself and, in time, his eyes turned and faced out the tinted window of the vehicle at the distant mountains. Inoue was left alone with her work and the resolution to not speak first again.

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The train car was nice, almost like the lobby of a hotel. Seats that swiveled comfortably were spaced in four-block sets facing a small and secured table. The floors were a sturdy plastic with some comfortable give and the walkway down the middle of the train car was carpeted. The car was well-lit but not too crowded, with only about half the sets of seats even occupied.

At the rear of the car, Inoue was facing forward. With the sun outside rising over the day, she was starting to feel more awake. The can of iced coffee from the snacks tray helped. Across from her, Eric was counting his money. He looked a little worried. "What's wrong?" she asked, speaking quietly over the hum of the train.

Eric shook his head and folded up the bills. He smiled at Miya the same way Shotaro did when he didn't want to share bad news. It prompted Miya to look angry and a little insulted. She leaned forward and asked again, "What's wrong?"

Unlike Shotaro, Eric didn't lie. "I'm running out of money," he told her. He looked around the train with some finality and said, "I think I've got enough to get us back to Tokyo. Food for tomorrow, and enough for the ticket."

"Ticket?" gasped Miya.

"I want to stay," Eric told her. "I may yet," he added, but then he smirked. "But I'm not made out of money. And this trip has just about exhausted all my savings."

"You're leaving?" Miya realized. She was too stunned to be sad just yet.

"I don't know what we're going to do after today," Eric confided to her. "Part of me hopes that you guys will come back to America with me."

Miya asked, as though amazed, "Could you afford four tickets?"

Eric started to do some math in his head when it didn't add up. "Four?"

"Yeah," said Miya. "Me, you, Shotaro, and mom."

Eric had no idea what to say to that.

Shotaro was in the bathroom, not crying. His body was trying its damndest but he was fighting to keep the tears inside. His chin quaked, as did his body. He was supporting himself on the stainless steel sink of the tiny, cramped train bathroom. Occasionally a tear would drip out and fall from his chin to plink onto the metal surface, but that sound only galvanized his need for control even more.

He managed to look up into the polished steel that was the mirror and for a moment, he distracted himself by wondering if glass hadn't been used as some kind of safety measure. Thoughts of train crashes turned into thoughts of trains in general. And in a flash, he was four years old. He

was clinging to his mother's hand as they approached the yellow line, to cross over onto the train itself. He couldn't remember the trip or where they were going. All he could remember was the fear of the tiny gap between the platform and the train itself. Not even an inch wide, if that, he couldn't have fallen through it if he tried. But his four-year-old mind sent him into a panic anyway. There was gibbering, stalling, and even tears. Shotaro couldn't remember if he'd thrown a full-on tantrum or not. He'd always been a difficult boy, and part of him wanted to think he'd done so. All he could clearly remember was holding onto his mother's hand.

Almost instinctively, his hand reached out. He didn't know what for or why, nor did he know what he had expected. But the absence he felt as he grasped at the air broke him. Now he cried. He had no choice and certainly no control. He doubled over, sobbing huge, desperate tears. His face warped as the tears came and he crumpled in on himself until he'd fallen to the floor. Curled in a fetal position, he stopped fighting it and just cried.

Shotaro lost track of time in the deluge of tears. They had exhausted him. When they'd passed enough for him to regain his equilibrium, he pulled himself up by the sink and washed his face. He looked at himself in the mirror and didn't know what to think. He recognized the face but he didn't recognize who it belonged to.

An errant glance at his hands and his eyes fell on the shifter. It sat on the back of his left hand, more like a glove than a watch. The dial was at 99:99, which he guessed was maximum. Feeling lost, he turned the dial to 2 o'clock and the face popped up. He slapped it back down at the world turned purple.

In the Alpha phase, the purple world, Shotaro felt heavy, but not compared to anything else. Moving through the air felt like moving through the shallow end of a swimming pool. Breathing was harder too, though it was easy to overlook at first. The ground beneath his feet rumbled and rattled far more violently, like the train had turned off its shock absorbers.

Switching to the 4 o'clock setting, that Shotaro had learned was the Sigma phase, was not a pleasant experience. The world turned blue and that blue punched him. Shotaro was slammed into the wall of the bathroom like he'd been hit by the speeding train itself. He couldn't breathe at all and was pressed into the wall harder and harder. Fighting against the forces pressing against him, Shotaro slid his hands over his stomach so he could shift back to 12 o'clock. The instant he pushed

the display down, all the pressure disappeared and he lurched forward, slamming his head into the metal mirror. He rebounded off it and fell to the ground, holding his head.

He lay on the ground for a long time, still holding his head. He just started up at the tinted skylight in the sloped ceiling of the bathroom. Something hypnotic about it caught his eye and his thoughts and he didn't get up for a few moments. Instead, he just lay there, hearing the hum of the train. He found himself compelled to say 'Mom' but while his lips would move, his voice wouldn't allow it.

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"<Looks like something out of GI Joe,>" said Eric, in a now-rare instance of him speaking in English. He lowered a pair of unassuming binoculars as he looked out across the valley at the large, four-story processing plant built right into the side of the mountain. He didn't bother asking and just handed the binoculars to Shotaro who was waiting for his turn. "What mountain is this again?" he asked, turning to Miya.

Miya was sitting on a small bench built just off the side of the small park walkway. Green trees all around them, the chirp of birds and other sounds of forest life echoed through the trees. "Mt Arayama," she told Eric very matter-of-factly. Eric looked at something on his phone, looking unsure. "What, you don't understand 'Mt Arayama?'" she asked, slightly amazed.

"He can't find it on Google," Shotaro chimed in, looking through the binoculars.

"There's no Mt Arayama!" Eric protested defensively.

"Yes there is!" Miya insisted, jabbing her finger towards the mountain behind Eric. "It's right there!"

Eric deferred to his phone. "This says that's Mt Akagi."

“Great. It’s wrong,” Shotaro said, not caring but backing his sister all the same. “All the same,” he detoured before the debate could continue. “That’s Eighty-Four Industries regional plant.” He stared at it for a second before asking, “What do we do now?”

Eric turned and joined him in looking at the giant facility. He looked, stared, and then finally looked to his phone. “Give me your phone,” he said to Shotaro. “Yours too,” he said with a glance to Miya. Both teens were uncertain but they handed over their disposable prepaid phones. Eric immediately set about downloading an app onto each of them. Once the installation process was underway, Eric showed his phone to Shotaro and said “This is a locator app.”

“What’s it locate?” asked Shotaro, looking at what looked like any other map on a phone.

“Phone numbers,” Eric said, clearly waiting for it to hit.

“Whose phone...” The emotional hurricane started with Miya. Her jaw dropped open and she looked at Eric, stunned. It Shotaro half a second longer to glance at the top of the screen and connect the numbers the app was tracking. When he did, he looked at Eric as though he’d betrayed them both.

“Her phone means nothing,” Eric cautioned them. “Just because it’s in there doesn’t mean she is. It doesn’t even mean she ever was.”

“Yeah, but...” Shotaro argued weakly.

Eric nodded, a little sadly. He echoed Shotaro’s sentiments by repeating his words, “Yeah, but...” He readied to say more but a random jogger came down the wooded path. Eric fell silent and turned away from her, leaving Miya and Shotaro to barely notice her existence except to be quiet.

Once she’d passed, Eric said “I don’t really know what to expect in here. I just know we’ve got to find some answers.” One look into Shotaro and Miya’s eyes and he saw their resolution. “And we will,” he said confidently, hoping he was right.

Down the jogging path, Inoue ran for another mile before she came to the parking embankment where three Eighty-Four Industries vehicles waited. With them was Minase, talking

with several men in tactical gear. When Inoue came down the winding wooden steps to the parking lot, he left them behind without a word. “Well?” he asked before she’d stepped off the stairs.

“They’re there,” she said. A tech came over and took her phone from her, plugging it into a laptop. He immediately began to pull videos and stills of the three that the built-in camera had taken when Inoue had jogged past. “They’re scouting out the place.”

“Any idea how they plan to get in?” Minase asked.

Inoue shook her head at a loss. “I saw no equipment. Not even spare changes of clothes.” Minase paced away from her, thinking. “Sir, why not send up a team now?” she said to him, with a glance to the men in tactical gear.

“We’re going to have an even harder time exerting influence over the local cops than we do in Tokyo,” Minase said. “We do this on a park, on government land, and there will be federal consequences.” Inoue accepted that and went about changing from her gray jogging outfit back into her suit. “Despite what your average anarchist might tell you, not everyone in the government is corrupt,” Minase seemed to lament, mostly to himself. “No, we need them on our property,” he concluded. He turned and faced up the hill Inoue had just jogged down. “We have to let them in,” he concluded.

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Shotaro had decided he liked the Sigma Phase better. Not only was blue better than purple, he could move so much easier. If the Alpha phase was like being in the pool, the Sigma phase was like being on roller skates. Everything seemed effortless and faster than normal. Granted, the ground felt like it was ice, but as Shotaro practically flew through the parking lot around the large factory, he didn’t mind.

He'd climbed the fence – with far greater ease than he'd expected – and subtly redirected two security cameras. Right now, he was on his way to the side entrance on the western side of the facility. There, in a small alcove, was the employee entrance, complete with redundant cameras and a security lock on the heavy, metal door. These things didn't bother Shotaro. They didn't matter. It's not like anybody could stop him. As for Eric and Miya, they just needed shifters of their own.

That callous thought brought Shotaro skidding back to reality. He stopped just before the door and stood perfectly still. He suddenly realized he had a bit of a headache. He looked at the door, hoping to see his reflection in the small slit of a window, but light didn't seem to do much reflecting in the Sigma phase. But in trying to see his reflection, he realized he was wobbling. He grabbed his head, realizing he was short of breath.

Shotaro switched from Sigma to Alpha and it was like getting punched in the chest. Maidenly he could breathe, but it was hard to do so. The ground that had felt slick and featureless a second ago now felt like gravel. He went from being light as a feather to weighed down. He dropped to his hands and knees as he caught his breath.

Eric and Miya came down the alcove behind him, both intuitively stepping around him without a thought. Eric put his phone to the door and tried the electronics app again. When it worked, Eric didn't look relieved but suddenly more worried. He held the door for Miya before saying to the empty alcove, "Come on."

Shotaro got to his feet and slipped inside. Once he was in the building, the purple looked so sickly and artificial, he felt like he was going to throw up. He shifted back into the normal phase, just to keep from losing his breakfast.

As Shotaro bent over and breathed, Miya patting his back supportively and uselessly, Eric turned to face the locker room. Much like the facility they'd broken into the day before, they found themselves in a locker room with low-hanging lights and hard floors. Instead of half lockers stacked two high, these were full length lockers with built-in combination locks and sturdier doors. Metal benches ran down the rows, built into the floor and seemingly made of the same hard stuff of the floor.

“Looks like a prison,” Eric whispered to himself. He paused momentarily when he realized he’d mumbled in Japanese. On the far side of the locker room was a metal door. To their right, up on a catwalk just a few steps up, was a transparent sliding door. It was through this door that Eric saw the security guards coming.

“Hide!” Eric exclaimed as he dove behind the nearest set of lockers. Shotaro and Miya followed him, huddling next to him as the doors opened. Two security guards came through, both drawing tazers. “Stay quiet,” Eric whispered to the kids.

“We know you’re in here,” called the guard on the left. “The exit is secured, so you can’t run away.” His voice echoed badly against the locker room’s innumerable hard surfaces. “Come out.” Eric looked down the row of lockers, then back at the door. As he seemed to consider their options, he began to slowly sidle towards the edge of the row. Miya and Shotaro did as well.

A paranoia about the edge of the lockers hit Shotaro, it dawned on him that he had no idea why they seemed to be moving towards exposure and surrender. He glanced down the row and quickly shifted into Alpha phase. The world went purple again and he saw two men in combat fatigues shocked at his sudden shift. Shotaro rushed at them, trying to tackle them, but the high school student was no match for the two security guards. They wrestled him quickly and efficiently to the ground. One pinned his hands behind his back while the other pinned his head down by putting his knee on the base of Shotaro’s neck. Two more guards joined the pile-on from the other end of the lockers, no longer pinning in Eric and Miya.

Choking from his position, Shotaro scrambled to turn the dial of his shifter to 4 o’clock. In the time it took the four guards all holding him down to realize what he was doing, Shotaro slapped his shifter against himself, shifting to the blue Sigma phase.

An unearthly chill went down Shotaro’s spine as the shift from purple to blue took almost half a minute. He didn’t feel free like he’d hoped but he felt no longer constrained as he had. A glance forward and he saw two men in the blue light. They looked horrified beyond all reasons. One had clearly thrown up. They both were stumbling away, as though they’d seen a monster.

Shotaro managed to turn his head enough to look at the guard that had pinned his neck to the ground. All that resided there was a black shape, featureless but in the form of a man. Like a

black mannequin, it was perfectly still and in precisely the same position of Shotaro's attacker. He struggled to slide free of the once-men. It was like trying to slip his way out from between stone statues. They weren't hard or solid like exactly. He just couldn't move them.

Once he'd slipped free of the guards, he stood up and was finally able to take in the scene. Four black shapes that had once been men now occupied the blue-lit row. They were all bent over and focused downward like faceless demons over some pit into hell. Shotaro realized that whatever he was looking at, it was nothing holy. The sheer, subdued horror of what he saw finally ended his control and, like the blue-lit guard just a moment ago, he threw up.

In the normal world, Miya and Eric were both stunned to see sourceless vomit expel out onto the floor. Miya shrieked and Eric moved her away, just as Shotaro reappeared and collapsed against the edge of the lockers. "What happened?!" Eric asked. "The guards just ran."

"I-I shifted from..." Shotaro tried to explain. He felt numb all over, even as he pointed down the row where the black shapes had been. "I guess I took them with me."

Eric looked down the row. Even though he could see nothing, an ill feeling passed through him. He couldn't stop himself from back-pedaling from the unseen horror Shotaro was referring to. "The guards retreat," Eric said, returning to the situation at hand. "Now's our chance."

Miya, supporting her brother, protested. "He can't—"

"No, he's right," Shotaro said, getting to his feet. His whole body felt like it had fallen asleep and was now beginning to awaken, painfully. "We gotta go now." He looked between the two doors and asked Eric "Which way?"

"What do you mean 'they are refusing to use the shifters'?" asked Minase in a tone that, initially sounding calm, betrayed a readiness and willingness to murder.

In the security office of the plant, surrounded by uniformed security personnel at dozens of stations, Inoue stepped close to Minase. She whispered quietly, for fear that the electric hum of all the computers wouldn't drown them out. "Sir," she said crisply, unable to hide her revulsion. "Four of our men are dead. Four more men saw them..." She cut her words short. "The shifters

are not safe. Yes, we have bench tests and early-use trials,” she conceded. “But not tactical utilization. Not like this!”

Now it was Minase who stepped forward, moving dangerously close to Inoue so that he barely even needed to whisper to make himself clear. “You cannot afford to be this naïve.” He stepped away from her like he might step away from a trash can. “Issue all available shifters to security personnel,” he decreed. “Anyone who refuses is terminated immediately.” Considering that matter resolved, Minase looked to the main security monitor and asked, “Where are they?”

The metal door opened with a loud bang. Miya ran in first, Shotaro right behind her. Eric came in last and shut the door fast, locking it and then trying to wedge it shut with a broom handle. He looked out over a large series of power batteries. Like buildings unto he selves, the giant energy repositories hummed and buzzed inside the absolutely gigantic chamber they found themselves within.

“What IS this place?” Shotaro whispered in awe.

“A distraction,” Eric said as he consulted his phone. “Your mom’s phone is less than...” He didn’t understand the display so he showed it to Shotaro and said “That far.”

“She’s that close?!” Miya exclaimed.

“Her phone is,” both Shotaro and Eric urged her cautiously. Eric began to quickly shuffle down the metal steps to get to the base of the giant room. “Hey, wait a second,” Shotaro said, not following. “A big reactor like this—”

“It’s not a reactor,” Miya corrected, following Eric.

“Whatever,” Shotaro said. “Shouldn’t there be people here? Like scientists and stuff?” Miya slowed, looking back up at him. “I mean, where is everybody?”

“They don’t want extra casualties in the trap,” Eric called up to them, only now stopping at the bottom of the stairs almost three stories down.

“What trap?” Miya called.

“The one we walked into,” Eric said. “You think we’d get this far with only one welcoming party?” That thought slowed both Miya and Shotaro. Eric nodded a black half-bulb in the corner, just over the door they’d come through. As the two kids turned and looked at the security camera, Eric said, “They know where we are and almost certainly what we’re after. They’re waiting for us. Our only hope is that we can screw up and thwart their trap before they can fully spring it.”

Arriving at the bottom with Miya, Shotaro told Eric “You suck at staying positive.”

“Positive and delusionally optimistic are not the same thing,” Eric told him. He turned and began to lead the kids down the narrow space between the wall on their right and the first set of batteries on their left. With the electric humming of the batteries washing out all ambient noise, the three didn’t realize their situation until two armed guards stepped out from around the far end of the room. Leveling machine guns at the intruders, the two guards shouted something but it was lost in the wash of white noise.

Shotaro glanced back and saw two more men, both with machine guns as well. “What do we do?” Shotaro asked Eric. He didn’t immediately answer, glancing back and forth between the two sets of guards. Shotaro took the initiative to turn his shifter to 2 o’clock, causing the two guards ahead to yell again and prepare to shoot. Shotaro slapped his hand down on the shifter and the world went purple.

Two men appeared behind the forward guards. Seeing Shotaro in the new phase, they both drew pistols and leveled them at him. “Freeze!” they both yelled. An awkward uncertainty followed as Shotaro didn’t move and neither did the men. Mindless of what was happening in the regular world, the two men began to approach Shotaro until they spotted him turning his dial to 4 o’clock. They didn’t bother with a warning and both fired.

The pistols didn’t shoot. There was a loud pop like a gunshot, but it was deeper and it had no echo. The bullets left the barrels of the gun but at a speed more akin to a baseball pitch than a true weapon. Worst of all, though, both pistols exploded. The metal just turned into radiant balls of fire in the hands of the two men. Both men screamed in pain and dropped their broken and destroyed guns, which quickly returned to the normal phase as charred and ruined scrap.

Shotaro broke into a run at the two men, as though to attack them. Neither stayed their ground. They turned and ran, both shifting phase back to normal as they ran. Shotaro smirked with pride, feeling pretty badass. He kicked one of the scrap guns, only to remember how poorly that would work when he nearly broke his toe on the hunk of metal. He turned now back around to see Eric's state and to help him, only to see all four machine gun-toting guards unconscious on the ground. Eric had all four machine guns and their accompanying pistols as well. Shotaro decided instead to simply shift unceremoniously back into phase and ask "What now?"

"Keep going," Eric said with a nod to the door beyond Shotaro. He was disabling all the weapons save the ones he was going to keep. When Shotaro went for a pistol Eric hadn't disabled yet, Eric told him "Leave it."

"We might need it," Shotaro suggested as Miya came to stand by him.

"The guns I'm keeping are for distraction, not to win any fights." When Shotaro tried to press the issue, Eric stated clearly "A gun will not avail you, or us." He looked at Miya when he said that. "And if you take one shot, they will stop trying to capture us." He shook his head, discarding the last gun. "Leave it." Shotaro didn't argue.

They rushed on through the door. With Eric's hands now busy, it was Shotaro and his phone's locator that led the way. Miya clung just a few steps behind him, while Eric stayed at the rear, trying to watch in all directions at once.

Shotaro led them through a few more doors and down another flight of steps when the phone app told him they'd drawn close. The steps emptied out into a long hallway that was narrow yet tall. Doors were staggered on either side of the long expanse, with wide spaces between them. Shotaro consulted the phone and started down the hall. The air was still yet felt charged. Their steps echoed seemingly endlessly down the hall, as did their breathing.

Shotaro turned at the third door on the left. He reached for the handle but didn't immediately turn it. He looked at Miya and Eric and a desperate gasp escaped his lips. He faced the door again and pushed it open.

Hayao Minase was waiting.

In a square room full of junk and spare parts that was piled along the edges of the room and stacked haphazardly on three chemistry tables, Minase made no move. His hands were placed wide on the end of the central table, standing like a corporate overlord behind some desk of power. Even when Eric aimed the machine gun at him, Minase looked not just in control but indifferent. “This is what you’ve been looking for,” he told the two children. His voice was weighty with expectation.

“Where’s our mom?” Shotaro asked, his voice quaking. Miya clung to his arm, practically hiding behind him.

Minase looked at Eric but said nothing. The two stared across the barrel of the machine gun for just a second before Eric lowered the weapon. “Thank you,” Minase said like showing courtesy to Eric was just that, a courtesy and not necessary. He faced the Kodana children now, as though Eric had ceased to exist. “Your mother, Miyako Kodana, is dead.”

To hear those words broke Miya. She exploded into tears and fell against Shotaro’s back. He turned and caught her, holding her as she cried. “The moment she was assigned to integrate the phase shifters, she began to exhibit signs of insanity: paranoia and delusions chiefly. We fear there may be a radiation danger to the phase shifting.”

“Our mom never worked here, how did her phone end up here?” Shotaro demanded, trying to keep from crying himself.

“She did work here,” Minase corrected him. “This is the very room where she built that,” he said with a nod to the shifter on Shotaro’s left hand. “You have our property. You have a marvel of scientific engineering but also a very dangerous implement.”

“How did my mother get it into my locker?!” Shotaro yelled.

Minase stunned all three of them when he said very succinctly and clearly, “We don’t know.” He nodded to the room they were in and said, “This is where your mother was last seen alive.” He told Shotaro, “Use the shifter. Go through all four phases. Confirm she’s not in here.”

Shotaro looked at Miya, then at Eric. He stepped away from them and shifted in the Alpha phase. The purple world held three men with guns drawn, but no sign of Shotaro’s mother. He

cycled through the Sigma, Chi, and Mu phases as well. Purple to blue, blue to green, green to gold, they were all the same. Eighty-Four Industries agents ready and waiting but no sign of his mother.

When Shotaro returned to normal, Minase seemed unsurprised at his heartbroken expression. “Now that your curiosity has been satisfied,” said Minase, “Please, give us back the shifter. Return it to us, right now, and you three walk out.” Shotaro looked down at the device that felt like a part of himself. And, somehow, a part of his mother. Removing it seemed unthinkable. And yet, he was prepared to do just that.

“How did she die?”

It was Miya that asked the question. Her crying had subsided into a dull unemotional state, almost like a waking catatonia. “Where’s her body?” Shotaro looked expectantly at Minase and, for the briefest of instants, saw him squirm.

“She disappeared,” Minase said, his strong voice unusually uneasy.

“You don’t know that she’s dead,” Eric said.

Minase addressed Eric like he was done talking to children and was ready to speak to the grown-up. “The only way we can find her is with his shifter.”

Eric smirked. “You should have stuck with your first story.” He fired the machine gun before he’d even fully raised it, blasting a pile of junk near Minase. Metal and sparks sprayed everywhere as Minase ducked. “Run!” Eric yelled as he backed up to the door. He stopped short of it and couldn’t get closer. “Shotaro!”

Shotaro shifted into Alpha and saw no one. He jumped to Sigma and found two guards standing between Eric and the door. He jumped at them like a luchador and slammed them into the wall, all three collapsing. Shotaro got to his feet as Eric led Miya outside. Immediately he heard shouting and even gunfire. He got to his feet and one of the guards punched him. Shotaro slumped to the ground and the guard grabbed him by the collar and the waist and threw him into the wall. Shotaro slammed into it like he’d been shot from a cannon.

Shotaro crumpled to the ground and felt his hands and feet all pulled apart. He tried to fight it but he was splayed apart. Hoisted up, he was practically slammed down onto the central chemistry table. More gunfire was coming from the hallway. “MIYA!!!” he screamed futilely.

Shotaro’s left hand was forced up as Minase appeared over him, a bone saw in his hand. “You brought this on yourself,” Minase made clear. He began to draw back the bone saw like he was going to chop down a tree.

In a fit of terror, Shotaro ripped free his right hand. He grabbed his left hand out of the air, yanking it down just narrowly to avoid being struck by Minase. His hands on his chest, Shotaro turned the dial to 10 o’clock and slapped down the display.

A gust of wind burst through the room, like a tornado had appeared and disappeared in the same instant. The wind rocked through the room on all the phases, blowing back all the men to the distant walls. Out in the hall, Eric whirled around when the wind came gushing out. He turned his near empty machine gun at the door and ran back for it. He glanced inside and saw Minase against the far wall. The look of total and complete surprise said everything.

Eric turned as Miya ran towards him. “What—”

“We gotta go,” Eric yelled. The security he’d been trading shots with leaned around the far edge of the hallway and Eric fired suppressively at them, then threw away the empty gun. He began to walk briskly back the way they’d come.

“Where’s Shotaro?!” Miya screamed.

“Chasing down your mom,” Eric yelled over his own gunfire before he pushed Miya up the stairs on their way out of the facility.



With a quiet knock, Inoue opened the door into Minase's office. He was seated behind the desk, staring at nothing. The windows of his office were open and a warm city breeze was blowing in. When he'd realized she'd opened the door, he sat up. "I understand congratulations are in order," he told her. She said nothing and instead stepped inside the office, closing the door behind her.

Minase looked at the pristine surface of his desk, then at her. "I would like to think you have some big shoes to fill." Again, she said nothing. Silence seemed to be her only defense against tears.

When nothing was said, Minase finally rose. "Well..." he said. Inoue started to speak, to protest his departure, but he ignored it. He walked around the desk and began to walk for the door like a dead man walking to the gallows.

Inoue didn't move when he reached the door. Without looking at him, she whispered "I may now have some kind of pull. Maybe I can—"

He stopped her. He whispered angrily into her ear, as though disappointed with her compassion, "You cannot afford to be that naïve." She looked crossly at him, as angry at his condescending tone as his seeming acceptance of the situation. "You know what awaits for me." He said nothing more. He left Inoue alone in the office, shutting the door behind him as he left.

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'Thank you again, Saya'.

Miya hit send on the final text message before she powered down her phone. Standing by the window looking out at the tarmac, a sense of sadness filled her. She couldn't see much beyond the airport and she hoped some gorgeous vista of Japan would be seeing her off. Instead, all she

had was smog and clouds. Something about the obfuscating darkness seemed apropos, though she still didn't have to like it.

A shape appeared in the window behind her and Miya turned. It was Eric. "You okay?" he asked. Miya didn't say anything, she only nodded. She found it hard to talk, like the sound of her own voice reminded her of her mother and her brother.

"If there's anybody here, in another phase or whatever, I can't spot them," Eric said, like he was giving a report to a military superior. "No unusual gaps in the crowds, no spots I can't bring myself to walk through." He looked down at her and shook his head. "I think we might be okay." Miya just stared at him, like that word 'okay' was a mockery of what they were. At least what she was.

Eric didn't push the issue. He picked up her one tiny bag and looked patiently to her. "Ready?" She nodded and turned to get in line for the flight going to Los Angeles.