

RAIDER

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Secrecy.....	1
Chapter 2: Behind The Eyes	35
Chapter 3: Revelations.....	63
Chapter 4: Leaving The Past.....	85
Chapter 5: Stepping Onto the Line of Fire.....	111
Chapter 6: One Another For Each Other	137
Chapter 7: Out of the Shadow	173
Chapter 8: Consequences.....	231
Chapter 9: Starting Over	264
Chapter 10: Unconditional.....	300

CHAPTER 1

SECRECY

The year is 2056

On a cool night in the greater area of Tokyo Japan, a wicked thunderstorm downpours on the elaborate city. Some of its skyscrapers are well over a hundred stories tall. Billboards lined with extravagant LEDs project subtle holograms. Tinier versions of these lights mark road signs and white pavement. Many skyTrains packed with passengers, some suspended over the city, glide around and through buildings like rollercoasters. Outside lanes on main roads have been dedicated to double-sided, train-trucks towing ten bus lengths at a time, all packed with passengers. Practically every business has holographic advertising, including robotic features to grab peoples' attention. Features like moving mannequins, shifting window billboards and elaborate doors that open unconventionally.

Numerous police quadcopter drones with one blue and one red light on each side rove above the streetlamps. These so-called, "prones" monitor the dense traffic, about half of which are electric vehicles lit with LEDs, while the other half are hybrids of gasoline and diesel. Many of them have decals resembling tattoos. Most are driverless while the drivers do other activities when they are not supposed to. Riding beside these civilian vehicles are electric bicycles, scooters, rollerblades, and skateboards. Some hurtle through the inner city at the speed limit of 50 KPH, but most travel much slower to cross back and forth between the roads, bicycle

lanes, alleys, and sidewalks. On the roadside, vehicles are crammed so close together that parallel parking seems impossible.

Mixed with the thousands of working-class people, many homeless linger and loiter. Practically everyone wears facial fashion: accessories like masks, eye shields, all kinds of hats, wireless headphones, and earmuffs. Some even wear custom, motorcycle-like helmets.

Much of the area around the harbor is flooded. Along the waterfront, massive, concrete storm barriers struggle to hold back relentless waves. Waves that easily crash over and flood the districts beyond. Currently, hundreds of construction crews are building more ocean wall segments. A way to utilize and redirect overflow, large portions of the storm barriers have been retrofitted into hydroelectric, silo-wells. All of the surrounding communities have been heavily impacted by the flooding, and many have their own ocean walls. Scattered down the coast, streetlamps, treetops, even building rooftops can be just seen poking through the water's debris littered surface.

Across many city blocks in designated medical zones, temporary tents and small trailers have been built for the many homeless and displaced families. Medical aid teams seem to have been stationed abroad for a while now, as signs of dirt, grime, damage, and graffiti blanket their white tent trailers.

A couple hours later, the city traffic dwindles substantially, allowing a sharp-eared observer to hear violent noises from inbound Road Racers. The one in first place has a license plate reading, "Retro" and resembles a dark red, American muscle car. By drifting around traffic smoothly, Retro maintains a safe lead from the following five Road Racers. Each are different in design, including their own license plates reading their names.

Road Race

1st: Retro

2nd: Vidar

3rd: Onslaught

4th: Hades

5th: Neptune

6th: Kronos

Road Racers are enhanced, high-end supercars with unique, concealed weapons. All of the Road Racers race while simultaneously using their arsenal of weapons on each other. The most common weapons are their front and rear guns. Shotguns for close range, machine guns for medium range and rifles for long range, all of which are only able to aim up or down. Their weapons rise out of hidden compartments covered by panels that can mechanically open and close. The Road Racer cars do so by engaging and disengaging flywheel pulleys powered by their axel's rotational momentum. This assembly opens a compartment panel and deploys the weapon within. A striking common feature amongst the Road Racers is they all emit no light as to attract minimal attention while achieving maximum surprise.

Road Racer wheels are protected by reinforced rims called plater plates. These plater plates make it rather difficult for gunfire to blow a tire. Gunfire also has troubles against the Road Racers' bulletproof windows however, not impossible for enough has already cracked Vidar's windshield.

Drowned out by the Road Racers' violent commotion, buzzing just above the streetlights, are a few small quadcopters. They belong to the Road Racers, whizzing around swiftly to capture the Road Race on video. Some quadcopters fall behind because the Road Racers are too fast, so they fallback and stand on prone guard, whereas other new quadcopters already stationed well ahead join in.

Inside of Retro's cab, he is wearing fire retardant racing gear including a fancy custom helmet. Retro's interior looks like a spaceship dashboard

filled with monitors, buttons, switches, dials, levers, and knobs. Currently, gunfire from Vidar thuds and pings against the rear of Retro's cab. His entire windshield is a see-through, LED screen which displays most of his many mechanical, instrument, and weaponry readouts. Ones like a speedometer, battery power, fuel level, nos reserves, oil levels, compressor pressure levels, engine temperature and so forth. There is also his weapon inventory which displays his ammunition supplies. Ammo reserves are not much for a Road Racer given internal volume storage available.

For example, Retro's machine guns can only hold a couple hundred bullets, whereas each rifle carries fifty rounds, and the shotguns have fifteen shots per barrel. Being resourceful with ammo and using it efficiently is vital.

The center of Retro's dash has another camera mounted on it which captures his first-person Road Racer experience. Flipped down, the driver side's sun visor serves as a small monitor displaying a video feed of his rear view. At the same time as steering and switching gears, Retro has to activate and deactivate many of his car's functions, like using his many weaponry options. Suddenly, a couple of Vidar's bullets tear a small section of Retro's back end open. Next, bullets rip through the driver seat. One bullet catches him in the right shoulder. Roaring in pain, he manages to hold first place.

A solar-paneled suburb lies on the outskirts of Tokyo, only half above water. Street lamps, treetops, even home rooftops can be just seen poking through some flooded areas closer to the ocean shoreline. Prones rove the skies above on preset patrol routes. Designated medical zones and temporary housing for many of the displaced families are scattered about the barren, flooded blocks.

Along these suburban roads, a twenty-two-year-old named Amaya Daigo is driving a little bit faster than the speed limit on her matte black, custom hybrid motorbike which resembles a Panigale V2 Ducati motorcycle. Its license plate reads, "Violet." Dressed in a black, full body leather motorcycle outfit, Amaya's helmet is even custom made with an ultraviolet visor. A black ponytail sticks out of a hole in the back of her helmet and extends to her shoulder blades, flapping in the rain and wind. In addition, Violet has a LED dash display including subtle, purple LED lights lining certain parts like the gas can, engine compartment and handlebars.

From inside Amaya's helmet, her heads-up display is colored purple and shows various other readouts like speed, Violet's fluid gauges, her own heart rate and object recognition of road signs, pedestrians, moving vehicles, and highlighted GPS indications. Muffled within Amaya's helmet, what sounds like an 80's rock song plays loudly while Violet quietly cruises through the neighborhood. Just a few blocks further, in front of the Daigo household, Amaya arrives and slows to a quick halt.

"The Daigo household reached," Violet announces, sounding female and robotic. After stopping, she instantly turns and gets off Violet. "Initiating security mode. Goodbye, Amaya."

The Daigo home looks like a regular, two-story, four-bedroom house with no signs of flooded related damage. On the way to the Daigo home, she takes off her leather motorcycle jacket and ties its sleeves around her hips, revealing just a white t-shirt underneath. Then she takes off her helmet, which opens up like a book into two halves via a simple inner hinge, running down the mouth area. Of a Japanese ethnicity, Amaya has more of a fierce look. Wearing no makeup, her one dominant feature is that she has thick eyebrows and a bold widow's peak, like her father. Now at the front door, she knocks a couple times.

A few seconds pass before her father, Susumu Daigo, opens the door. Clad in filthy coveralls, he is a relatively average-sized, middle-aged

Japanese man with greased back, black hair. Additionally, he is wearing small reading glasses. Susumu's unimpressed facial expression remains constant at the sight of Amaya. It is hard for her to make direct eye contact with him, but she tries anyways.

“Hello,” Amaya says quietly.

1st: Retro

2nd: Vidar

3rd: Onslaught

4th: Hades

5th: Neptune

6th: Kronos

With no warning Vidar fires a dual flamethrower out of where his headlights would be. Between his flames, two miniature machine guns also shoot out of his grill. The flamethrower reaches almost two car lengths, just short of Retro's rear bumper. In defense, Retro not only fires his rear guns, but he also pops his trunk and begins launching serrated disk blades called bisks, which fly like frisbees. Many bisks are stacked onto one another and gravity fed into his trunk's spring-loaded launcher. Most of Retro's bisks miss, fly by Vidar and at other Road Racers. A bisk hits one of Vidar's flamethrower barrels and as a result, the flamethrower now sputters its fire on a forty-five-degree angle.

An automated Road Race function occurs which opens the trunks of Vidar and Neptune. Out of their trunks, a few soda can-sized, rocket-shaped drones called kamikaze kites deploy from tubular launchers. They are called kites because they harness the Road Racer's speed by

being tethered to one. Right after being deployed, small spring-loaded wings eject and give the kites more lift. When the slack in the tether increases, so does their elevation. Once speed and stability are established, the kites hold on until needed, which is now. One by one, they detach from their tethered cords and jet off.

Only a couple kilometers away, a prone detects the Road Race's violent noises and flies straight towards its loud signal. Before the prone gets halfway, a kamikaze kite streaks past. But the second and third don't miss, creating a small fireball blossoming in the sky.

Retro splashes an oil slick behind him, and Vidar ignites the oil with his only working flamethrower. Without enough time to turn, he drives directly over the flaming oil and the tires on his catch fire. Then they both pop, forcing him to swerve into a spinout. Just behind him, Onslaught accelerates closer. A hydraulic, one meter long steel bat called a batter bat, swings out from underneath Onslaught's side just as he passes Vidar. Onslaught's batter bat bashes a crater into Vidar's side panel and causes his spinout to rotate even faster.

1st: Retro

2nd: Onslaught

3rd: Vidar

4th: Hades

5th: Neptune

6th: Kronos

Out of Hades' front end grill, he extends a grenade launcher barrel called his grill grenadier. Missing the first, Hades' grenade bounces and skips across the pavement before its explosion brings down a streetlamp. His second grenade hits and blows a nasty crater into Vidar. Only Hades' hefty grill guard allows him to withstand driving right through

Vidar's damaged middle. Split into two pieces, Vidar bursts into flames. The succeeding Road Racers zoom past his sparking wreckage as it slides to a screeching halt.

- 1st: Retro
- 2nd: Onslaught
- 3rd: Hades
- 4th: Neptune
- 5th: Kronos

Onslaught covers his rear with a smokescreen, making it hard for Hades to hit Onslaught with his grill grenadier. Instead, his grenades demolish civilian vehicles and cause brutal crashes. Such random fatalities occur constantly during the Road Races. Just average people, going about the end of their lives.

Just a kilometer out, a roving prone picks up on the near Road Race sounds and instantly starts flying to its signal. In seconds, a kamikaze kite already tries intercepting, though misses. Only seconds pass until another kite hits the prone and brings it crashing down.

From Neptune's hood, his hood harpoon fires and pierces into the back of Hades. By slowing down, Neptune pulls Hades back. Using nitrous oxide called nos, Kronos exponentially boosts his speed and drives past both of them.

- 1st: Retro
- 2nd: Onslaught
- 3rd: Kronos
- 4th: Hades
- 5th: Neptune

Reeling Hades in, Neptune's harpoon cable is retracted by a compressor powered winch. They inch closer and closer, firing their arsenal of guns at each other. Proximity only increases their accuracy and as a result, the bullets chew apart their exterior paneling.

When within range, Neptune ejects his front bumper called a batter bumper and then quickly retracts it again and again like a six-inch punch. Neptune smashes and bashes Hades' back end rapidly. Tearing his rear end apart, neither the front guns nor the batter bumper lets up. With no means to protect himself, Hades desperately leaps out of his car and into an oncoming minivan full of a family on their way home from the dance studio. They yell and scream in horror as they feel the two bumps when passing over Hades' body.

1st: Retro

2nd: Onslaught

3rd: Kronos

4th: Neptune

With a raised chin, Susumu asks, "How long has passed since?" He speaks sternly, his voice a little loud, deep and intimidating.

"Too long. Thanks for waiting up for me. Traffic was dense," Amaya responds with a subtle sadness in her naturally cool, calm, and quiet voice. *Almost three weeks*, she thinks.

"Thank your mother. Well, how have you been? Has work been going well?"

"I've been well and, you know, I'd rather not talk about work. How is everyone?" Amaya requests.

“I have been well as well, thanks. Come on in and see for yourself,” Susumu offers with a smile. Replying with a nod first, she enters. Before he fully closes the front door, Amaya latches herself around him in a tight hug.

Following Susumu inside, Amaya looks around the home and notices nothing has changed. Tools and random car parts still lay around on dirty rags. Filling the house, neat and orderly, hundreds of diecast high-class cars, motorbikes, boats, and even jet airplanes sit on custom made shelving. Behind them, portraits of detailed diagrams exhibiting engine parts hang on the walls. The entire living room, hallways, and stairwell seem like a mechanic’s bachelor pad.

When Susumu and Amaya enter the pristine, simplistic, and modern kitchen, she sees her mother Kayoko. Dressed like a traditional Japanese woman, she is a pretty one. Like a porcelain doll with not a single hair out of place. Currently, she is using a heated knife to spread butter perfectly over some delicate bread. On the stove, self-stir cookware manage themselves. They do by utilizing miniature steam pumps that power metal paddles, shaped to the pot or pan. The paddles move slowly and turn over rice, stir-fry, and boiling potatoes.

“Hello, Mother,” Amaya says, though Kayoko does not flinch.

“Dinner will be ready in two minutes. Wash your hands and take a seat if you’re staying,” Kayoko instructs in an emotionless tone. A very quiet speaker, Kayoko always tends to look down and avoid eye contact. Nodding once, Amaya continues on and washes her hands at the kitchen sink.

“I’m going to wash up,” Susumu mentions before he leaves in an attempt to escape the awkwardness between his wife and daughter. The tension between them is thick as Amaya washes her hands. Afterwards, she escapes toward the empty dining table covered in a perfectly arranged, porcelain and silverware dining set. In silence, Amaya takes her old seat

at the dining table. Glancing around, she then looks to Kayoko and asks, “Where’s the Gearhead?”

“In her lab,” Kayoko answers, as if calling her younger daughter’s room a lab is normal. “Nyoko is always on time. It’s only 7:56 p.m.”

“I see. I thought you guys would have been nearly packed by now.”

“Moving trucks are backed up for months. Everyone is moving further inland. Your father fixed a cube-truck. In return, the client is allowing us to use it next month.”

“That’s a good deal.”

“Not really. It cost your father a lot more than, say, if he were paid instead. The parts alone— Never mind, we have no choice. People are paying triple for trucks. So we’re waiting on that because money has been tighter than usual. We’re not receiving a dime for what we put into this house...it’s just me packing,” Kayoko explains while prepping dinner.

“I see. Do you...need any help?” Amaya offers.

“No. You moved out years ago. It’s our stuff. We’ll manage,” Kayoko says briskly.

Hades’ lifeless vehicle is pushed aside by Neptune who also detaches his hood harpoon’s cable. Immediately after using nos, he boosts ahead and catches back up with the leading three Road Racers.

1st: Retro

2nd: Onslaught

3rd: Kronos

4th: Neptune

Out of Onslaught's front end, he extends two meter-long chainsaw-like arms. These chainsaws nick and gash slashes into Retro's back end. One even cuts through Retro's trunk and destroys his bisk launcher. Retro's back-end batter bumper punches out and not only destroys one of Onslaught's chainsaws but forces him back a car length. Extending two long spears out from where the headlights would be, Kronos simultaneously initiates his nos. Right after, one of Kronos's spears plunges through Onslaught's back end and through the middle of his cab.

Kronos's spear just misses Onslaught's shoulder, tearing through the side of his driver seat instead.

While Kronos has Onslaught skewered, Retro takes this opportunity to slow down so fast that he crashes his back end into Onslaught's front. Once again, Retro's rear batter bumper smashes Onslaught's front inwards, destroying his forward array of guns and pushes him further down the length of Kronos's spear until it pokes through his windshield. In addition to Retro's rear machine guns, he fires his rear double barrel shotguns at point blank into Onslaught's cracking windshield, giving Onslaught no choice but to roll down his inside windshield cover and switch to a live video feed from his dash monitor.

Answering back, underneath Onslaught's trunk, he activates a swinging batter bat and strikes Kronos until Kronos stomps on the brakes and simultaneously retracts his front spears, enabling him to retreat. Having suffered too much damage, Onslaught could never keep up so, he slowly drives his rickety car off the road and into a dark alleyway.

1st: Retro

2nd: Kronos

3rd: Neptune

Inside Nyoko's room, a couple miniature quadcopter drones hover around, shining color changing, spotlight-like, LED lights. In one corner, a small, custom soldering station resides. On the station's workbench, many electronic components are neatly organized in their individual containers. Resting on podium platforms, a couple custom-made, remote-controlled cars are showcased next to RC car racing trophies. One RC car is currently disassembled because it is being upgraded. In between the studs within the walls of Nyoko's room, inner compartments have been notched out to hold shelves consisting full of thick books, while cupboards have been installed in the corners. Located on the shelving above the bedroom door, three junior car racing trophies labeled, "5th, 3rd and 2nd," reside alongside a couple, "6th and 7th," place medals hanging from the shelf's corners.

In the room's center, an eighteen-year-old woman named Nyoko, is seated in front of her large drafting desk. She reads a thick book on asteroids through round, thin-framed reading glasses and fidgets with her pencil. Flipping it, spinning it, passing it effortlessly from hand to hand. Fidgeting is so common for Nyoko, it is rare to see her hands empty.

Speaking of her hands, they are stained with grease and oil. Reaching her lower back, Nyoko's long, black hair is tied in a ponytail. Wearing similar workwear like Susumu's coveralls, implies she works at his mechanic shop. In fact, she has been since the age of five, telling from an old, bedside photo of her ten-year-old self, working alongside her father, within his own mechanic shop.

Regarding Nyoko's physical features further, subtle scars scattered randomly across her face, neck and hands appear obvious. Some of the scars are longer than others, ranging within a few centimeters to a decimeter. The digital clock above the bed frame turns to 7:59 p.m., prompting Nyoko to stop reading and stand up. When she pulls her arms out of the coverall's sleeves, it reveals even more of the same scars scattered on her forearms.

“Dock,” Nyoko orders and ties her coverall’s sleeves around her hips. Right after, her two miniature flying drones gently land on charging landing pads next to her bedside. On the way out, Nyoko steps around a camera tripod in the middle of the room. On it, a thin bed sheet is draped over what appears to be a 10x30 centimeter box-like container. Whatever is on the tripod, Nyoko did not want any dust on it.

“Open,” she commands. The voice command automatically opens her bedroom door via an electric hydraulic arm compressor. When opening, the door causes a sucking hiss as it opens and releases a blowing hiss when it closes shut behind her.

From underneath Kronos, two miniature remote-controlled cars called r-cars, drop down, accelerate, and gain on Retro.

1st: Retro

2nd: Kronos

3rd: Neptune

Aiming down, Retro’s rear machine guns pick off one of Kronos’s r-cars. Only a couple meters within explosive range, Retro’s rear shotguns blast apart Kronos’s remaining r-car. In response, Retro dispatches his own r-car behind himself. Aiming down, Kronos’s forward guns easily breaks it to bits. Using nos, Kronos also ejects his front spears again and quickly gains on Retro.

Entering a long drift, Retro smoothly glides onto the next road. At the same time, he emits a smokescreen followed by splashing down an oil slick behind the smokescreen. Driving blindly right over it, Kronos swerves extra far and into a medium.

Passing by, Neptune drifts right next to Kronos and deploys a single r-car. Too close to be intercepted, Neptune's r-car drives directly into Kronos and blasts one of his front wheels into shreds, leaving him to hobble away.

1st: Retro

2nd: Neptune

When entering the kitchen at 8:00 p.m., Nyoko is still fidgeting with her pencil. The instant sight of her sister provokes Nyoko to call out, "Amaya!" Racing across the dining room, Nyoko rushes over to where Amaya is seated, leans in, and hugs her tightly. Glancing over, Kayoko's sight of her daughters hugging brings a smile upon her face.

"Hey sis," Amaya says, feeling guilty.

"Where have you been?" Nyoko asks, looking down upon Amaya with a sad expression. "Why don't you answer our text messages, or calls? We left numerous messages," Nyoko implored, changing her current look of sadness to bitter. Excited Nyoko may be however, she is always excited. Usually beginning sentences off slow, to then speed up uncontrollably until it is hard to keep up with what she is saying.

"I've been busy with wor—"

"So have I! Besides helping Pops out at the shop, I've also been going to high school," Nyoko says quickly. Entering the kitchen, Susumu realizes his timing was a bit too soon; just as Nyoko's voice turns angry. "It takes like, two minutes tops to text back. Just tell us you're busy, or at least answer. We would understand!" Using one hand, Nyoko reaches out and nudges Amaya quite hard. When doing so, Nyoko's necklace pendant

pops out of her collar and reveals it be a matte black gear, only a couple centimeters wide.

“Hey, none of that,” Susumu orders, taking his seat at the end of the table.

Giving Amaya a frustrated smirk, Nyoko makes her way around the dining table and plops down next to their father. Still not making eye contact with Amaya, Kayoko proceeds to serve herself, Susumu, and Nyoko a plate of food.

“How have you been, Mom?” Amaya asks, though Kayoko does not respond.

Continuing to serve food, Kayoko says, “Is that enough, Susumu?”

“Yes, thank you so much,” he says and nods. “That’s plenty, thanks.”

Ignoring Amaya’s question, Kayoko mentions, “Help yourself Amaya.”

“You know, I—”

Before Amaya can finish her sentence, Kayoko stares right into her eyes and does not blink. After freezing Amaya still with a stare, Kayoko takes a seat at the table’s opposite end from where Susumu is seated.

“I wouldn’t understand because I know nothing,” Kayoko huffs.

Here we go... Susumu thinks. Instead, he says, “Kayoko—”

“It’s a broken record excuse, but work...well you know.”

No one speaks for a very quiet moment. Kayoko tries, but only quietly mumbles, “How could we understand if we know nothing?”

breaking the silence, Nyoko calmly says, “We’re here for you, always. We may all be on our own, but you are not alone Amaya. We would do anything for you because we’re family.” In a rush, she concludes, “Whatever made you think otherwise is wrong.”

Frozen in place, Amaya blinks a couple times, swallows and is currently holding back tears.

“Nyoko, she knows this, your sister—”

Before Kayoko can finish what she is saying, Nyoko jumps right back in. “First responders have one of the highest turnover rates out of every

profession. Especially EMRs, EMTs, AEMTs and paramedics. What you do is brave, noble, and we are very lucky to have you a part of our family. I'm proud to be your sister." Finishing with a large exhale, Nyoko picks up her chopsticks and takes a large bite out of her stir-fry dinner. After taking a bite, she smoothly spins the chopsticks like drumsticks.

"The Gearhead is right, yet again," Susumu murmurs. Amaya's social tactic is to bottle things up and have them burst out later. Already, she is starting to sweat and feel tired.

"Thanks, Nyoko," Amaya replies, feeling overwhelmed by all the attention.

"Stop spinning those, Nyoko!" Kayoko demands. "You'll get food on the carpet again."

However, all this does is make Nyoko get more elaborate with her chopstick spinning.

"That was ages ago. I'm *waaaay* smoother now," Nyoko claims before impressively spinning her chopsticks between her fingers. "Look!"

"I can see that," Kayoko says with a roll of her eyes.

Using just one chopstick, Nyoko stabs a piece of chicken and bites small chunks out of it. With the other free chopstick, she spins it effortlessly like a top. Amaya cannot help but be amazed by her dexterity for a moment.

"Besides work, what have you been up to, Amaya?" Susumu asks.

For a couple seconds, she tries conjuring something to say. "After work I come home and work on my business fabricating furniture."

"Oh yeah? How's that going?" Kayoko asks sincerely.

"I have orders lasting me for months. I barely have the time to keep up."

"Your talent speaks for itself. I love the coffee table you made us," Kayoko comments, glancing over at a sleek metal and glass coffee table situated in the middle of the living room.

"Thanks. At this rate, I'm making more money fabricating furniture. I may make it my full-time job. Who knows? We'll see."

“That sounds like a better idea,” Kayoko concurs.

“I love my adjustable soldering station,” Nyoko adds. “Working standing up at times is a great change up.”

“That’s great, glad to hear it.” Switching the subject, Amaya says, “On weekends, I’ve been hanging out with some friends from work.”

“Are you still hanging out with Jamie?” Nyoko questions with genuine interest.

“Sometimes, here and there. Uh...Jamie actually quit being an EMT not too long after the flood.”

“No, really?” Nyoko seems surprised.

“And got hired on helping with building the new ocean wall,” Amaya adds. “As a welder.”

Kayoko leans in and says, “That is unfortunate, but maybe it’s for the best. Jamie is such a nice woman. Being an EMT...that line of work didn’t suit her. It shouldn’t suit anybody.”

“Someone has to do it,” Amaya replies in a quiet tone which silences everyone as they focus on eating their dinners. Flashbacks remind Amaya of the day that caused Jamie to retire early as an EMT, for they were partners. The sheer number of casualties from the flood was shocking. Emergency response teams did everything they could, including Jamie. But it was not the flood’s merciless body count that pushed her to quit. No, it was the wave of crime and inhumane violence in its aftermath.

A few kilometers ahead of Retro and Neptune, half of the road has been flooded by water. Only one lane with a lot of backed up traffic remains open.

1st: Retro

2nd: Neptune

Directing the flow of vehicles, a couple police officers manage the intersection, and even a few prones monitor the area from above.

On Retro's main dash monitor, the GPS map indicates the Road Race finish line is just after this flooded intersection. Retro's rear-view monitor showcases Neptune gaining quickly.

Smoothly maneuvering around traffic, Retro maintains a fluent flow forward. Just behind him, Neptune side-swipes vehicles and smashes through practically everything in his way. Not only is he firing his forward guns at Retro, but he's also hitting civilian vehicles, wounding and even killing their passengers.

At the same time, Retro and Neptune deploy kamikaze kites and send them after the nearby prones stationed at the flooded intersection ahead. Seemingly from out of nowhere, the kites easily destroy the prones. This surprise attack freaks out the police officers managing the intersection so much, they flee and leave their post unattended. Furthermore, all of this spooks traffic and causes a series of crashes in the middle of the flooded intersection. Some people even drive into the waist deep water, which quickly gets them stuck when their engines flood.

By using nos, Neptune puts himself right up beside Retro. A device called a pressurized piston puncher ejects from just behind Retro's front wheels and smashes a huge dent into Neptune's driver door, pushing him away. A split second passes and several spikes called side spikes extend out of Neptune's side panels. Next, he veers towards Retro with all his momentum.

By slamming on the brakes, Retro slows down so fast the g-force is rough enough to smash his helmet against the steering wheel and crack his visor.

Retro's immediate deceleration enables him to dodge Neptune's momentum entirely. Built up inertia from turning into Retro was too great for Neptune to recover, resulting in Neptune driving off the road and plunge into a three-meter-deep flooded ditch.

Sinking down to the bottom, Neptune gently drifts down onto his passenger side. Even though the water's depth is a mere few meters, it is just enough to submerge Neptune's car, which takes on leaking water fast because of the recent Road Race damage. In an attempt to escape his flooding cab, Neptune strenuously tries to open his driver door, but Retro's previous piston punch pounded into his driver door is jamming it from opening. Even Neptune's door ejector is not working when he tries flipping its switch repeatedly. Realizing he is most definitely trapped, Neptune desperately tries kicking out the bulletproof windows while yelling in anger and fear, for his cab is already half full of water.

Before entering the crowded and flooded intersection, Retro hydraulically raises his car's body by half a meter. This elevation function allows him to slowly drive through a small, flooded gap in between the crowded intersection. After surpassing this intersection, he continues on the gravel side of the road to avoid traffic.

On Retro's dash monitor, it shows his GPS map indicating he is crossing the Road Race finish line. Using some of the Retro's functions with his right arm, it proves to be very painful for him due to his right shoulder's gunshot wound. When doing these once simple tasks with his right arm, he moans and grunts. Momentarily steering with one of his knees, Retro uses his left hand to tear off his cracked helmet to unveil his blue eyes, white skin, and red-haired eyebrows. The rest of his facial features are still covered, as he wears a fire-retardant balaclava.

One of the functions Retro uses retracts his weapons back into their compartments, followed by their panels concealing them. Back on the open road, Retro hydraulically lowers his car to its normal elevation, close

to the road's surface. While making a clean getaway, a couple kamikaze kites deploy from his trunk and trail behind by their tethers, just in case.

With a somber tone, Amaya expresses, "The flood submerged too many of us. We're outnumbered by the amount of calls each day. People quit practically just as fast as they get hired as an EMR. We have to prioritize every day. Almost like playing God, and I don't like it, but someone has to do the job." She ends her sentence with a scoff and shakes her head.

"Surely you can't do this forever,' Kayoko warns. "How can you? At this rate you'll burn out soon."

"Every life I save makes it worth it," Amaya asserts.

"Of course," Kayoko says and looks down. It is truly sad to know her daughter puts herself through being an emergency medical technician. But in the same breath, it makes her proud of Amaya.

"Who knows how many people will be walking around because of you alone? What an honor and we are all so very proud of you," Susumu declares.

"I am grateful for your concern. Sometimes...when some switches get switched on I...I shut others off. Defense mechanism I suppose. I shouldn't, and I know better, but I do anyways because it helps with the short-term issues. But doesn't help my relationships in the long run, which are most important to me. I...I'm sorry," Amaya finishes speaking and looks down into her lap.

Clearing his throat first, Susumu responds in a calm voice saying, "We wish we could understand, but we do not, for we haven't driven in your seat. Just know we're always here for you. Try leaving work at work and coming home to home."

When Amaya looks up at her father, his smile makes her slightly smile too. “Both bleed over into each other. Hard to differentiate the two,” Amaya utters followed by a long, helpless moment of silence. “So, did anyone hear about the drilling in Yellowstone, Wyoming?”

“Yes, but not lately. How’s that going?” Susumu asks in trying to help Amaya switch the subject.

“It’s working, apparently. They drilled to the depth required to insert a siphon-like device. They’ve been pumping out material steady by using several oil pump-jacks. Like draining a pool. A lot of material to move though. Hundreds of double container loads a week. Independent contractors are volunteering to help too.”

“What types of materials are they extracting, exactly?” Nyoko requests.

“I’m not sure. The article and videos didn’t mention that bit of info. Maybe I missed that. Raw heavy metals I’d presume. Anyways, for the last six months, they’ve basically been saving the world from a potential volcanic cataclysm.”

For the following half hour, the Daigo family discuss trivial topics. Now with an empty plate, Amaya stands to announce, “Well, I best be off. Thank you for dinner, it was great as usual, Mom.”

The comment draws a smile from Kayoko, and she nods in return.

“Your company was better,” Susumu rallies with a smile, before grinning at his wife, who rolls her eyes in response.

As Amaya walks to the kitchen sink, Nyoko speaks up. “Hey, Amaya?”

“Yes?”

“Can I quickly show you something? It’s in my room.”

“She has turned her room into the underground Daigo garage,” Susumu jokes.

“Uh...not now. Today was a long day, and I’m exhausted. By the time I get home, I still have to take out the garbage, shower, and—”

“No no, it’s cool,” Nyoko says, biting her lip. “I understand.”

“Next time?” Amaya suggests.

“Yeah, I’ll see ya in a couple weeks,” Nyoko says sarcastically. After standing up, she stomps away from the dining table.

“Nyoko...hey, Nyoko, wait!”

Kayoko stares at her lap and sadly shakes her head. “You don’t have five minutes to spare?”

“Our Gearhead has been waiting to show you her new idea for some time now,” Susumu informs Amaya.

“I’m sorry. It’s never enough,” Amaya says to her father.

“Nyoko doesn’t know the next time you’ll visit,” Susumu answers.

“Neither do we,” Kayoko adds

“How about same time, next week?” Amaya offers.

After setting down her fork rather abruptly, Kayoko replies, “You don’t have to prove any—”

“You’re welcome anytime, Amaya,” Susumu says. “You know this.”

“All right then, I’ll be here next week, same time. See you guys then. Goodnight and thanks again and...I love you both.” Giving a rather sad looking smile, Amaya turns and leaves the kitchen. After which Kayoko and Susumu look at one another with positive, surprised facial expressions.

On the way to Violet parked on the street, Amaya takes her phone out and begins texting Nyoko, “I’ll be here same time next week. I’ll make the time,” followed by pushing, “Send.” Amaya cannot help but feel guilty and selfish for neglecting her family and letting so much time pass by recently. When Amaya is within a couple meters of violet, it turns on, including its LED lights.

“Destination: closest convenient store and then home, Violet,” Amaya orders. In doing so, it activates Violet’s GPS navigation program.

Violet says, “Looks like there is one only two kilometers west from here. Marking the route now, Amaya.” While putting on Violet’s motor-cycle helmet around her ponytail, she slowly shuts the helmet like a book.

On a four-lane highway, everyone pushes the speed limit: 110 KPH. Amaya speeds along at twenty over that, weaving around dozens of vehicles and across all four lanes. When Amaya passes other vehicles, she purposely gets a little too close to them.

“No prone wavelengths on the radar for another twenty-four kilometers,” Violet reports. “You’re good’n’green to go.”

Slowing down, Amaya pulls up really close beside a van containing a family. Next, she nods at a six-year-old boy before accelerating to 150 KPH in a couple seconds. The boy gapes at her.

Continuing on, this highway stretches around the city center, where it’s still raining. Taking a turn off onto a dimly lit single-lane highway, Amaya heads directly away from the city and into the countryside.

“No prone wavelengths received,” Violet reports, giving Amaya the opportunity to accelerate to just over 200 KPH and fly by anyone in her way.

Ten minutes later, it is only Amaya now on the single-lane highway covered in potholes. It is a good thing Amaya knows this highway like the back of her hand for she is still traveling fast, practicing her tilt turning capabilities.

“Battery power at, 15%,” Violet mentions. Just a little farther and Amaya reaches the driveway leading to her bungalow home.

On the edge of a small river, Amaya’s home appears older, built around the mid 1970’s, but is equipped with a solar panel array and a couple miniature wind turbines. Installed on the riverside, another turbine turns in

the current. Also connected to Amaya's home is a large, newish looking prefabricated metal garage. Parked in front of Amaya's house is her small four -door hybrid pickup.

Just before reaching the garage door, it automatically opens for her to drive in. As soon as she does, the door closes behind her. A second of silence later, Amaya rushes back outside and steps in front of what looks like a large wardrobe closet. After opening it, she quickly rolls out a wide multi-bin container with five lids labeled, "Plastics, Papers, Metals, Glass and Organics." Once she finally wheels the bin to the end of her driveway, a garbage truck arrives.

Right on time.

The garbage man's name tag reads, "George." His garbage truck may be self-driving, but it's George's job to make sure each container is properly inspected and weighed. He talks with Amaya while he works, chatting about the city growing inland because of the rising waters. Once Amaya's garbage is weighed, correlated return funds are calculated, followed by Amaya checking the Weighed Waste Wage app on her phone to see her return getting calculated. Subsequently, she receives money for each of her weighed waste contents.

"It was good seeing you Amaya. Take care," George says with a smile.

"Thanks, George. Goodnight!"

"Until next week!" he says before hopping back into his truck that immediately drives itself away.

The automatic garage door opens right as Amaya walks through it to be instantly faced with an arsenal of fabrication and machining equipment surrounding the middle. Positioned there, Violet rests on its kickstand next to another motorbike, a half bicycle, half electric motorcycle. It too is matte black like Violet, though is equipped with shocks which resemble those one would find on a dual-suspension mountain bike. Not only do batteries power its small electric engine in the rear,

but the pedals crank a generator which charges the batteries back up. On its backside, two poles the length of this motorcycle are attached to a third small wheel held over the back tire. These poles extend out behind its rear wheel to create what is called a stretcher wagon. Kneeling, Amaya reaches for an extension cord and plugs it into Violet's outlet positioned in its engine's center. And when she does, small LED lights turn on upon Violet.

“Finite future fuel for free?” Violet asks with a surprised tone.

Both the kitchen and garage back onto Amaya's living room. The home is very modern looking inside with minimal decorations. Every piece of furniture has been fabricated out of stainless steel by Amaya. Additionally, quite a few half-built or partially built pieces of furniture lay around the garage. On one of its walls, unique, matte black motorcycle armor is hung on hooks. Piece by piece, Amaya puts on the armor which is mostly attached to a classic motorcycle jacket. In addition, she straps on thigh plates and puts on knee high boots, serving as knee pads. Next, she puts on a heavy backpack called a medical body pack. It clips together by a chest strap, equipped with chest plates. Right after, she kneels and unplugs the power cord from her second motorcycle.

“Cycler on,” Amaya orders, and a small violet LED light turns on in between Cycler's handlebars.

It announces, “Keep the cycle cycling.” Cycler's voice also sounds female and robotic, but deeper than Violet's voice.

Hung on the lathe, Amaya picks up her all-black custom Cycler helmet and holds it under her arm.

“Any tune-ups I need to know about, Cycler?”

“Diagnostics ran. No service required. The night awaits.”

“Activate police, fire, and EMS emergency channels,” Amaya orders. As requested, local radio broadcastings of live emergency channels play from within her helmet's headphones. When putting the helmet on, the

broadcastings become loud and clear. Currently, recent Road Race collateral damage is being reported. If only Cycler could offer her help! However, she knows emergency response teams will be swarming the Road Race's bloody breadcrumb trail. There is still the rest of the neglected city that could use Cycler's help. After swinging her leg up and over Cycler, she mounts its seat.

"Open door," Cycler commands, and the garage door opens. When Amaya talks through her Cycler helmet, her speech sounds like Cycler's western American voice. As the garage door opens just enough, she moves forward by pedaling.

Doing 100km per hour on the highway, Cycler can barely be seen, for it emits no light and has neither reflectors nor license plate. Even at this high speed, the sound of Cycler can barely be heard except for a quiet hum. For the most part, she sticks to the roadside like a shadow and pedals at the same time for energy generation. On the way, a few EMS calls are announced, but she is still too far from the city center. These calls only tease Cycler, provoking her to increase speed to 130 KPH.

Once Cycler is within a couple kilometers from the city center, she quickly pulls over behind a skyTrain column. Coming to a sliding halt, Cycler splashes into a puddle. The succeeding skyTrain column is under water due to nearby flooding. This particular column Cycler has arrived at has a charging outlet for maintenance crews. The emergency channels chatter with police reports as she kneels down by Cycler's back end. On Cycler, an extension cord unwinds from a retractable wheel. Charging time provokes anxious feelings because she is waiting while she could be helping. Leaned up against the column, Cycler takes a moment to look up at the city's many LED-lit skyscrapers. From overhead, a skyTrain flashes by at 400 KPH.

"Twenty seconds until charged," Cycler reports. Taking one last look at the city skyline, she turns around, mounts Cycler, and puts it into drive.

Consequently, when Cyclor quickly accelerates away from the skyTrain column, the power cord rips out of the column's outlet socket, followed by retracting back into Cyclor simultaneously.

Driving at 140 KPH down the highway, Cyclor continues to stay on its shoulder, pedaling as well. During her ride, she quickly passes hundreds of cars, trucks, and motorbikes. At times, Cyclor moves from highway to highway by crossing the grass medians, even catching over a couple meters of air when hitting the ditches and berms like ramps.

Approaching denser traffic near the city's edge, it is more difficult for Cyclor to weave around it and the city's overpopulated sidewalks. There are so many homeless amongst the working-class people, the sidewalks are practically impossible to drive on. In addition, many alleyways in between the large buildings have been designated for temporary housing enclosures for a lot of the displaced people from the nearby flooding. Meanwhile, more emergency calls are being reported. It is the spaces in between the dense traffic and bicycle lanes that provide main conduits for Cyclor's continuous progression. The sight of Cyclor driving from sidewalks and onto roads causes people to stop, glare and even curse at her. But as soon as pedestrians see Cyclor, she disappears due to her combined agility and speed. In the process, she easily goes down and up staircases. During one case when going up a set of stairs, she catches a couple meters of air hang-time.

"Approaching destination," Cyclor informs her while she drifts around a corner before accelerating to 60 KPH in a few seconds. This is the moment adrenaline spikes highest for her; the moment before the moment itself. Cyclor's visor LED display even shows her heart rate increase rapidly. "Breathe, heart rate increase," Cyclor advises.

After passing a couple blocks, Cyclor comes to a sliding stop, hops off on foot, keeps her helmet on, and sprints towards a group of people crowded around what appears to be the result of a gang related shooting.

As Cyclor gets closer, she identifies three men lying dead on the ground full of gunshot wounds. Walking among the people, Cyclor quickly looks around to find any survivors. Blending in with the noisy city, a mother can be heard crying and yelling. Looking towards the sound of sobbing, she sees a mother holding her unconscious ten-year-old daughter, bleeding from the side of her torso. Around them, a few people watch helplessly. Wasting no time, Cyclor runs towards the mother and simultaneously takes off the front pack of her body pack. Dropping down, she slides on her kneepads for over a meter until she stops just beside the mother.

“Ma’am, can I?” Cyclor asks. The mother is stunned by her out of nowhere introduction and appearance. “Ma’am, can I help your daughter?”

Answering Cyclor, the mother quickly nods. After lifting the daughter’s shirt, Cyclor finds she has been shot cleanly through her side torso.

“Her name is Emiko, I’m Christine. You’re...*Cyclor*?” Christine asks in disbelief.

Emiko’s wound is bleeding slowly but fatally, so Cyclor rushes to unpack her front body pack full of medical supplies. Grabbing two handfuls of gauze, she then hands it to Christine. “I’m the help for right now. Now, hold this and apply pressure!”

“Okay. Oh, please...please save my daughter! We called 119 like ten minutes ago.” Christine presses the gauze up against her daughter’s wound. One after the other, more bystanders crowd around. Some even take out their phones and film Cyclor prepping her medical gear.

“The calls must be backed up. There was a Road Race, and it’s rush hour,” Cyclor explains. Next, she first takes out and moves on to use a blood clot pump. “Okay, when I say let go, let go.”

“Okay,” Christine explains.

“Let go!”

Right after Christine removes the bloody gauze from her daughter’s wound, Cyclor presses a blood clot pump against it. Then, it puffs in a

small, single serving of compressed air, creating possible blood clots within Emiko's wound. However not enough to cause a fatal embolism. After taking the blood clot pump off of her wound, Cyclor quickly cauterizes it with a green laser torch, making electric zaps while doing so. "What I am doing may not hold for long. Furthermore, she may have internal bleeding I cannot access."

"It...it seems to be stopping," Christine mentions. By this point, Cyclor is finished using the cauterize laser and the wound is barely bleeding now. With haste, Cyclor bandages it well.

"Extend stretcher, Cyclor!" she commands. The poles on each side of Cyclor backflip fold 180 degrees. Next, they telescopically extend to triple their original lengths. While clipping Emiko's bandages secure, Cyclor turns to Christine. "Give me a second, I have to prep the stretcher."

"Oh, okay."

Rushing to the stretcher wagon, Cyclor quickly rolls down its sleeping bag-like tarp across the stretcher's support poles. As soon as she connects its eight clip anchors, she pulls their drawstrings tight. Rushing back over to Christine and Emiko, Cyclor kneels down.

"Now...hey, look at me," Cyclor demands. "Help me get Emiko onto the stretcher."

"Oh...okay...okay, good." Christine helps Cyclor carefully lift Emiko onto the stretcher wagon.

"I will be taking her to the south side hospital. Say it, *south side hospital*," Cyclor repeats clearly.

"South side hospital...okay, I'll be right behind you," Christine says while scrambling for her keys within her overly packed purse. Taking a knee, Cyclor straps Emiko's body down using the stretcher wagon's quick-strap fasteners. Next, she drapes the sleeping bag-like cover over Emiko to shield her from possible rain, dust, and debris. "Wait...wait a second... *the south side?* That's like...a twenty-minute drive from here!"

“I’ll do it in five.”

“Five minutes?” Christine repeats as if to refute this notion, followed by making a scoff. Standing back up, Cyclor gets ready to leave.

“Would you rather wait for the next ride?” Cyclor offers. “I don’t even hear sirens.”

After turning Cyclor on, it says, “Setting course.”

“Save my daughter. Drive!” Christine demands. Immediately after, Cyclor accelerates away. Watching through her tears, Christine yells, “Fasterrr!”

On the way through the dense city, Cyclor anonymously reports Emiko’s arrival to the south side hospital by using a fabricated male voice. Meanwhile, she swiftly maneuvers around vehicles, pedestrians, and inanimate objects, all while with Emiko on the stretcher wagon. Increasing maneuverability, the wagon’s wheel turns and swivels with Cyclor’s angular pitch by utilizing a ball-joint pivot shaft.

Just over four minutes, they arrive in front of the south side hospital’s emergency room entrance. Cyclor pulls up and comes to a full stop. After dismounting, she quickly unstraps Emiko and squat-lifts her off the stretcher wagon. Already at the entrance waiting are a couple nurses and their table stretcher. Cyclor gently sets Emiko down onto the nurses’ stretcher.

“You got my voice message indicating her wounds?” Cyclor asks.

“I did,” one of the nurses acknowledges. Her nametag reads, “Breyan.”

“I have done what I can,” Cyclor somberly says, turning to walk away.

As Cyclor manually folds her stretcher wagon’s tarp, Breyan warns, “Cyclor...”

She turns to face Breyan.

“Don’t go to the north side hospital tonight.”

“Why not?”

“A doc I know there said police are waiting for you.” After nodding to Cyclor, Breyan turns and starts wheeling Emiko into the hospital with the other nurse.

While driving away, Cyclor's stretcher wagon automatically retracts and folds back to its original position. Looking in one of her rear-view mirrors, Cyclor can just see the nurses rolling Emiko into the hospital.

"Incoming calls," Cyclor announces. Turning the emergency channels back on, she listens in on potential calls she can take. Meanwhile, she tries peddling through parks, alleyways, and parking lots more often to keep out of public view. Crossing from one alleyway to the next, Cyclor appears and disappears in a fraction of a second.

Not even a half hour later, Cyclor returns to the west hospital's emergency room entrance with another mortally wounded victim. This time, she has no choice but to drag the heavy man off the stretcher by pulling him from under his arms. Next, she gently lays him down on the sidewalk. Immediately after, while she rolls the stretcher wagon's tarp back up, two nurses rush out of the emergency room entrance, including a pair security guards. Before one of the security guards reaches for Cyclor's stretcher wagon, it retracts to its original position. In due course, she makes a clean getaway.

The next call involves Cyclor sewing many stitches for a young adult male named Alex, who had been stabbed in the thigh. Down on the pavement, leaned up against a car in the bar's parking lot, his face looks like it took a few painful blows with a cut under his left eye. Additionally, his hands are cut, swollen, and shaking. Slowly, police sirens can be heard growing louder in the near distance. Around them, three other middle-aged men are barely conscious on the ground, groaning and moaning. They look badly beaten up. Behind them, a trembling young woman has her eyeliner running down her face with her clothes almost all torn off.

"You'll be okay," Cyclor says while securing Alex's wound with some surgical tape.

"Thank you. Not sure about her," Alex points out.

“You did the right thing,” Cyler adds while nodding towards a security camera mounted on the corner of the bar’s building. Her tip gives reason for Alex to look at the bar’s camera. Once he realizes the ordeal was caught on camera, it reduces his paranoia.

Just as police cars are coming down the block, Cyler flees the scene fast. As she accelerates away, Alex and the woman watch her in amazement.

“Thank you,” the woman tells Alex.

For Cyler, false alarm calls happen more often than real life-threatening calls. As soon as Cyler realizes a victim’s limb or life is not at stake, she will evacuate the premise with no hesitation because every call Cyler commits to, she is rolling the dice. Gambling on one and potentially jeopardizing the next. After answering a false fire alarm, she was too late to resuscitate an elderly woman who suffered a heart attack. For Cyler, including Amaya’s EMT day job, it would neither be the first nor the last time where she had to say, “I am sorry, may they rest in peace,” before leaving for the next call.

Cyler maneuvers through the city center. The emergency channels continue posting calls worth taking, but the dash monitor reads only twenty-five percent battery power.

“Estimate energy?”

“Your pedal generation plus what’s left will get us home with a couple kilometers to spare, maybe three. Otherwise, an outlet is required,” Cyler advises. “Cutoff time due in T-minus fifteen minutes.” Letting out a growl, she makes such a hard turn she drifts for a while until accelerating on a new road. Headed back home, Cyler weaves through dense traffic and uses bike lane, sidewalk, and grass gaps as short cuts before turning down an alleyway to expedite her travel to the highway.

Once on the busy highway, Cyler sticks to its shoulder and accelerates to 140 KPH. As she drives, she pedals as fast as possible to generate enough power to get home.

In Amaya's steaming hot shower, she sits on the floor with her thighs close to her chest. A single candle perches on one of the shower's ledges, illuminating her. Over and over, she plays out the night's fresh events in her mind. Anger stirs within her due to her technological limitations. If it weren't for Cycler's limited battery power, she would stay out much longer. Infuriated, she growls, buries her head down between her knees, and sighs.

CHAPTER 2

BEHIND THE EYES

Through a crowded high school hallway, Nyoko weaves past many students, most of whom are wearing facial fashion. Dressed in blue jean coveralls and a white t-shirt, Nyoko has her hair tied up and a pencil holding it together. She is not wearing her big round reading glasses or facial fashion and of course, she's fidgeting with a pencil.

The hallways are so tightly packed with other students, one would assume it is an overly populated high school. That is because it is, by a lot. It is raining outside too, which means more students are staying inside today than otherwise. Next to Nyoko's side, Jia Kung, a female Chinese teenager steps forth. Sprinkled with a little acne, she is wearing big reading glasses with a pen attached to one of the ear bridges. She walks with a slight limp and wears thick clothes to hide her slightly pudgy figure. At shoulder length, her hair is very neat and styled like a bowl cut.

"Nyokooo heyyyy, last class?" Jia asks. Due to her braces, she slurs her words just a bit.

"Thankfully. Can't wait to get out of here."

"I hear ya," Jia sighs.

"Come on, let's cut through the gym and cafeteria."

"Good idea," Jia concurs.

Inside the three-court gymnasium, many students belonging to the soccer team are already warming up.

Nyoko glances down and notices Jia's limp. "How's your ankle?"

“Better. Can you still notice?”

“You should be at least using crutches still,” Nyoko chides.

“Braces on my teeth and legs? No thanks. I stayed home long enough. I’m wearing a tension band, and it *does* feel better. Trust me.”

“You know I do. But would you be limping if there wasn’t some form of pain?”

“I find if I offset my weight just a bit, there’s no pain, okay?”

“Okay, okay, still can’t believe how long it took you to get the surgery when you did,” Nyoko says. “Leaving it broken for so long could have caused further damage.”

“We’re lucky the next city over could accommodate my mother quicker. Local hospitals are so backed up these days.”

“I know,” Nyoko says before taking a deep breath. “How is your mother doing lately? I’ll come by soon. Last week was pretty tight on time.”

“She’s all right. Still drinking out of a straw but it’s the best the docs can do for now.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Jia.”

“She’s home, and she is happy because of it. Thanks for visiting when you can. It means a lot to her.”

“Of course.” Nyoko smiles and nods.

“Given the opportunity,” Jia growls, “I’m not sure whether I would run over Dagger.”

“Jia, don’t say such th—”

“I was a witness and a victim.” She swallows hard. “I...wanted to see what happened. Wouldn’t you?”

For a couple quiet seconds, Nyoko ponders Jia’s question and cannot decide.

“I watched their array of camera footage online. I saw what happened to me...and my mother.”

“Yes, I know, but Jia—”

“A semi that Dagger hit slammed into another car, then hit my mom and—”

“You’re better than them,” Nyoko insists. “I know that.”

“I know *you* are,” Jia says softly.

Through the busy high school hallways, Jia and Nyoko stick close together. Carrying on, they eventually enter a massive yet almost empty cafeteria.

At a fast pace, Nyoko explains, “I want them to stop just as much as the next person does. But the thing is, we’re helpless. Fixating on them only creates anger and stress. They’re beating us physically and now mentally if we show them this internal negative attention.”

“Attention? Hah, do you know how many people I’ve seen watching the latest videos? Too many. Their ratings are *offensive*. People entertained at the expense of someone like my mother...”

“I know. It’s not right.”

“Their cameras cover *everything* from every vantage point. Did you know they have miniature quadcopters following them the entire way?”

Nyoko shrugs. “Just because it has been sold onto the internet, copied a thousand times and broken down into highlights doesn’t change what it is.”

“And what do you think it is?” Jia asks.

“Billion-dollar horse races. In this case, weaponized supercar races. Who knows how much is spent on these behind the curtain Road Race bets and who controls it all. Could be a group or what they want us to believe, *Ra*.”

“Maybe the numbers are exaggerated to hype-up demand and attention because of their actual lower return,” Jia suggests.

“We’ll never know. Pop-up websites leak the footage, and they get the ratings they need. They flip a switch and probably multiply the very money that paid for the Road Race. Otherwise, why race at all?”

“Apparently most of it is laundered and encrypted through internet currencies too,” Jia adds. “Totally untraceable.”

“Vultures, I’ll tell ya.” Nyoko shakes her head in disgust.

“And it’s only been a few months. People are protesting to keep it off mainstream news because it gives them more coverage. But, given the collateral damage, how can the news not report on them?”

“If there’s a dollar to make, there’s someone to make it,” Nyoko says. On the other end of the cafeteria, they exit and rejoin all the other students in the crowded hallways.

Raising her voice to be heard over the crowd, Jia asks, “Speaking of making dollars, work after school again?”

“As usual.”

“You know, I miss it when we used to hang out more.”

“Miss it? We hung out, like, last weekend.”

“We used to hang out at least twice a week.”

“I know,” Nyoko says in a hushed tone. “We will again, soon.”

“How about tomorrow night?”

“Sorry, I can’t. I made plans with Jennifer.”

“Oh...okay.”

“I can this Friday evening, if you’d like,” Nyoko offers.

Quick to reply, Jia answers, “Okay! Well with work, school, and your matter, there isn’t much time for anything else these days, anyways.”

“You’ve been a tremendous help, and I won’t forget it.”

“You could have found another 3D animator. But you can’t find another Nyoko Ene—”

Before Jia can finish, Nyoko pulls her aside into an empty doorway. “I’m...confused.”

“*You?* About what?”

“About the matter. Whether to hold off until I can get a cleaner opportunity to release it to the public.”

“Cleaner?”

“Maybe if I had the name and the credibility first, then launched the matter second, I could protect myself better. Set myself up in a way that ensures the best possible future outcome,” Nyoko explains.

“I agree.”

“You do?”

“There is a greater chance to become vulnerable, that’s for sure. Possibly a better opportunity to make more money, too. But there is no telling how long that will take. By the time you realize it’s the right time, it could be too late.”

“Too late?”

“Yeah, like, someone else could invent it first. Or a war could break out. Given the history, we are overdue for one, as dramatic as that may sound. In trying times, say like in a pandemic, unless your invention vitally helps out, the general public won’t really care for your art.”

Sighing, Nyoko nods. “True. I guess it’s now or never.”

“Exactly

“And Elisha...,” Nyoko says.

Jia rolls her eyes. “Seriously?”

“You know I’ve liked him since grade school.”

“Everyone has, Elisha’s perfect.”

“I feel like he barely opens up to me. I just...want him to like me for me and not for what will happen to me, you know?”

“We all want that,” Jia says. “That will be impossible to tell once you’ve crossed that grey finish line.”

“I know. After crossing that line, there won’t be any going back. I talk to him almost every day after gym class, and he still hasn’t asked me to hang out...outside of school, that is.”

“You can’t force attraction,” Jia declares.

“But you can force repulsion,” she says, finishing with a wink.

“Hah!” Jia laughs but stops as soon as she realizes Nyoko isn’t.

“I feel like I push him away when I try to speak to him. I’m just not getting any reception, any interest back.”

“You won’t need him once you have done what you plan on doing.”

“What’s the point of the plan if I don’t have the man?”

Furrowing her brow, Jia replies with a genuine, “Aww.”

“Once I cross the grey line and head into the bright white, there is no going back to the black, and time will be against me,” Nyoko explains very quickly.

Taking a couple seconds to ponder a good reply to what Nyoko just said, Jia responds with, “Time is against us all. Time tick-tocks towards th—”

The school bell rings, and everyone begins clearing out of the school hallways.

“Let me know what time on Friday evening, okay?”

“I’ll talk to you after class, at the flag.”

After giving each other a nod, Nyoko steps out of the corridor and back into the flow of students. Jia watches Nyoko disappear into the crowd and can’t help but worry about the mental weight Nyoko is carrying. It can’t be easy for anyone to bear, especially when nobody else knows.

On the way to class, the hallways are so packed Nyoko has to brush and bump shoulders with other students. Just ahead, she can see Elisha standing with two other pretty girl students. Good looking, tall, well-built, and dressed in a preppy style, Elisha is a green-eyed, clean-cut Egyptian. When Nyoko passes him, they make brief eye contact. She greets Elisha with a smile and says, “Hey.” Though he only beckons at her with a simple nod to then return his focus to the girls he is speaking with. This causes

Nyoko to become instantly sad and momentarily jealous. It provokes an involuntary anger she tries fighting but can't beat.

Along a hospital hallway, Amaya maneuvers around nurses and other patients with her head held low. She is dressed in her EMT uniform, so no one questions her. When Amaya peers through a patient room doorway, she sees Christine seated next to the bedside. A bed that cradles Emiko's battered but healing body. It appears Christine has been here for a while. Covered in blankets, resting on pillows, and sipping on coffee, Christine is surrounded by packaging from numerous restaurants. The sight of them puts a smile on Amaya's face. She continues down the hallway with her head held high.

The sun has set, and the crescent moon is just rising over the horizon. In an industrial part on the city's partially flooded outskirts, Susumu's mechanic shop is a four bay, cinderblock garage. It has a large neon sign reading "Daigo" just over its doorway entrance. Next to their family name is a violet neon light resembling a lightning bolt. On the door, a multi-colored neon sign saying "open" is lit up. Machinery can be heard near and far.

Inside the Daigo shop, Susumu leans up and out of a sedan's engine compartment. Next, he walks to a tray, sets down his tools, and starts wiping his dirty hands with a rag. Meanwhile, Nyoko remains leaned over the sedan's engine, staring off into space and fidgeting with a crescent wrench.

"That was quick as expected," Susumu says, which breaks her concentration.

“I knew it was the diode,” Nyoko explained. “Everything else in that alternator seemed to be working great.”

“You saved this client a couple hundred, that’s for sure. Not to mention the time replacing the diodes.”

“Speaking of which, when is the client showing up?”

“They should be here soon. We can go home early yet again because of you.”

“We still have time to fix the truck,” she suggests.

“Forget about it. We did enough for today. Time and time again, you are fixing the smaller parts and saving the larger ones. Saving me time and fitting in extra work in one shift. Lately, you’ve been teaching me a thing or two...or three,” Susumu admits with a chuckle, and she cannot help smiling at the sound. “You know, growing up, your mother and I rarely had to tell you twice. You wanted the one truth, plain and simple. That can be hard for parents to reveal early because knowing what age or moment to bear witness to such...such things that are...are—”

“I understand, Dad. It depends on one’s judgement. Their assessment of what is mature enough. Impossible to judge and control fully.”

Nyoko’s quick explanation of what Susumu said, causes him to pause. *Exactly.* Responding back with a nod, he says, “Based off your mother’s judgement and my own, this was earlier for your...particular set of gears.”

“How so?”

Silence follows as Susumu gathers his words. “You were asking us questions we didn’t know the answers to. Questions a minor shouldn’t be asking. We all have our limitations, and our reach goes only so far. Thing is, you were reaching into places even we didn’t think to reach. Some... some of your questions kept me up at night, to be honest.”

“Growing up, where would I tend to reach most? I want the one, plain and simple truth,” Nyoko demands with a grin.

“Trying to prove yourself,” Susumu answers.

“Prove myself? Prove myself to who?” she asks. “I don’t care about anyone’s opinion except for the ones I love. Only their opinions about me matter to me, because they actually know me.”

“Growing up, I noticed you wanted our respect rather than disrespecting us,” Susumu tells her.

After a smile, Nyoko replies with, “Proving myself to the ones I love does sound like something I would reach for. I felt redeemed each time.”

“I suppose it is a two-lane road,” he says with a nod. “Seems to me that there are two types of social attitudes. Those who want others’ respect, and those who do not. Each attitude has its advantages and disadvantages. However, in my experience, it is wise to show respect, for you will receive it in return. It is always wiser to have more friends. The path becomes less, resistant.”

“The ol’ golden rule. There must be a disconnection in the relationship between children and their parents when this two-lane road, negative feed-back loop doesn’t work. Lack of appreciation and or attention it would seem.”

A few seconds pass as Susumu processes what Nyoko just said. Once again, he is impressed with her reasoning. “Yeah,” he concurs and nods. Breaking the short silence is the client knocking on the garage door window. Waving back, Susumu gives him the thumbs up and steps around Nyoko, towards the client’s car. “We’ll grab a pizza on the way home!” he cheers, just before opening one of the garage doors with the tiny remote control clipped to his belt.

In response, Nyoko mouths the word, “Yes,” and then performs a finger snap fist pump.

The alarm clock sounds off at 6 a.m. in Amaya's plain bedroom. Running on only four hours of sleep, she slowly sits up in her self-made king-sized bed. "Off," Amaya commands, and the alarm clock turns off.

In Amaya's kitchen, the coffee machine is triggered to turn on by the alarm clock turning off. Also, the refrigerated microwave is activated with a porridge breakfast already inside.

Laying back down in bed, Amaya rolls over, looks up at the ceiling and takes a deep breath. For a quiet moment, she lies there and breathes slowly. The dresser, including the desk and mirror, she also fabricated out of metal herself. At her feet, a gorgeous view of the river presents itself through a floor-to-ceiling window. Above Amaya is a sentence written on her ceiling in a large font reading 'Evil does not rest.' After looking down from reading it, Amaya instantly gets up and enters her walk-in closet. There, she changes into her EMT uniform.

"Television: on. Play news," Amaya orders, and the living room's television turns on. Below the television, a holographic projection of a menu interface resides. From the television, the morning news is displayed, and the host concludes his morning report on last night's Road Race. Footage is revealed from bystanders capturing glimpses of Road Racers, including its aftermath.

While pouring a cup of coffee, Amaya commands, "Sport highlights," and the channel changes to a sports channel.

On the highway, Amaya drives her truck, listening to classic 80s rock music. Headed towards the city, she does the speed limit among dense traffic. Along the way, Amaya imagines herself driving Cyclor fast down the very same highway at night. The thought of this makes her uneasy,

so she distracts herself by turning up the music and overly focusing on the road.

Arriving at an EMS hall, Amaya parks in the parking spot with her name on it. From underneath her truck, two rubber pivot rollers extend down and elevate it off the ground by just a couple centimeters. Once jacked-up, her truck horizontally parks itself by moving on the pivot rollers, resulting in a perfect bumper-to-bumper park between two other vehicles. Others are parked in similar tight parking spots implying all vehicles have these pivot rollers installed underneath them. After gathering her work-related things, Amaya gets out of her truck to head towards her designated ambulance, which resembles the shape of a sleek hearse. Furthermore, the ambulance's back tires are much larger than the front. Moreover, its sides have racks for holding two stretchers.

Already seated in the ambulance's passenger seat is a paramedic whose name tag reads, "Andres Harris." Of a large muscular stature, Andres is a twenty-five-year-old, six foot one, African American man that has a short, faded Caesar haircut. He is currently completing the morning checklists on a holographic projecting tablet. After opening the ambulance's driver door, Amaya greets him with a smile and says, "Gooood morning Andres."

"Gooooood morning, how are you?" he asks.

"Feeling good. Yourself?"

"I feel good about today," Andres expresses.

"Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"I guess I got some good rest and...oh, and I have *you* by my side," Andres answers, which makes Amaya look away and roll her eyes. Still, she cannot help but blush a little.

"I think you put too much cheese on your creamed corn this morning, again," Amaya replies.

After making a disgusted squint, Andres chuckles and says, "Gross." Continuing on with a serious tone, he tells Amaya, "The past two weeks

have been some of the most successful shifts I've had so far. You should be a paramedic by now."

"Thanks, Andres, that means a lot."

"My previous two partners constantly froze or called in sick, but really the shift before was rough. Can't blame them, but you know your stuff and you're not afraid to be the first one in and take charge. Most EMTs expect the AEMTs or paramedics to do all the heavy lifting. You're a leader, Amaya. I can tell," Andres says, smiling and touching the tablet one last time to turn it off. The comments made by Andres spark Amaya's positivity and significantly brighten her mood. Next, he slides the tablet into the passenger door's side cubby.

"That was really sweet of you to say. I think...I know you're ahead of the curve too," she comments.

"Takes one to know one, I suppose."

"You're right there by my side. Most times you take point. You never shy away from doing the parts everyone doesn't like. Like right now, you went through all of the morning check lists yourself. I appreciate that, truly," Amaya says sincerely.

"I'm happy to lighten the load so long as others pitch in, too. I have been through quite a few partners in the past couple years, and you know what I have learned?"

"What's that?" she asks.

"When one steps on the line we walk on every day, you find out where they truly stand. If you know where someone stands, you know who they are. Some cross the line where others—"

"Don't," Amaya interrupted with a grin.

"You're either born with it or—"

"Not."

"Would you stop that?" Andres begs, then chuckles.

“Can’t stop, it’s time to go,” Amaya indicates by pointing at the digital clock in the center of the ambulance’s dash. The clock’s backlight turns from green to red. At the same time, the emergency channel turns on and begins announcing current incoming emergency calls. After turning on the ambulance, Amaya begins driving out of the EMS hall’s parking lot. On their way out, they pass an incoming ambulance switching out with them. Apparent on sight, this ambulance has some fresh body damage. From the looks of it, the two within the ambulance, Asuka and Matt, appear to have gone through hell.

“They don’t look too good,” Amaya says.

“No, they don’t. Not even two weeks in the driver seat and Matt damages an ambulance. I heard they helped with a Road Race last night.”

“Yeah, saw it on the news this morning. Must have been rough,” Amaya says while pulling out of the hall’s parking lot. When they do, Andres says, “Off the block, on the clock, let’s rock!” She rolls her eyes but can’t help smiling. The emergency channel continues reporting cases, which prompts Andres to say, “Your call.” In response, she nods, looks forward, and focuses her attention on the road. At the same time, Andres reaches out towards the dash and turns on the siren.

As soon as Amaya stops the ambulance, Andres gets out, grabs one of the stretchers from off the side of the ambulance, and leads the way into a new week of shifts.

Some EMS calls take twenty minutes. Others take a few hours depending on the injury, environmental obstacles, and distance they must travel. Many are only limb injuries, whereas a lot are life threatening, and they can only do so much to help on some until they can get victims back to the hospital. Due to traffic, victims sometimes die on the way to the emergency room. Too many potential close-call car accidents pose obstacles in front of them while she drives the big bulky ambulance around

many civilian vehicles. Each shift is a curveball, a new situation whilst dealing with the never-ending traffic. Andres often tries making light of the darkness. He always has his comedic side ready to let loose, so it is a good thing they both share a dark sense of humor, which makes it so moving and special when Andres's attitude becomes serious in nature. Both of which Amaya often sees, for he takes his duty seriously.

Sirens roaring on the way to a call, Amaya drives well over the speed limit. In the passenger seat, Andres says, "And if you are going to survive in such a dark, depressing domain, you have to try and make light of it. For it lights up your way through the darkness."

From Amaya's nod and facial expression, one can tell she not only understands Andres but finds what he just said to have been a profound statement. Simultaneously, she slows down quite a bit in order to make their way through a red-light intersection.

"It is what keeps me from—on your right!" Andres quickly cuts himself off and warns of an unaware elderly lady driving a tiny electric car.

"I see her," Amaya acknowledges while carving the ambulance's course of direction slightly left, dodging the lady's car by a couple meters.

When not on call, Andres and Amaya drive around their posted area and explore the city together, all while taking turns on music selection or even trying new cuisines on their lunches. Or, they remain parked, listen to music, browse the internet, even watch movies on the ambulance's computer monitor. Without warning, calls always interrupt. Overall, their shifts reap low activity, or at least most of the calls are false alarms. Though some days are tough, even for an EMS veteran. But it is Andres's company, support and attention that help motivate her to show up to each shift. He makes her feel more prepared and confident. Admittedly, Amaya wants to impress him. For her, Andres is more than just a co-worker. He is becoming her best friend. This makes it uneasy at times for Amaya because she knows getting too attached to Andres could mean something more.

Parked back at their EMS hall, it is late into the evening now with Andres sitting beside Amaya within their ambulance. Neither are speaking while putting their final touches into their shift reports.

Taking focus off the tablet and putting it on Amaya, Andres asks, “How are you, Amaya?”

“I’m okay. How are you?” Amaya quietly replies while finishing her report. Once done, she looks up and over at Andres looking back at her. Trying to maintain a poker face, her bottom lip slightly begins trembling. Shuffling closer to Amaya, he holds out his arms and reluctantly smiles to try and cheer her up. Falling into a full weep, she wraps herself around him. Trying to stop, Amaya wipes her tears and breathes deeply.

“Sorry,” Amaya utters, letting go of Andres. “It seems like I often get hugs from you when bad and sad things happen. Wish they were about positive things.”

“It’s okay, really. I...I cry too,” he admits. “Pretty sure everyone does. Everyone that still has a soul left, that is.”

“I have never seen you shed a tear, not once,” she recalls.

“I have nothing to prove,” Andres asserts.

“No, you don’t. It’s just, I have never seen it. Seems like letting go and crying should be a given considering our...line of work.”

“There is enough sadness to go around to fill everyone’s cup. Problem is, no one bothers looking around to keep an empty one. Easier that way.”

“Are you referring to this metaphorical cup as being our metaphorical hearts, which is our emotional compassion?”

Answering Amaya with a nod, he continues to explain, “It is easier to not care, to give up and say fuck it. When you let yourself care enough, your cup will overflow and as a result, one’s eyes will literally overflow with tears.”

“Well, I know you care. Is it me then?” Amaya asks.

“Everyone chooses their time to mourn. Sometimes, the mourning chooses you whether you want it to or not,” he says, looking away and staring off into space. Truly, she is moved by Andres’s words.

“It’s just pretty fresh. I hope time helps in healing. I suppose it hasn’t been long enough, for quite a few past events,” Amaya mentions.

“Good or bad, memorable moments leave scars in our memories,” Andres says in a troubled voice. His sad tone makes Amaya look over to see him still looking away.

“What keeps you going?”

“Perhaps we can save people in their darkest moments so they can continue living in the sunlight,” he answers.

A couple silent seconds pass before Amaya comments, “Noble.”

“One day, after I get more experience as a paramedic, I would like to become a certified instructor for paramedics. But first, I want to get real world experience and teach those who are on their way up. Maybe I can help them do better.”

“I know you will and will do it better.”

“Why do you think that?” Andres asks while looking back at Amaya with a smile and evidence of a single tear trailing down his cheek. His smile implies he is digging for a compliment and Amaya knows it, which makes her respond with a smile of her own.

“You make me not only try to be better but...I know I am better when I’m with you,” Amaya says.

Taken back by Amaya’s answer, Andres nods and looks forward. Taking his time to reply, he carefully thinks about what he is going to say next. “Well, if it means anything, I would have none other than *Amaya Daigo* by my side through this experience of getting experience.”

In response, Amaya involuntarily blushes, looks away, and says, “Aw, it does.”

“It does what?”

“Mean something,” she answers before turning and looking back into his eyes as he gazes at her. “To me.” After which, Andres and Amaya share a dead quiet moment and simply look into each other’s eyes. In mid-stare, she realizes she is sharing their stare a little too long, so she looks away, grabs ahold of her duffle bag, and utters, “Well, I should go now, it’s getting late.”

“All right...yeah it is, well...goodnight, Amaya. See ya in the morning,” he says in a calming voice, though Amaya is not calm and has become super nervous.

While exiting the ambulance, she tells him, “Thanks. Goodnight, Andres.” Amaya walks towards her truck, rushing to escape her own awkwardness. For a still moment, he watches her leave. After taking in a large breath, Andres looks down and finishes typing out his shift report.

The girls changing room opens and Nyoko exits into the high school gymnasium. When Nyoko notices Jennifer, she is already leaving the gym with a couple other girls, laughing and smiling. Just with one glance, anyone can tell Jennifer is a beautiful, blonde Caucasian and the way she carries herself...she flaunts it. A couple seconds later, Nyoko notices Elisha going out of his way to catch up to Jennifer, so she takes off her glasses and speeds up to catch up to him first.

Just as Nyoko steps by Elisha’s side, she asks him, “Hey Elisha, how are you?”

Nyoko’s sudden interruption catches him off guard for a brief second until he slows down and responds with, “Hey...a little sore. I worked out last night, too.”

“Yeah, you must be sore. You killed it in gym class today.”

“Thanks.” A couple seconds pass as Nyoko thinks of what to ask him next. Meanwhile, they exit the gym and enter a hallway where many other students are walking by.

“What do you do to help with your recovery?” she asks.

“Lots of protein. Trying to eat healthier every day,” he answers.

“Sounds expensive.”

“Can’t put a price on health,” he says.

You very well can, Nyoko can’t help but think. Instead, she asks another question. “So...any plans tonight?”

“Yeah, rest.”

“Yeah, recovery...right,” Nyoko says and rolls her eyes.

“So, I was thinking, maybe if—”

“Okay well, have a good evening, Nyoko,” Elisha says before he splits off and joins Jennifer, frustrating Nyoko.

I was just about to ask him out, but he could have cared less, she thinks to herself. In a stern manner, she changes course too fast and bumps shoulders of a couple other students, resulting in dropping her tablet monitor. The thud noise her tablet makes when it hits the floor does not sound good at all. Neither does the giggling and mumbling sounds from a few other close by students who witnessed it. Kneeling down, when Nyoko picks up her tablet, it reveals multiple cracks spanning across its screen. She stands with a sigh and continues on, fuming.

While walking through the busy hallways, Nyoko tries turning on her tablet. Once it does, a jagged text message from Jennifer reads, “Hey, sorry, but I can’t hangout this evening. Other plans came up.” Looking up with a blank facial expression, Nyoko is so mad she becomes emotionless.

Standing in a very crowded skyTrain, Nyoko is on her way home, staring down and looking sad. Next to her, she notices a couple teenagers watching a Road Race on their phones.

One of the teenagers speaks up to say, “The gods didn’t stand a chance.”

The other teenager responds to say, “A Road Racer has an average lifespan of about three races before...”

The feeling of Nyoko’s wristwatch vibrating grabs her attention. She hopes it is Jennifer or Elisha, but it is Jia instead, following up on their plans to hangout tomorrow evening. Choosing not to answer for now, Nyoko looks up and stares at the receding city, thinking she really does like and respect Jia. But Jia alone, it would seem, is not enough. *What is enough?* she asks herself, not having the slightest clue. *Maybe it is because I haven’t met him yet,* Nyoko thinks. A whole overpopulated city to herself, but still, she cannot find someone or something to fill her lingering sense of emptiness.

Parked at the EMS hall with their ambulance, Andres and Amaya are finishing up their daily reports.

“Another one for the books,” Andres says. Saying nothing in response, Amaya looks away and shakes her head.

“It’s not your fault Amaya, we did everything we could. No other paramedic could have saved her life,” Andres whispers.

“That’s not why I am mad.”

“You’re mad?”

“I’m mad because of what ultimately caused her death. Her death was directly related to those Road Races.”

“I know, it’s crazy to think they are happening within and around our city. I hear they put the vehicle on auto and then simultaneously use their weapons. Far out on the frontline tech, right there.”

“Basically car tanks, driving on our roads, in our communities, where our homes reside,” Amaya says with a frustrated tone, shaking her head in disbelief. “Someone has to do something about it.”

“At this point, seems as though they are unstoppable.”

“Everything can be stopped or started,” Amaya states.

“They need to start funding the police more. Outfitting their squad cars with the same weapons. They—”

“They have some exterior weapons, but they are nowhere near as deadly or as high-tech as the Road Racers’. They have hood harpoons now, at least. It’s all just...just more countless civilian casualties if you ask me.”

The alliteration made by Amaya makes Andres scoff and say, “What are you doing this evening?”

Shrugging her shoulders, Amaya’s answer is, “Dinner with the family.”

“Nice. Well, if you want to after, Kao, Jimin, and Christopher are going out to Anthony’s this evening. I’ll, uh, be there too.”

“It will be crazy busy there tonight,” Amaya says, feeling suddenly anxious. “I think I’m just going to—”

“Oh, come on, you never come out! When was the last time, huh? Christmas party, I think?”

Letting out a sigh, Amaya smiles and answers with, “We’ll see. I think I’m going to hang out with my sister after. I said I would, so...”

“Okay, just letting you know.”

“Thanks though, I appreciate the invite, truly,” Amaya says.

“The invite is always there.”

“Okay, well, we good?”

“Yeah, shift report is all finished,” Andres reports.

“You’re the best.”

“That’s because I try my best. Which is why I prefer to work with the best, because they are trying their best too,” Andres finishes saying with a flare of excitement.

The comment makes Amaya smile, blush, and look away, then ask, “What is it like?” Next, she turns to look at Andres and with a sexy voice, specifies, “To work with the best?”

Caught off guard, Andres scrambles to find his words because it was not just what Amaya had asked, it was how she asked it in a sexy, smooth way. The pressure of laughter builds up in Amaya until she does.

“Laugh all you want but when the laughter dies down, it is all hands on deck so no one dies.” From Andres’s tone and facial expression, she can tell he is being serious. “You asked what it’s like, to work with the best... it’s like finally getting what you’ve been waiting for.”

It is dead silent as she maintains eye contact with him. First to look away, Andres smiles and looks forward. “Have yourself a great night, Amaya. If you can’t make it tonight, I’ll understand. Otherwise, I’ll see you Monday.” First to exit the ambulance, Andres begins making his way towards his car. Amaya watches him, thinking of how much of an incomparable impact he has on her life.

The midnight road conditions are wet, for it rained all day. It is not raining anymore on the dense highway traffic leading into the city. Doing 130 KPH, Cyclor effortlessly weaves around it all. Due to the decrease in friction, she slides around at times, practicing with the wet road conditions. Currently, no viable emergency calls are within her range.

“I’m picking up photo-radar drone wavelengths ten kilometers out,” Cyclor reports. This warning forces her to slow to 120 KPH.

Taking the highway’s shoulder, Cyclor steers around three lanes of backed-up traffic, crosses a grass median, then launches onto another highway turnoff. One which leads directly to an intersection that is currently red, forcing her to come to a sliding stop. Once the light turns green, she re-enters traffic seamlessly and continues on into the heart of the city.

“Car pileup, Miyako River, reportedly on the bridge nearest to Shinmei Park. Dispatch immediately required,” the emergency channels broadcast a 119-reported incident.

“The location is close: half a kilometer northwest from here,” Cyclor adds. Taking a left, she drives onto a sidewalk, easily dodges a few pedestrians, then disappears into an alley. Before crossing an intersecting road, Cyclor slows down in case of crossing vehicles or pedestrians.

“Clear,” Cyclor says. Right after, she continues driving into the linking alleyway.

“Approaching, four blocks away,” Cyclor reports. Drifting out of the alley and onto a road, Cyclor spots the three-vehicle pileup just before the bridge across the Miyako River. One large cube-truck, a sedan, and a single burning caravan. From the layout of the vehicles involved in the crash, she can tell right away how the crash played out.

The caravan wanted to take a left turn to exit the bridge, while the sedan was incoming. The caravan got impatient and turned left, thinking there was enough space and time. Instead, the caravan turned into the sedan head on. And behind the sedan, the cube-truck tried turning out of the way but swerved and collided with the back of the sedan, tipping over onto its side in the process and sliding into the bridge’s concrete wall.

Many people surround and film the crash site, standing from a safe distance on the bridge’s sidewalks. It doesn’t look good, for no one seems to be performing first-aid, which implies everyone is still trapped or has died in the crash.

Most vehicles are blocked by the crash, while some drive around and go on about their night. Only one car has stopped next to the sedan, and the woman driver is trying to open the sedan’s back passenger door. Whoever was in the burning caravan died along with it. Coming to a sliding halt, Cyclor stops, gets off, and runs to the closest crashed vehicle: the cube-truck. Toppled over, the truck has a single male driver still in the cab

who is not moving. The amount of blood splattered over the windshield suggests he probably took a fatal blow. The truck is tipped onto its driver side, trapping him. Even if Cyler climbed through the truck's passenger door, she could not lift him out herself.

"Sir! Sir, can you hear me?" Cyler shouts, though the man in the cube-truck is not responding.

"Help! Over here! Help!" calls the woman who is trying to open the sedan. "A girl and boy, they're trapped!"

Feeling torn, Cyler considers helping either the unconscious man in the cube-truck or heeding the woman's call. She cannot help the man alone, so she makes a run over to the sedan. Right when Cyler arrives, she recognizes an entire family is still in the crushed sedan. None of them are moving. The closer she gets, the clearer it becomes that the parents were brutally killed in the crash.

"You're...you are the *Cyler*," the woman states in disbelief. Named Aki, she is in her early twenties, wearing office clerk attire, and is in way over her head. The horrific images of the parents seated in the front seats shock Cyler, for their bodies have been mutilated by the crash. Focusing now into the sedan's backseat, she sees two children who aren't moving either. Unfortunately, the little girl suffered the same gory fate as her parents. Still in his seat belt, a little boy named Jiro appears to have only minor cuts and bruises, breathing shallowly, and is unconscious.

"I can't get the door open. I...I don't think I can," Aki trembles when speaking. The experience for her is obviously paralyzing.

"It's okay, you actually tried. That's more than what most can say." Attempting to open the sedan's rear passenger door, Cyler has to reach through the broken driver's side window. When she does, more gruesome details are unveiled from Jiro's mother. All over the sedan's floor, her guts are spilled, and she has a caved-in face. Looking away horrified, Cyler reaches around and unlocks the driver door from within. Next, she

rushes to open the sedan's back passenger door to access Jiro over her dead sister, who does not look ten years of age. Turning away, Aki cannot bear the images of the brutalized family. It would seem the daughter was torn out of her seatbelt and thrown about the car's cabin like a ragdoll. After cutting Jiro's seatbelt with a knife, Cyler easily picks him up and carries him away from the sedan. Behind her, Aki follows, unaware of the trail of blood dripping from Jiro's foot.

"I've already called 119. That was like fifteen minutes ago. Wait...he could have neck or back injuries; should we be moving him?"

"Life over limb. That car could explode at any time. Extend stretcher, Cyler!" she commands, then kneels down and gently lays Jiro on the ground. In a hurry, Cyler fastens the stretcher's tarp to its support poles.

"On three," Cyler indicates.

With Aki's help, they carefully lift Jiro off the ground and onto the stretcher wagon. Next, Cyler grabs a different type of wound pump from her front body pack compartment. It is designed for extremities so she can zap-strap it around Jiro's lower leg, resulting in a tight rubberized seal. When Cyler rolls up Jiro's pant leg, it reveals a compound fracture where his tibia has torn through the skin. After administering an instant morphine injection, Cyler resets Jiro's broken leg by snapping it back into place; Jiro does not even flinch due to the morphine injection and being unconscious. When Cyler zap-straps the wound pump to Jiro's leg, she activates it to give a single served burst of air. Immediately after, she takes the wound pump off and rushes to use her green cauterizing laser pen to stop the bleeding. Doing both helps the bleeding become drastically reduced.

"I'm Aki, by the way." For a second, Aki expects Cyler to introduce herself but then realizes it is the Cyler. When Cyler does not reply, Aki smiles and nods.

"I'm reading a low pulse. He's pale, breathing is shallow. Trauma to the head, it appears. Concussion for sure. He's still out cold. I've reset his

tibia but if not treated soon, his entire lower leg could be lost. Worse, he could bleed out.”

“Okay,” Aki responds. “What are you going to do now?”

“The bleeding has been reduced, but he may lose his lower leg.”

“What are you going to do Cyclor?” Aki asks again in a quick and insecure fashion.

“Take him to the hospital, stat,” Cyclor sternly answers. Standing up, Aki watches in amazement as she quickly straps and covers Jiro laying securely on the stretcher wagon. “Thank you, Aki,” Cyclor tells her just before peeling rubber when accelerating forward. Aki hesitates to speak, for Cyclor has taken off so fast. Shocked by the recent event, Aki watches Cyclor increase her speed around what the city has to throw at her. So too do the many bystanders, most of whom were filming the whole event.

Only a block away from the hospital, Cyclor is driving fast but slowing down to anticipate the hospital’s parking lot entrance, minding that she has a stretcher wagon trailing behind her with Jiro strapped on it. Out in front of the hospital emergency room’s entrance, Cyclor comes to a slow stop, gets off, and proceeds to unstrap Jiro from the stretcher wagon. Already there, two nurses are waiting with a table stretcher.

Loud police sirens announce themselves from across the road. Several police cars seemingly emerge from out of nowhere and head directly towards Cyclor. Furthermore, prones even deploy from out of their trunks and hone in on her. A split-second decision is made by Cyclor, which forces her to disconnect the stretcher wagon and accelerate at full speed out of the hospital’s parking lot. As Cyclor drives away, both nurses aid Jiro.

Right on Cyclor’s tail, five police cars and their prones gain on her. In front, civilian vehicles are yielding to the sirens and pull out of the way. Making a right turn, Cyclor drifts onto the sidewalk to keep her distance from the police cars.

They gain quickly, for they are much faster, and are soon right up beside her announcing, “Stop the bicycle, Cyclor. This is your only warning, or we will open fire!”

“Open fire? There are civilians around!” Cyclor yells in anger.

Just up ahead is a fenced-in schoolyard. Cyclor’s handlebars just fit through the entrance to its baseball diamond, whereas all the police cars are forced to stop at the fence line. The prones continue pursuing Cyclor. Across the baseball diamond and then onto the surrounding field, she accelerates and puts distance between herself and the prones.

Through the school’s parking lot and back onto the road, Cyclor almost hits a random person walking their dog and swerves into a drift. Around the schoolyard’s perimeter, the police cars trail behind and are also held up by traffic. Cyclor takes the turn into a busy courtyard, slips through narrow gaps between quite a few people, then rides towards a mall. Way behind now, the police cars become bottlenecked due to the number of people. However, the prones hover above everybody and keep their cameras fixated on Cyclor. Slowing down to a walking pace, she maneuvers around numerous people. At the same time, some shout curse words at her and give angry looking glares. By slowing down, it provides the time needed to perfectly time Cyclor’s entry into the mall’s automatic doors.

Almost immediately after entering the mall, mall-based security quadcopters begin following her. Shoppers are surprised by seeing Cyclor driving through the mall and quickly rush to the walkway’s sides. Some people even shriek, yell, and scream due to Cyclor’s presence. It also does not help that she pops a wheelie for a fifty-meter stretch.

Might as well, she thinks to herself.

Taking the signs leading to the food court, Cyclor tries to maintain a safe distance from people, including the security quadcopters. On the way, she uses a flight of stairs and hits it like a jump, catching a couple meters of air. Right as Cyclor drifts around a corner, a family of four are in the

way. In order to not hit them, Cyler falls and slides. Making sparks, her motorcycle armor does so because it is scraping and scratching against the mall's tile floor; all while holding onto the bike's handle. When coming to a halt, she immediately mounts Cyler and continues on around many startled people.

Once Cyler reaches the food court, she dodges around people to reach a Chinese restaurant. Cyler's handlebars just fit through its front entrance. By entering the restaurant, Cyler loses the mall's security quadcopters. In response, the employees yell and shout at the sight of Cyler, but she does not let up. Pressing on into the kitchen, she now has to use her toes to stay upright and make her way without bumping into too many things. Managing a few boiling pots of water, a young line cook shakes in shock due to Cyler's appearance.

"Open the back door!" Cyler orders. With no hesitation, the cook lunges towards the back door and holds it wide open. Popping a short wheelie, Cyler drives right out of the kitchen. Just as she is passing through the back doorway, the line cook shouts, "Thanks, Cyler!"

From out of the Chinese restaurant's back exit, Cyler blasts out and into the mall's back alleyway. Accelerating faster, Cyler heads toward the nearest road. Overtop of the mall's roof, the prones begin crossing to its other side. Police cars are now well on their way, going around the mall.

In the dense traffic, Cyler spots a transport truck hauling six new vehicles on an exposed double-decker trailer. Cyler drives straight towards it as fast as she can. It is not long until she is right along the side of the transport truck's trailer. Using one hand, Cyler grabs onto the frame of its trailer and holds on for a quarter block.

At the same time, a family driving within a minivan is following close behind. They are all amazed by what they are witnessing. While holding onto Cyler, she also climbs onto the truck. With just one arm, she then lifts Cyler and makes a groan doing so, for Cyler is quite heavy. Around

the transport truck's trailer framing, she ducks and pulls Cyclor in. The transport truck is a driverless drone, completely unaware of her presence.

Now just arriving on the other side of the mall, the prones scramble to scan the area. They do so until the police cars finally come roaring around the corner. All directions show no sign of Cyclor, and the chase is called off soon after.

On the opposite side of the city, an hour has passed, and Cyclor is still on the transport truck. Making use of the time, she is resting, laying down on one of the car's hoods. At the next red light, she quickly gets up to drop Cyclor off the trailer, resulting in it falling over and smashing one of Cyclor's rearview mirrors.

"Son of a—!" Cyclor shouts. After hopping off the transport truck's trailer, it drives off across the intersection. Now blocking honking traffic, Cyclor quickly saddles up and then takes off out of the way. With Cyclor back on, it begins reporting, "Processing emergency call database."

"Energy left?"

"Seventy percent," Cyclor reports.

Accelerating off the road, she maneuvers around traffic, steers onto a path, and disappears into a dark park full of tents for the homeless.