

GODZILLA MINUS ONE

TAKASHI YAMAZAKI

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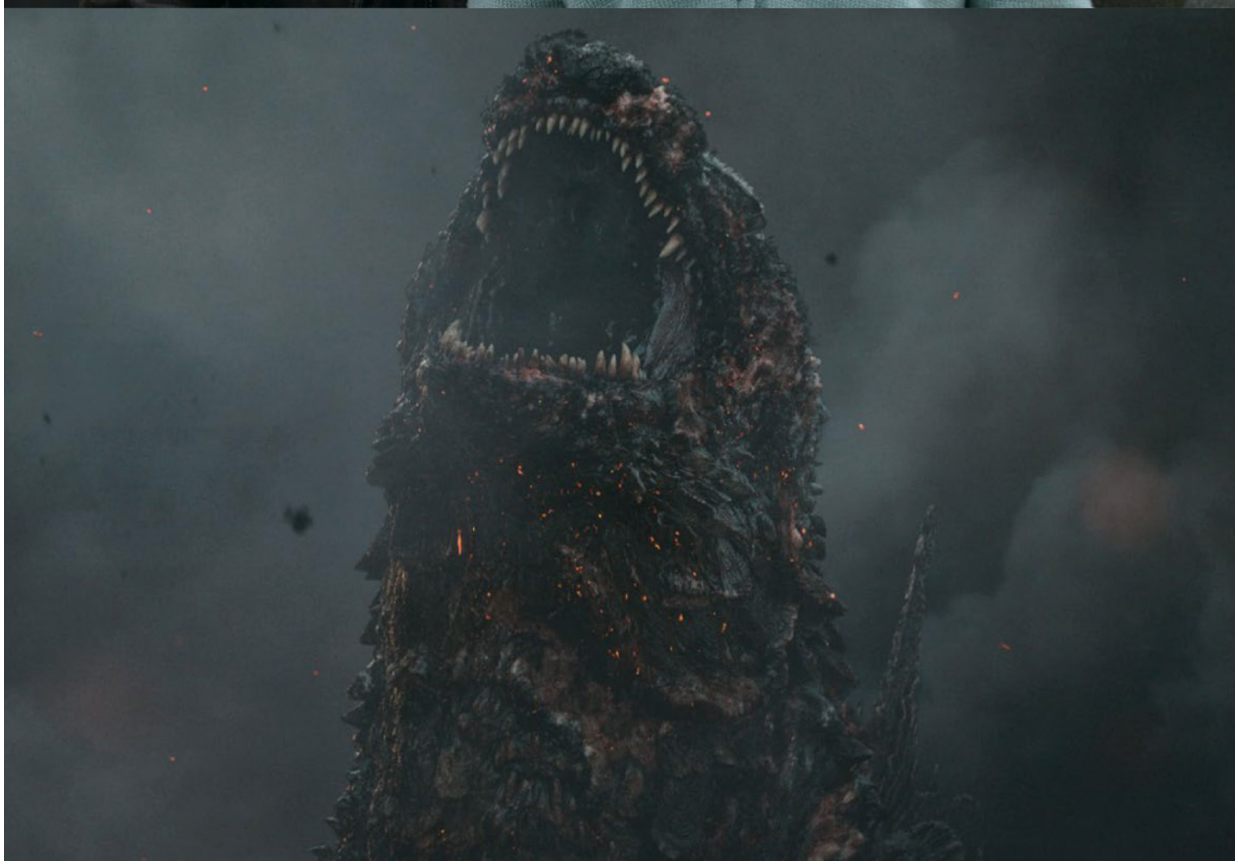



TOKYO









GODZILLA MINUS ONE

WRITTEN BY
TAKASHI YAMAZAKI

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EVAN WARD



Seven Seas Entertainment

SHOSETSUBAN GODZILLA —1.0
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THE SEARING RAYS OF THE LATE AFTERNOON SUN beat down on Koichi's shoulders through the acrylic glass. In the cockpit of his A6M5 Zero fighter, the only sound was the rhythmic hum of the Model 52's trusty Sakae 21 engine.

By rights, the whole aircraft should have been blown to smithereens by now—either by finding its target and slicing into an enemy warship or by succumbing to antiair fire on the way to its mark. He thought of all the comrades alongside whom he'd been sortied to the Pacific Theater; chances were every last one of them had dutifully carried out their missions. It was only Koichi who'd turned back and was now headed straight for the emergency-landing zone on remote Odo Island.

Koichi didn't know if there'd be any talking his way out of this one. But he figured he could at least buy himself an extra day or two of plausible deniability if he complained about engine trouble or something like that. That should be more than enough time to think about what his next move should be.

The war would be over any day now—that much was plain to see. And if Koichi could just survive until then, he could keep his promise to his mother. Thankfully, there should only be maintenance engineers stationed on Odo Island. He hoped they would be at least *a bit* more amicable and sympathetic to his plight than the average military officer.

The island appeared on the horizon, its hazy silhouette slowly growing larger and taking on a more distinct curvature as the base gradually came into view. It was only when Koichi was close enough to begin his descent that he could see that the runway had clearly been bombed and was now littered with massive potholes that made it highly unsafe for even an experienced pilot to attempt to land.

Koichi did a single go-around, circling the island to determine his best course of action. As long as he landed first on the left-hand side of the runway then swerved quickly to the right, he might just be able to avoid the potholes entirely. Steeling his nerves, he gripped the throttle and took a deep breath, then slowly began his descent.

The rest was all a blur—but somehow, through deft utilization of his wing flaps and rudder, he found himself braking safely to a halt just centimeters from the rim of a gaping hole in the ground. Had his wheels touched down even half a second later, the entire plane likely would have tumbled over the edge and burst into flames from the impact and ample remaining fuel in his craft. And no sooner had he breathed a sigh of relief than did he feel a cold sweat of adrenaline run down his spine.

Despite everything, he was back on solid ground. Alive.

Later that evening, as Koichi sat resting alone by the base's command post, he looked up to see a man walking toward him. He appeared to be the superior officer on duty here—and behind him, the contemptuous gazes of the maintenance personnel who'd been inspecting his aircraft all trained firmly on him.

It seemed his deception had already been found out. And yet, there was no way he could possibly take off again from that dilapidated runway, which meant both he and his aircraft were grounded. The staff could spurn him all they liked, but they had no authority to try him for desertion—so as long as he continued to feign ignorance, they'd have no choice but to let him stay here on the island with them until the war was over.

"Ensign Shikishima, was it?" said the man. "The name's Tachibana—I was on the maintenance team back at the Tsukuba Naval Air Group's HQ, if you remember."

Koichi *did* remember someone on the maintenance crew there by that name: a talented engineer who was held in high regard by

his team, as Koichi recalled. Unfortunately, these were far from the ideal circumstances for a reunion with an old colleague, but Koichi did his best to force a bit of cheer so as not to give away his guilt.

"Oh, Tachibana-san!" he said. "Of course—how could I forget? You were a huge help to all of us back then."

"Surprised you were able to land that old beater on our sad excuse for a runway here," said Tachibana. "But I guess I shouldn't be. You always *were* an ace pilot, after all."

"In mock battles maybe… Never got to see any real action before they assigned me to a kamikaze unit…"

"But it seems this bout of engine trouble bought you a brief postponement," said Tachibana, drawing closer. "Though I have to say, it's very strange; we've looked over your craft a dozen times, and none of us can seem to reproduce the issue you described."

"And…? What are you trying to say?" said Koichi, trying his best to sound deeply offended before turning on his heel and walking off toward the beach with a performative huff to hide his face, which was turning white as a sheet. *Not exactly a warm reception here*, he reflected as he sat on the rocks by the shore.

Eventually, another maintenance worker walked over and called out to him.

"What is it now?" Koichi asked.

"Begging your pardon, sir," said the man, whose name tag read SAITO. "But Tachibana-san asked me to call you over."

"Did he say what for?"

Saito didn't answer immediately but instead took a seat next to Koichi on the rocks.

"To be honest," he said, gazing out at the waves, "I don't see what the big deal is. I mean, what difference would it make to throw your life away at this point, when we all already know how this war's going to end? You could hold your head high and say you followed

your orders to the letter, sure… But what good is honor in death? I don't know."

With that, Saito stood up and walked back the way he came.

These were the first kind words—the first thing resembling acceptance—Koichi had received since arriving on the island, and it left him on the verge of tears. But as he lowered his head and tried his best to choke them back, Koichi noticed something strange washing up along the shore. It looked like the carcass of some strange deep-sea fish he'd never seen before but which had died in such a way that had left its stomach bulging out from its mouth, as though its insides had been sucked out through its jaws. And it wasn't just one, either—there were scores of these same fish floating up against the rocks, all of them having met the same fate. Some even had their eyeballs blown out of their sockets, now hanging on by only a thread. Koichi found the sight mildly disturbing but thought nothing more of it than that.

When at sundown Koichi returned from the beach, Tachibana was waiting. He gestured with his chin for Koichi to follow him into the command post. Koichi feared the worst. Was he now going to be subjected to a trial by kangaroo court? He could feel his breathing start to quicken; he knew abandoning his mission as a suicide bomber was a felony offense. But with little other choice, he followed Tachibana into the command post.

What awaited him inside the building was a far cry from what he expected, however, as he was greeted with eager smiles by a group of maintenance workers all huddled around a large pot of what looked like fish stew—all of them beckoning him to join them at the table for dinner. Frazzled and confused, he tentatively took a seat, and the room quickly erupted with conversation as the men each addressed him in turn.

"Y'know, I was wondering when someone like you might show up," said one.

"Man, kamikaze desertion, though? That takes some *stones*," said another.

"I mean, the war's as good as over," said a third. "Only an idiot would obey a suicide order at this point."

"Yeah, you can just keep your head low here with us for a while, then take a free cruise back to the mainland with us once things die down a little bit."

This pushed Koichi over the edge. It seemed the maintenance workers accepted him after all, coward though he was—and that moved him so deeply that he could only lower his face and weep.

"Aw, come on, don't start bawlin' on us," said one of the men. "Here, eat some food, why don'tcha—it's an Odo Island specialty: deep-sea fish stew!"

"Yep, just gathered these down by the shore this afternoon," said another. "They don't look pretty, but trust me, they're fresh and tasty."

"Probably better than whatever pathetic rations they're doling out back on the mainland right now," said yet another. "And you can actually eat your fill."

The men were right; the stew was unbelievably good. Koichi hadn't eaten a thing since he'd been sortied, so he ravenously devoured this peace offering.

"Boy, there sure were a lot of 'em down there today, though," said the second man. "Made for a pretty big catch."

"You think we might see Godzilla tonight?" said the first, jokingly.

"Godzilla?" said Koichi. "What's that?"

"Don't listen to him," said the other man. "Just some old superstition the islanders here believe—it's this 'godlike creature from the deep' in their local folklore, apparently. And they say on days when a ton of dead fish wash ashore, it means 'Godzilla' is coming."

"Yeah, I've heard that one too," said another man. "Something about how when Godzilla 'rises from its slumber,' all the deep-sea fish that live down there get scared shitless and race up to the surface fast enough to blow out their own stomachs."

All of a sudden, the base's air-raid siren rang out, snapping the men out of their conversation as they jumped up in their seats with a start. But they quickly regained their military composure and, not a moment later, all rushed out of the command post with their infantry rifles in hand.

"What is it?" shouted Tachibana. "Enemy planes?"

"No, sir!" called the lookout, a man named Taki, from the watchtower. "But there's a massive shadow approaching from the sea!"

Just then, a shrill, spine-chilling roar could be heard coming from the shoreline.

"Some new American weapon?" Tachibana muttered sharply as he hurried over to the watchtower. "Taki! Shine your searchlight onto the water!"

Taki did as he was instructed—and in the harsh glare of the searchlight, a strange, monstrous form could be seen rising from the surface.

Koichi could see the glint of beast-like claws on each of its hulking limbs. Its gargantuan jaw was lined from end-to-end with razor-sharp teeth. And along its spine ran a series of prominent, barb-like dorsal fins that made it look more like a spiked-back dinosaur from prehistory than a creature of the sea. It had to be at least fifteen meters tall.

"Is… Is that thing *alive*?"

Koichi could only stand there dumbstruck at the sight of this preternatural behemoth. Was *this* that Godzilla creature the others had mentioned?

The beast bellowed in protest at the glare from the searchlight, then charged forward as if to ram its massive body into the watchtower. In what felt like the blink of an eye, the tower toppled over, crumbling to the ground along with the searchlight and its operator.

"Taki!"

"No… Not Taki-san…"

Several members of the maintenance crew cried out Taki's name in horror and disbelief, but there came no reply. And as the creature continued its rampage, it stepped right into a stockpile of oil drums filled with gasoline, crushing them underfoot. Their fuel was set alight in a giant blaze by the electrical sparks from the shattered searchlight, and the resulting blaze cast an orange glow onto the beast's imposing form, revealing angular scales that lined its epidermis and twinkling golden pupils. Koichi could only watch in horror as the beast known as Godzilla walked right through the fire and flames, step by lumbering step, utterly undeterred by the explosion.

"Quick!" shouted Tachibana. "Take cover!"

At Tachibana's signal, all of the engineers and Koichi scrambled over to a trench that had been dug out along the coastline and dove down into it. Peeking up over the edge, they could see Godzilla slowly turning its head from side to side, as if searching for any remaining humans. But the light from the gasoline fire seemed to be obstructing its vision, as it didn't appear to have seen them flee, or to where.

Tachibana looked at Godzilla—then at Koichi's plane.

"Shikishima-san," he said. "Do you think you can make it over to your Zero fighter and shoot it with your 20mm cannons?"

Koichi just stared at him, mouth agape.

"You're the only one who can do any real damage to that thing," said Tachibana. "We're just mechanics here, and these cheap

rifles won't even put a dent in it."

"But, sir…" Koichi stuttered.

"Quick, while he's still looking the other way!"

"What if even those guns can't take it down? Won't it just get even angrier?"

"I don't care how big that thing is, there's not a creature alive that a few 20mm rounds can't make into mincemeat! Now go!"

After being practically shoved out of the trench by Tachibana, Koichi could only swallow his better judgment and hurry over to his plane. The thought of firing at that thing, even with a 20mm cannon, felt completely insane. Surely, it would be safer to just lie low and wait for Godzilla to grow weary of its rampage and then return to the sea. But Tachibana had a point—perhaps a gun of that caliber could *fell* the beast. And if Koichi was the only one here who could save these men from a gruesome death, then maybe there could be some sort of meaning to his failure as a kamikaze.

Taking great care to make as little noise as possible, Koichi climbed into the cockpit of his plane, put his hand on the throttle, and gripped the handle of its firing mechanism. But even this faint sound did not go unheard by Godzilla, who quickly turned and thrust its head down to Koichi's level as it searched for the source of the noise. Then, when it was only meters away from the plane, it stopped—its ferocious eyes seeming to stare directly into the cockpit for several agonizing seconds, as if considering Koichi. Koichi couldn't say for certain if Godzilla was truly looking at him or not, but he knew that if he made one false move, the beast could swat him like a fly or crush both him and his plane beneath its sheer mass.

He shrunk down in his seat, his entire body stiffening. Every fiber of his being was screaming at him not to pull the trigger. He knew, instinctually, that if he took a shot at this behemoth right now, it would be the last thing he ever did. This was not a creature that humans had any business messing around with; *humans* were the

prey in this equation, and he knew it full well. All he could do was stifle his breathing and pray for dear life as he waited for the beast to move on.

But over in the trenches, Tachibana was growing impatient.

"What the hell is he *doing*?" the man spat under his breath.

Godzilla's face was now directly in the plane's line of fire.

Yet still, Koichi didn't pull the trigger.

"Now!" Tachibana said in a harsh whisper. "Shoot! Shoot, goddamn you!"

But this muffled order went unheard and unheeded until, eventually, Godzilla turned its massive head and took a few slow, heavy stomps in the opposite direction—this time toward the trench where all the mechanics had been watching with bated breath. The young men began to panic as it approached. Even Tachibana's fight-or-flight response kicked in; he briefly considered ordering everyone to retreat into the wooded hills to the side of the trench. But he knew Godzilla would surely give chase if they tried to escape now, and there was no way his men would make it out alive if this monster made up its mind to hunt them down. Plus, it was heading toward the coast already; perhaps if they kept their heads down, it might give up and return to the sea.

Yet even this faint hope was snuffed out by the sudden sound of gunfire.

Unable to bear the suspense any longer, one of the younger engineers had taken aim with his Type 99 bolt-action rifle and shot at the beast—which the other men then took as their signal to open fire on it as well.

"Don't shoot, you idiots!" Tachibana shouted, but to no avail.

Their fear had made them trigger-happy, it seemed—but this barrage of rifle rounds did little more than elicit another earth-shaking roar from Godzilla and send the beast rushing in a rage directly over to their hiding place with incredible speed.

"Get out!" cried Tachibana. "Everybody, out!"

This snapped the other men back to their senses, but they had little time to escape from the trench before Godzilla crushed it underfoot. Tachibana had just barely made it out, though he wouldn't make it far. A heavy wooden beam that was split and sent flying by Godzilla's impact hit him right in the leg, crippling him. Seeing Tachibana struggling to crawl his way to safety, one of the younger men rushed back and tried to help him.

"Tachibana-san!" said the young man, offering his shoulder. "Are you oka—"

The very next moment, a shriek of terror drowned out his words. Then even that scream was muffled as Godzilla leaned down and clamped its jaws around the engineer's upper body, then with a toss of its head flung the man high into the air.

The other engineers could only stand there shaking, clasping their rifles in fear, as Godzilla decimated their ranks, trampling them beneath its massive feet, flinging them similarly skyward, or even crushing them with its enormous tail—a single swipe of which took out the entire command post, along with the few soldiers who'd fled into it to take shelter. Koichi could only sit and watch in dumbstruck horror from the seat of his cockpit as this carnage played out in front of him.

Was this all his fault? Could he have saved those men had he just pulled the trigger?

As he sat there questioning his decisions, Saito, the engineer who'd offered Koichi some sympathy at the beach earlier suddenly ran out in front of his plane.

"Here, I'll lure it over!" Saito shouted. "Shoot it with those 20mm cannons!"

But no sooner had he finished his sentence than the beast scooped him up between its fangs and launched him, shrieking, to his certain death.

This was enough to finally break Koichi, who jumped out of his cockpit and started sprinting as fast as he could away from the monster, screaming at the top of his lungs. Godzilla opened its massive jaws as wide as they could go, then clamped them down on the hull of the Zero fighter before sending it flying in Koichi's direction. As the plane hit the ground, its remaining fuel ignited, and it burst into flames with a huge explosion. Even running as fast as he could, Koichi couldn't escape the blast, the force of which threw him face-first into the ground. All he could smell was the scent of his own blood.

With unquenching fury in its eyes, Godzilla gazed out over the sea of flames its rampage had caused, then let out a roar of victory. Koichi could only watch in dazed disbelief for a few moments longer, before he finally blacked out.

When he finally came to, the first thing he felt was the touch of grass against his cheek. He could hear the sound of waves gently rolling in the distance. For a few moments, Koichi wasn't sure what had happened to him or why he was lying on the ground outside, but the smell of distant smoke served as a harrowing reminder, and he quickly scrambled to his feet to assess the situation in the early morning light.

Not far from where he'd fallen unconscious lay the scorched remains of his Zero fighter, still slightly smoldering. And just beyond it, he could see a man dragging something along the ground in a hammock that had somehow survived the fire. It was Tachibana.

"You poor boys…" he muttered to himself. "You didn't deserve this…"

As the sun crept up over the horizon, bathing the island in its light, Koichi could see that the man had been lining up the corpses of the dead—of which there were far too many. Some had been crushed so beyond recognition that Koichi couldn't even tell whether they were lying face up or face down. Some were missing limbs.

Others were missing heads. Some had been split in half, while yet others' eyes were still wide open in agony and horror. All of them had been arranged in a neat little line by Tachibana. Having to stare down at the result of the previous night's carnage made Koichi's knees give out from under him. But Tachibana remained standing, almost as if he was completely unaffected by the sight.

"Hey," he said, looking down on Koichi from above. "You haven't seen this guy's lower half anywhere, have you? I can't seem to find it."

Koichi didn't respond. He simply started hyperventilating.

"Why, Shikishima?" asked Tachibana. "Why didn't you shoot like I told you? If you'd just listened to me, they'd…they'd still be…"

As Tachibana broke down in tears, Koichi found himself unable to muster any halfway-decent excuse. When he looked down at one of the corpses lying in front of him, its hollow eyes seemed to be begging the exact same question: "Why?"

Just a few days later, the Japanese Empire offered its unconditional surrender to the Allied forces.

For the next six months after that, Koichi did everything he could to stay completely out of Tachibana's sight and just try to survive on his own. After a while, he began to worry that perhaps they'd been abandoned on this remote island, and he was doomed to live out the rest of his days sleeping outdoors while his body wasted away to nothing—but then at last, a demobilization ship arrived to finally take them home.

It was by no means a comfortable voyage, as the ship was already carrying far beyond its maximum capacity by the time it made a stop at Odo Island. As such, Koichi wasn't even able to share a room and instead had to sit crammed shoulder-to-shoulder with all of the other late boarders on the vessel's windswept deck for several days and nights. By the time they finally pulled into port

back at the mainland, he couldn't wait to get back on dry land. But his eager excitement was quickly quashed when just before it was time to disembark, Tachibana appeared before him.

Tachibana had sought Koichi out, not to reprimand him one last time as Koichi expected but to simply hand him what looked like a small parcel wrapped in oilpaper then walk off without another word. When Koichi unwrapped the bundle, he found it to contain a handful of photographs. As he flipped through them and realized what they were, his breath caught in his throat—and he hurriedly wrapped them up again and stuffed the bundle into his pocket.

After a long voyage by sea, followed by a ride on the Tokyo tram network, which had only just been restored to service, Koichi finally made it back to his old hometown. But what he found there did not remotely resemble the familiar streets he'd walked as a boy even though he'd gotten off at the correct station and knew he'd taken the correct turn at the next corner. What should have been his neighborhood looked more like a burned-out junkyard. As he made his way down the charcoal-covered road, he began to fear the worst, until his anxiety was so certain that he found himself running the whole rest of the way home.

What awaited him there was not the dearly beloved house he'd been born in but only the charred husk thereof. Though the iron door on the warped metal gateposts insisted this was indeed his family home, the only thing its fence now circumscribed was a heap of rubble. Only when he looked more closely could he see the faint contours of the old foundation beneath the debris.

As he stood there in a state of shock and disbelief, a voice called out, "Wait a minute… Is that you, Koichi-san?"

He turned to see that an older woman with unkempt hair had emerged from a crudely constructed shanty nearby and was now gaping at him incredulously as though he were a ghost. For a moment, Koichi didn't recognize her—but after a moment, he realized she could only be Sumiko Ota, the lady who lived next door.

"Miss Ota!" he exclaimed.

"I thought you were sent off on a suicide mission…" said Sumiko. Apparently, word of Koichi getting assigned to a kamikaze unit had gotten around the neighborhood. When he didn't respond to this, she pressed him. "Were you not?"

Only when Koichi winced at this did Sumiko finally understand.

"No… You're kidding…" she said. "And now you have the nerve to come crawling back here without a lick of shame? You're a disgrace."

Koichi could only stand there and take this verbal abuse on the chin. His evident abandonment of his duties had stoked the still-burning embers of indignation within Sumiko—an emotion he knew he was not directly to blame for but which he now had to accept as a shameful representative of the Japanese forces that had let her down. To be cursed for having returned alive from a losing battle was about the harshest reception a soldier could endure.

"It's because of spineless cowards like you that we're in this mess right now," she went on. "If you'd just done your jobs properly, my children would still be alive!"

Koichi winced again. Did all of the neighbor kids, whom he remembered fondly for their playful mischief, lose their lives in the firebombing that had ravaged this entire area? Koichi swallowed hard and, averting his gaze, asked Sumiko the one question whose answer he dreaded most: "Do you know what happened to my parents?"

Sumiko's spiteful glare gave way to a coldhearted smirk.

"They're dead," she said. "Everyone is. If only you could have seen it; this whole neighborhood was drowning in flames. Your family met the same horrible fate as mine."

It was the answer he'd anticipated, but that did nothing to soften the blow. Koichi fell to the ground, leaning his back against the gatepost as Sumiko walked off. Sitting there amid the evening

hubbub in this neighborhood that had only just reclaimed some semblance of normal human life, he could think of only one thing to do. He pulled out the letter his mother had written him and read it over for the hundredth time.

Please, whatever you do, just come home safe.

For so long, he'd been using that one sentence to justify his cowardice to himself. But now even these words rang hollow. There was no solace left to be found in his mother's plea.

"Well, here I am, Mom…" Koichi mumbled. "I made it back home."

But naturally, there came no reply.

Koichi could do nothing to lift himself out of this pit of depression. With each passing day, the world around him seemed bleaker and bluer than the last. He could barely manage to get his hands on some scrap wood and cobble together a rudimentary shelter on the plot where his childhood home once stood. It was hardly even worthy of being called a shack—but for now, it was home.

As he lay awake one night in his hovel, he had the sudden realization that he was starving. He hadn't eaten anything in three whole days now, come to think of it. Part of him felt content to just lie here and rot away like this, in truth, but his hunger pangs were enforcing the physiological mandate to seek nourishment. To survive. To go on living.

"Do I even *want* to live anymore…?" he muttered.

About a kilometer's walk away from his dwelling, there was a black market that had opened by necessity in the aftermath of the air raids where one could barter and trade for anything they might need. And in a corner of said market sat Koichi, slurping away at the

bowl of potage he'd just procured. It was clearly made from the leftover scraps of American occupation forces, featuring dubious crumbs of bread and slivers of meat, leafy greens that had once been part of a salad, and a few meager grains of rice. Yet despite its unappetizing appearance, the potage was surprisingly rich with flavor—either that or he was so hungry at this point that anything would have tasted like the nectar of the gods. Koichi felt strange to be so gratefully devouring this meal despite the deep sorrow that had taken root in his heart; it was as if his mind and body were entirely at odds on the matter of whether he deserved to live.

Just then, he heard a voice from across the crowd cry out, "Stop! Thief!" an all-too-common refrain at the black market, where it was shouted countless times per day. But this time, Koichi noticed that the commotion seemed to be moving straight in his direction—judging by the angry shouts growing louder and closer—until finally, he saw what seemed to be the culprit: a young woman carrying a large bundle in her arms being chased by several burly-looking men as she cut her way through the crowd.

Instinctively, Koichi shot up to his feet to block the woman's path. This was no moral crusade for him, nor did he bear her any ill will. He simply felt compelled to help resolve the situation. The woman's eyes went wide as she stopped dead in her tracks and considered her options for a moment, before—much to Koichi's bewilderment—she shoved the bundle she was carrying right into his arms.

"Please help!" she cried, then slipped past him and sprinted off down the street. Her pursuers followed shortly thereafter, and once they were gone, the onlookers quickly lost interest and the black market regained its usual clamor as though nothing had happened.

But now Koichi had a new problem. What was he supposed to do with this heavy bundle the woman had foisted upon him? Perplexed, he pulled back the old rags that were covering it to see what it was—only to reveal the face of a curious infant staring back at him.

"Wait, *huh*?" he mumbled in disbelief.

As Koichi stood there, confused and unsure what to do, he looked up to see the woman's pursuers had returned and were now trudging back to their posts. Judging from their expressions, it seemed they hadn't managed to catch their quarry.

"How the hell is that woman so damn *fast*?" grumbled one of them.

"I don't know, but that's the second time this month," said another.

Koichi walked up to the men and held out the baby in his arms.

"Um, excuse me…" Koichi said to the one who appeared to be their leader.

"Yeah?" said the man. "What do *you* want?"

"Well, I just don't know what I'm supposed to do with this now…"

"Not my problem, kid!" the man said, then continued with his retinue back to wherever they'd originally come from.

Now the sun was beginning to set. Koichi stood there for a good long time under the golden twilight, utterly at a loss as to what to do. He tried to tell himself over and over that he had no obligation to take this baby home with him just because it had been thrust into his arms. At one point, he even set it down on the wooden crate where he'd been sitting and began to walk home—but he didn't get far before turning around to see the infant staring innocently back at him, helplessly reaching out its hands.

"Great…" Koichi mumbled. "Just what I needed."

As he walked back toward his home with the baby in his arms, wondering how in the hell he was going to take care of a child all by

himself, a voice called out to him from a side street just past the edge of the black market.

"Hey, mister!" it said. "Over here!"

Koichi turned to see it was the thief from earlier.

"Oh, there you are," he replied. "Took you long enough."

"Don't blame me," said the woman. "*You're* the one who planted yourself right in the middle of the crowd. You really think I could just waltz back in there?"

"Wait… So you were watching and waiting for me that whole time?"

"Yeah—though I almost fell asleep waiting for you to move your butt. Isn't that right, kiddo?" the woman said to the infant, before holding up the onigiri she'd apparently pilfered earlier. "Bet you must be awfully hungry by now, huh?" she asked, waving it in his face.

The very instant the woman had taken the child back from Koichi and relieved him of his babysitting duties, he turned on his heel and started walking off.

"Hey," said the woman, accosting him once more. "So how come you didn't just put the baby down and walk away, huh?"

"I mean, how could I?" said Koichi, growing impatient. "What kind of monster would abandon a child in a place like that?"

"Well, well, well…" said the woman—evidently impressed by this response from the way she started circling him with great interest, sizing him up like a prospector who'd just dug up a diamond in the rough. "Aren't you a decent fellow then, mister?"

Koichi tried to ignore her and just carry on his way home, but the woman quickly followed him, an eager grin on her face. Though he hadn't gotten a good look at her during their brief encounter at the market, he could now see that she was quite young—in a better world, she could have been a student—and hardly seemed old enough to be a mother.

"Please don't follow me," said Koichi.

"Aw, come on…" said the woman. "You wouldn't just leave a poor woman and a baby girl to die, now, would you? We have nowhere to go."

"That's got nothing to do with me!" Koichi barked, sensing that he'd be in for a world of trouble if he fell for this blatant appeal to the better angels of his nature. But no amount of yelling or attempting to shake her off would deter her, as she still followed him all the way home. Clearly, she was far more adapted to living in this world of black markets and charred rubble where houses once stood than he was, and willing to do whatever it took.

There was a rudimentary wood-fired cook stove just outside the entrance to Koichi's home, which he'd taken the time to cobble together along with his shanty shack, but had yet to actually make use of. The woman borrowed a spare pot of his and began to make a thin, watery rice gruel from the onigiri she'd stolen.

"I want you out of here as soon as you're done feeding her," he said firmly.

"Awww… He's a mean old grump, isn't he?" the woman said to the baby instead of responding to Koichi directly. "Don't worry. I'm sure his bark's worse than his bite."

Koichi felt slightly offended by this comment, to the point that he felt justified to ask a rather insensitive question.

"So what happened to your husband?" he said. "Did he get conscripted or what?"

"Husband?" said the woman. "Do I look like a married woman to you?"

It was true; she didn't look that old. But that begged another question.

"Wait," said Koichi. "Then why do you have a kid?"

The woman looked deeply unamused by this question.

"Why does it matter?" she said, turning away.

"Why *wouldn't* it matter?" said Koichi.

There was silence for a time—until the woman caved to the awkward tension and answered in the tone of a confessional.

"I found her during the air raid…" she whispered. "Her dying mother entrusted her to me with her last breath."

"So then…" said Koichi. "You have no relation to her, blood or otherwise?"

"Again, why does it matter?"

Koichi could feel an irrational fury start to burgeon in his breast.

"Are you a complete *idiot*?" he asked. "How can you act so happy-go-lucky about this? You really think you're in any position to be taking care of a child?"

"Like you wouldn't have done the same thing in my shoes," said the woman. "You couldn't bring yourself to abandon her back there at the market."

This was a fair point. He was in no position to be criticizing her actions as though they were thoughtless or naive, given his own naivety today, which had led to this woman inviting herself into his home. He felt quite ashamed of his own foolishness, realizing this.

"Okay, fine," he said. "You win…"

The woman didn't even acknowledge Koichi as she proceeded to feed the baby sips of the rice gruel she'd just finished cooking. The infant must have been quite hungry as it slurped up the watery mixture obediently and with great eagerness.

"So do you have a name or what?" Koichi asked over her shoulder.

The woman didn't answer but flipped up the edge of the infant's cloth covering to reveal a name embroidered in bright red thread: Akiko.

"No," said Koichi. "I was asking *you*, not the baby."

"Oh, me?" said the woman. "Yeah, I'm Noriko… Why do you ask?"

"Well, Noriko-san, if you really have that child's best interest in mind, shouldn't you knock it off with all the petty theft? It's going to come back to bite you sooner or later, and acting like a street urchin isn't going to secure a better future for either of you."

"Well, what else am I supposed to do?" said Noriko, glaring at him. "You want me to go sell my body to the occupation soldiers like all the other desperate young girls and teenage runaways?"

"I didn't say that. But these are hard times for all of us. And if you don't have anyone else you can rely on, you're going to have to get creative *somehow* in order to survive."

Noriko didn't have a good retort to this as she simply stirred the rice gruel with a sullen look on her face.

"Do you not have any family?" asked Koichi.

She shook her head, then looked up at the pair of wooden nameplates Koichi had placed atop a box in a corner of his shanty.

"Are those memorials?" she asked him.

"You could say that," said Koichi.

"For your parents?"

"Yeah. Died in the air raids, according to my neighbor."

A look of shock crossed Noriko's face.

"Wait…" she said. "So you're in the same boat as me, then…"

Did she mean that her parents had perished in the bombings as well? Koichi thought on this for a moment, then looked at the bundle of photographs wrapped in oilpaper to the side of the nameplates. They sat there, beside the memorials, as if to serve as an eternal reminder of his deep guilt. Unable to even look at them for long, he turned his gaze back on Noriko and the baby—only to discover they had both nodded off.

"Hey!" said Koichi. "Come on, don't fall asleep in here!"

He stood up and, for a moment, was planning to shake her awake but couldn't bring himself to after seeing the look of calm upon the infant's sleeping face. Relenting, he clicked his tongue, then grabbed his only blanket and draped it over the two of them.

A few days passed, and Noriko was still staying at Koichi's residence.

She showed no intention of leaving anytime soon, either. In fact, she'd even begun proudly bringing home bits of furniture and materials to reinforce the structure and preparing meals for the three of them using foodstuffs she'd procured from who knows where… It seemed she intended to live with him for the foreseeable future.

Then one day, as Koichi was walking back from the watering hole with a heavy bucket in hand, he found his neighbor Sumiko watching him with a dubious look in her eyes. He tried to ignore her gaze and quickly pass by, but then she called out to him.

"So what's the story there, hmm?" she asked, gesturing toward his shanty.

"What's the story with what?" he replied.

"Don't play dumb with me. I'm talking about that woman and child you picked up off the street. You trying to play Good Samaritan or something?"

"I didn't pick anyone up. They just decided to live with me of their own accord."

"Same difference, if you're too spineless to kick them out. A little late to decide you want to play hero, don't you think? Oh, forget it… I'm too old for this."

But just after shaking her head and turning to enter her shack, Sumiko stopped.

"Wait…" she said. "Can that woman breastfeed or not?"

"Well, she's not the child's mother, so no," said Koichi.

"What do you mean, she's not the mother?"

The next thing Koichi knew, he was watching Sumiko feed baby Akiko some rice gruel inside his home. She did it so naturally that one would almost think *she* was the mother and with such doting sweetness that he couldn't believe this was the same woman who'd been so horrid to him as of late.

After feeding the baby a good helping of rice gruel, Sumiko turned to face Koichi and Noriko, who were both sitting on their knees in formal posture.

"At this rate, the poor thing's going to die of malnutrition," she said. "What were you thinking, adopting a child like this when you have no means of supporting it?"

"I know," said Noriko. "I'm sorry."

All she could do was apologize. She knew it was irresponsible—reckless, even. But as she explained to Koichi previously, she just couldn't bring herself to leave Akiko to die with her mother that night as the encroaching flames had grown higher and higher.

"You probably think you saved her life," said Sumiko. "But if you're so ill-equipped to raise her that she ends up dying anyway, then you just prolonged the child's agony, and you might as well have abandoned her in the first place."

With that said, Sumiko pulled out a small bag filled with white rice and placed it in Noriko's hands.

"That's not for you, just so we're clear," she said. "You're adults, so you can eat whatever you need to in order to survive. You give that rice to the baby, you hear me?"

On that note, Sumiko stood up, gave one last full-faced smile to Akiko, and then saw herself out of their home. Both Koichi and Noriko stood up in a fluster and followed her outside, where they bowed their heads deeply to her in gratitude as she trudged back to

her own shack. Only once she was inside and out of earshot did she mutter to herself:

"Well, there goes my last bag of rice. These troublesome kids, I swear…"


MARCH
1946

March 1946

THE RAIN WAS COMING DOWN HARD THAT DAY. Koichi hurried home as fast as he could, clutching his bag to his chest beneath his jacket to keep it safe from the torrential downpour as he scrambled through the door.

The place was looking a lot more like a home now than it was when Noriko first started living with him, though it still offered little protection from a heavy storm like this, and the sound of water dripping through the cracks echoed in the shanty. Every receptacle they owned—be it a bucket, a rice bowl, or an empty can—was currently being used to collect the rainwater.

"God, it's like a monsoon out there…" Koichi said. "I'm soaked to my skin."

Noriko deftly avoided the bowls on the floor as she walked out to greet him, handing him a dry hand towel to wipe himself off. Her clothing, too, was looking a fair shake better now than the ratty, vagrant-like rags she'd been wearing when they first met.

"Any luck finding work?" she asked.

"I guess you could say that, yeah…" Koichi said, somewhat evasively.

Noriko raised an eyebrow at this noncommittal answer. "What do you mean?"

"Well, see for yourself," said Koichi, reaching into his bag to pull out an application form with the job description. "The pay's pretty good actually. In fact, they even said they'd give me a three-thousand yen advance!"

"Oh my goodness! That's amazing!"

Her elation lasted only a moment, however, before she furrowed her brow with suspicion. "How do you know this isn't

another scam?" she said. "Like that job you got delivering rice a while back, where it all got 'stolen' right at the end."

"No, I'm pretty sure this one will be different," said Koichi.

"Different in what way? How can you say that for sure?"

"This one's government-sponsored—by the demobilization bureau specifically. So it's definitely not a scam…but there *is* a catch."

"And that is?"

"Well, even though the war is over, it just so happens that there are still hundreds and hundreds of active mines out there in the ocean—from both the U.S. *and* the Imperial side. So now they're looking for people to help go out and disarm them. And the reason it pays so handsomely is, well…because there's no guarantee I'll make it back alive."

Noriko's face went pale. Koichi braced himself; this was exactly why he'd been reluctant to tell her about the opportunity.

"Have you lost your *mind*?" she shouted, her voice shaking the walls of the shack. "You just survived a war, and now you want to go out and risk your life all over again?"

"It needs to be done," said Koichi. "We have to secure a stable income somehow, or all three of us are going to starve to death. And we both know Akiko isn't going to last much longer in these conditions."

Noriko looked over at Akiko, fast asleep on the floor. It was true—they'd barely been able to feed her at all for several days straight now. When Noriko looked at the growing dark circles that had developed under the child's eyes, she could only bite her lip.

"I realize that," she said. "But there must be some other way…"

"We can't wait to find another way," said Koichi, sensing that she was one solid argument away from caving. "Just think—with this advance money, we could even buy her some of that good powdered milk. The American kind! It's worth the risk…"

"No, you can't die on me… I won't let you!"

Koichi genuinely appreciated the sentiment. That there was at least someone in this world who insisted on him being alive, when for so long he'd felt like a man whose only value to his country was in death. Yet even so, this was all the more reason he needed to make money to support her. Not to mention…

"It'll be fine," he said. "Sure, it's dangerous work, but it's not like it's a *guarantee* that I'll die out there, like being a kamikaze pilot was. Plus, they've got this top-of-the-line boat that won't detonate magnetic mines even if it runs into one by accident."

He wasn't lying about this, either; they'd explained during the information session today that this newfangled ship was nigh unsinkable. He was confident he'd be just fine.

"This…is 'top-of-the-line'?"

A portion of the fishing harbor had been converted into a base for minesweeping operations. Koichi now stood on the pier in front of the newfangled ship he'd been assigned to—*Shinsei Maru*. But it was far from the "nigh unsinkable" vessel he'd been sold on. It was plain to see that this was just an old wooden fishing boat that had been hastily modified for its current mission.

As he stood there, mouth agape, a man emerged from the cabin of the ship. Koichi could tell from one look that he'd been a man of the sea his entire life.

"Oh, hey," said the man. "You our new sharpshooter?"

"Yes, sir," said Koichi. "Shikishima, sir."

"Nice. Were you in the navy?"

"No, I was a fighter pilot."

Upon hearing this, the man, likely the ship's new captain, seemed to lose all enthusiasm for Koichi. He turned to the man

behind him, a scholarly-looking sort who wore a pair of thin-framed round glasses, for a second opinion.

"The hell?" he said. "This guy's useless to us, isn't he? What gives?"

Just then, a third, much-younger man emerged from behind the spectacled scholar, his eyes almost shimmering with elation. "Wait, you were an airman?" he exclaimed. "Get outta town!"

The apparent captain shot the young man a remonstrative look. "Don't get too excited, now," he said. "These ex-military types ain't good for diddly squat, I tell ya."

Seeing how deflated Koichi was by this cold reception, the man in glasses hurriedly cut in as if trying to salvage the interaction somehow. "Ship's not as glamorous as you were expecting, eh?" he said. "Well, let me explain. You see, between the U.S. and Imperial forces, our navies left something in the order of sixty thousand mines littered across the ocean surrounding Japan. All sorts of the darn things too—the most deadly of which being the magnetic mine the Americans came up with. Get close enough to one of those things in a metallic vessel, and it'll detonate before you even have a chance to sweep it."

"Oh, so *that's* why we're using a wooden boat," he said.

"You're quick on the uptake," said the man. "Mind you, it's still primarily moored mines we'll be dealing with, but you can never be too careful." The man smiled and reached out to shake Koichi's hand. "The name's Noda," he said. "I was a naval technician working in weapons R&D during the war. This here's Captain Akitsu, and behind me is Mizushima-kun."

"We just call him 'the kid,' mostly," said Akitsu, interjecting. "And this here's Doc."

"I'll remind you that I'm not technically a doctor, Captain," said Noda.

"And I'm not a kid either!" said Mizushima. "Even if I *am* the youngest one here!"

"Aw, put a sock in it," said the captain. "You're still wet behind the ears, so 'kid' suits you just fine."

Mizushima turned his head away like a pouting child.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'll probably never be a 'real man' in your eyes since I never got the chance to go to war."

Koichi was a bit put off by this phrasing, but didn't have the chance to raise an objection before the captain dove straight into a brisk rundown of what the job entailed.

"This old girl here's called *Shinsei Maru*," he began. "It's one of a pair of vessels that operates in tandem with her partner, the *Kaishin Maru* over there. You can think of these mines we'll be dealing with like big metal balloons that are connected to the ocean floor—and our job is to cut their 'strings' using a long, deep cable that runs between our two ships. Once we do that, they'll come floating up to the surface of the water, where we can detonate 'em safely with our machine gun from afar. That's the long and short of it."

It sounded simple enough—but once they actually set out to sea, Koichi quickly learned that it was far more tedious work than the captain made it sound. Having to trawl the same stretch of ocean over and over with their wire-cutting cable, never knowing if or where exactly the mines would be hiding, took a fair bit of patience. And even once they came upon one and successfully severed it from its anchor, there was still the matter of detonating it—which one might think would be a simple matter, but hitting the tiny Hertz horns that triggered the mines' explosion mechanisms from a safe distance of at least three hundred meters away turned out to be the most difficult part of the job. Especially when the small boat that the crew were taking aim from was constantly being rocked by the rolling waves beneath them. Even the captain seemed to struggle with it, despite his experience, as he emptied an entire

magazine of bullets on the very first mine they found, trying, to no avail, to show Koichi how it was done.

"Tricky little bugger…" he muttered. "H-hang on, almost got it…"

Koichi watched him struggle and simultaneously paid close attention to the rhythm of the waves beneath them, trying to get a feel for the undulations.

"Mind if I give it a go?" he eventually asked.

"You sure?" asked the captain. "It ain't easy, I tell ya…"

He gave Koichi a doubtful look but relinquished his grip on the boat's sole deck-mounted 13mm machine gun regardless and stepped aside.

"You have to account for the fact that both you and the target are in motion," said Koichi, as he took the captain's place. "Don't shoot at where it is now. Shoot at where it's *going* to be by the time the bullet reaches it."

With both hands gripping the gun's emplacement, Koichi rolled the barrel in time with the rhythm of the waves as he lined up his shot, then fired off a few rounds—at least one of which hit its mark. The resulting explosion sent up a massive pillar of water several times larger than Koichi had anticipated, along with a resounding *boom* he could feel reverberating in his chest. It definitely wasn't an easy task; even Koichi was half convinced it was just a lucky shot. But this didn't stop Noda and Mizushima from raising their voices in admiration at the impressive precision of this brief fusillade.

"It's no different from how you target an oncoming plane," said Koichi.

"Well, I'll be damned," said the captain. "You must've been one hell of an ace pilot."

"I only took part in mock battles, actually. Never saw any real action."

Hearing this, Mizushima quickly scrambled up to the emplacement. "Wait, wait, wait…" he said. "So you didn't actually *go* to war? Well, shoot! Guess that means you and I have the same level of combat experience, technically!"

"Keep dreaming, kid," said the captain, bonking the boy on the head. "This guy actually knows how to pilot a plane, unlike you."

"Well, I could have, if I'd ever gotten the chance to enlist! Man, I would've been a real force to be reckoned with out there on the front lines. Shame the war didn't last a little longer, honestly."

This last comment lit a fire of rage inside Koichi. He couldn't believe his ears; how could this ingrate not understand how *lucky* he was to have never gone to war? Koichi walked up to him and grabbed him firmly by the collar. "You'd better be joking," he said, almost growling.

Sensing the intensity in Koichi's voice, Mizushima immediately realized that his comment was in poor taste and quickly raised his hands in apology. "Okay, okay!" he said. "My bad, man… Jeez…"

Koichi released him and stomped off, his eyes watering, his cheeks hot. As Mizushima watched him go, unsure what to say, the captain reached over and bonked him on the head again.

"Nice going, dumbass."

Upon returning home from his minesweeping job for the first time in what felt like ages, Koichi handed Noriko his dirty laundry, ate a quick meal, and then promptly laid his tired body down on his futon, where sleep came quickly and easily.

But only a few hours later, he woke up with a start to the sound of an unusually loud commotion outside. Through the sliding paper shoji they'd been using as a front door, he could see red and orange lights shifting and interchanging with one another in such a tempestuous fashion that he wondered if perhaps the neighbor's house was on fire.

"Shikishima! We know you're in there!" cried an angry voice.

"Come out here!" shouted another. "Right now!"

Frazzled and confused, Koichi hurried outside in the yukata he'd been wearing as a nightgown. But when he saw what was waiting for him there, he couldn't believe his eyes.

He was back on Odo Island—watching the remains of the command post burn after being utterly ravaged by Godzilla. And standing right before his front door were a group of maintenance engineers, all lined up in a row, their faces white as sheets.

These men are all dead, his intuition reminded him.

The man named Saito stood at the front of the group.

"Why are you still alive?" he said, looking Koichi straight in the eye.

Then another man stepped forth from behind the maintenance personnel. This one was in an airman's uniform, and wore the face of one of the men in Koichi's kamikaze unit, though he couldn't recall their name. "Because he's a coward," said the man, pointing at Koichi. "That's why."

No sooner had these words left the man's lips than did all of the men suddenly lift their gazes and, after trembling in fear for a moment, they all turned and ran away. But a lone soldier among them hesitated a moment too long—and was promptly crushed to death by a gargantuan foot, his insides splattering out across the ground beneath it.

Koichi lifted his head in horror to see Godzilla towering directly over him.

He opened his mouth to scream, but all that escaped was a startled gasp, as in the next moment, he was suddenly in Tokyo again—lying on his back in bed, staring up at the ceiling as his heart raced at a million miles an hour.

It couldn't have been a dream. He knew those maintenance engineers, and the men from his kamikaze unit had all actually been

there. They had finally come for him, and he could still feel their presence lurking somewhere as he sat up in bed and started looking frantically around his home. No, they hadn't left yet; they were simply laying in wait for when he next lowered his guard. One blink and he knew he'd slip back into that illusory world, where all of them were waiting. Watching. Judging his every move.

Once again, he could feel reality beginning to fade, as his consciousness grew dim and hazy—when all of a sudden, Noriko pulled back the curtain they'd hung between their beds. He turned to see her looking over at him with concern.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

She went and scooped him a cup of water from the bucket outside, which he downed in one gulp. At last, he could feel his pulse begin to stabilize.

"Were you having a bad dream again?" she asked.

"A dream?" he said. "Oh… Yes, I… I guess I must have been…"

And yet, for whatever reason, the word "dream" rang hollow for what he'd just experienced. Then a harrowing thought occurred to him: What if *this* was the dream? What if he was still back there, passed out on the island, and everything he'd experienced after that —his return to Tokyo, his new life with Noriko and Akiko—were all just figments dreamed up by his unconscious mind? Perhaps he hadn't been spared after all; perhaps this was just a life he'd never gotten the chance to live, flashing before his eyes as he lay there, mortally wounded from the explosion that had sent him flying. Or maybe he was already dead, and this was the afterlife. So deeply convinced was he that he could still feel the presence of those pale-faced soldiers, watching him from just over his shoulder that Koichi became all but certain Noriko herself was an illusion and that she would vanish into thin air at any moment. He looked at her fearfully, his whole body trembling.

"Or maybe… Maybe it's *you* that's just a dream…" he mumbled.

"What are you talking about?" said Noriko. "You sure you're feeling okay?"

Now that he'd given voice to this theory, it felt all the more plausible. And the only way he could ever convince himself otherwise now was to somehow prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that she was real. He crawled over to her and grabbed her by the shoulders, leaning in as though he meant to embrace her.

"I'm not just imagining this, right?" he said, gradually leaning more and more of his weight against her. "We're really in Japan right now? I actually made it back home?"

"Stop it!" Noriko cried, reflexively kicking him off her before they both collapsed to the ground. Recoiling, Koichi lost his balance and fell backward into the wooden box atop which sat his parents' memorials. The impact bumped the bundle of photographs wrapped in oilpaper and scattered them across the floor. Koichi looked down at the faces of the maintenance workers and their families—all of whom were now looking directly at him. And although none of them could say a word, he could tell from their gazes that they all were asking him the same exact question:

How come you *got to live?*

"I know…" said Koichi, curling up into a ball. "I know, okay?"

All he could do was sit there on the floor, sobbing like a baby.


SUMMER
1946

Summer 1946

ON A BRIGHT SUMMER'S DAY, NEAR A BEAUTIFUL atoll in the South Pacific, a group of aging warships had laid anchor as though stationed there to deliberately spoil the lovely tropical scenery. Among them was the Imperial Navy's one-time flagship, *Nagato*. She floated listlessly in a lagoon along with several dozen other older ships, their bows pointed every which way in seemingly random directions, waiting for its time to come.

Then, a flock of nearby seabirds abruptly changed course, flapping their wings and calling wildly as if possessed. They fled the area as fast as they could. The sky was clear and blue as far as the eye could see, and the waves calm.

And then the time came.

In the blink of an eye, a sun burst forth from the sea.

The resulting shockwave vaporized the ocean water around it, which then rapidly condensed, freezing into a haze of tiny ice crystals that swelled outward in all directions. For a moment neither the *Nagato* nor its brethren could be seen within this sphere of frozen mist. But eventually, a pillar of smoke pierced the vapor, billowing upward in a distinctive mushroom cloud.

The second nuclear test at Bikini Atoll as part of Operation Crossroads—codename Baker—had just been successfully conducted, eradicating all marine life in the lagoon through intense heat and radiation and destroying the surrounding underwater ecosystem. The seabirds, for all their haste, were broiled alive and then cremated in midair, their ashes spiraling through the sky as if continuing their flight.

But somewhere on the ocean floor, not far from Bikini Atoll, a ferocious creature lay dormant. Godzilla, the same beast that had destroyed the Odo Island garrison, now stirred from its slumber by

the same searing heat and radiation from the nearby nuclear test. Awakening, the beast cried out in unfathomable pain as its skin was scalded, its flesh burned, and its eyes boiled turbid and white in their sockets. Any ordinary life-form would have perished instantly, but Godzilla's extraordinary regenerative capabilities allowed it to weather the blast. And as its body regenerated, a rage began to form within the beast, an immense hatred toward whoever or whatever had inflicted this pain upon it.

But even with its great power of regeneration, Godzilla's body would not return to its original shape. The radiation from the blast had penetrated so deeply into its epidermis that the beast's cells grew distorted and irregular, turning its hide rugged and rocklike as the replacement tissues hardened. The dorsal fins along its spine grew longer and sharper, branching out in fractals like Hell's own snowflakes. This process repeated, the body building layer upon layer of this new armor over itself until it took on the appearance of an impenetrable, battle-hardened oyster shell that had lived for eons at the bottom of the sea.

Yet still, its body grew larger and larger, as if its biological systems had broken and no longer knew when to stop, until eventually the creature became so gargantuan and so mutated that it hardly even resembled the being it had been before.

Godzilla had become the king of all monsters.

Time flowed ever onward.

For each weeklong stint of work aboard *Shinsei Maru*, Koichi was given three days leave on dry land. With this basic schedule in place, his life with Noriko and Akiko had finally taken on a semblance of stability and routine.

Whenever he returned home, he brought with him four bags of laundry—one for each member of *Shinsei Maru*'s crew—which Noriko promptly washed and neatly folded. According to her, she'd never known how to properly do laundry until Sumiko from next door came

by one day and offered a few pointers. Now her washing and ironing services were in high demand, and Koichi's shipmates greatly appreciated her help.

On his days off, Koichi spent a majority of his time either playing with Akiko, or patching up their ramshackle home. Before long, he'd saved enough money to afford a used motorbike. He was eager to have some sort of vehicle he could call his own again; to him, there was no greater feeling in the world than racing through the town, with the wind against his cheeks and Noriko at his back. To watch in real time as the familiar streets he grew up on were slowly rebuilt made him feel he was witnessing the dawn of a shining new era—even if the buildings themselves were a bit shoddy and makeshift at the moment.

Eventually, Koichi decided it was time to fix up their own home into something a bit more respectable, so he hired an actual construction firm to rebuild a portion of their shack into a more permanent structure, with actual foundations and walls made of the plain, unvarnished wood that was awfully hard to come by in this booming era of reconstruction. It was, admittedly, more of a semi-luxurious shack than a proper house, but when he saw the look of elation on Noriko's face as she ran her hands along every surface of the newly installed kitchen, he knew it'd been worth every yen.

Before they knew it, the seasons changed, and the days grew shorter and colder. On a night of gentle snow flurries, Koichi invited his fellow shipmates over for a simple dinner party to celebrate the completion of his new home.

"Boy, you sure got your money's worth," said Akitsu, marveling. "Gotta hand it to ya. The place looks great."

On his lap sat little Akiko, who was now two years old. Koichi might not have pegged the captain for a kid person, but he seemed awfully fond of the little tyke. Mizushima, meanwhile, was simply twisting his head from side to side and marveling at the house's interior, while Noda raised his beloved camera—a Leica 250 Reporter

—and pointed it at Noriko as she walked back over to the table with a decanter she'd just filled at the sink.

"Mind if I snap a photo for posterity?" he asked her.

"Wh-what, of *me*?" said Noriko. "Oh, please, that'd just be a waste of film…"

But despite her polite refusal, Noda insisted on taking the picture anyway.

"Yes, that's it!" he said. "Keep smiling just like that!"

He pressed the shutter button, burning Noriko's bashful, reserved face in that moment forever into silver halide film.

"Hey, careful there, Doc!" teased the captain. "Don't go getting the hots for ol' Nori-chan on us!"

"Oh, come now!" said Noda. "I'd never fall for a married woman!"

"Okay, that's quite enough, you two," said Noriko, smiling awkwardly. "And I'm not married, for your information."

As she stood up and walked back over to the kitchen, all three of Koichi's crewmates turned their heads in unison to look at him. Their confusion was palpable.

"Wait, you two aren't married?" said the captain. "Then why the hell is she living here with you?"

"She just followed me home one day," Koichi explained. "Said she didn't have anywhere else to go, so now we're just kind of… living together, I guess."

"And what about this kid?"

"Akiko's her adopted daughter. No blood relation—just an orphan whose mother died in the air raids."

"Wow," said Noda, staring Koichi straight in the eye. "Now *there's* a heartwarming tale of finding family in the wake of adversity if I've ever heard one."

"Please don't romanticize it… We're just cohabitating for now because that's the way things happened to turn out."

"Daddy…" said Akiko, all of a sudden.

There was a hint of anxiety in her voice that suggested she could tell Koichi was distancing himself from her, even if she couldn't understand what they were talking about. Koichi was slightly taken aback by this interjection for a moment, but then leaned down to her eye level and addressed her firmly.

"Now, now, Akiko. I already told you: I'm not your daddy," he said.

This dismissal clearly wounded Akiko, as her eyes immediately started welling up with tears.

"Hey, come on, man!" snapped Mizushima anxiously. "That's just cruel!"

Then, right on cue, the dam burst, and Akiko started bawling loudly.

"Aw, there, there, kiddo!" said the captain, bouncing her in his lap. "No need to cry… Your Uncle Akitsu's gonna talk some sense into your mean old dad, okay?"

"You should really reconsider. Every child deserves a father figure in their lives," said Noda.

"Now, you listen here, Shikishima," said the captain, launching into the lecture he'd just promised Akiko. "Call it fate or divine will or whatever you want, but the fact of the matter is this—the three of you were brought together for a reason. And as the man in this household, it's time for you to step up and take responsibility."

"Yeah, come on, big guy!" Mizushima teased, affecting a faux-sultry feminine voice as he wrapped his arms around himself and wriggled coquettishly. "Make me a happy woman, why don't you?"

Happy.

For whatever reason, Koichi recoiled at the word. “Enough!” he shouted. “I just… I don’t need that sort of thing, okay?”

As soon as he raised his voice, the convivial atmosphere around the table froze over in an instant, only to be quickly replaced by an oppressively awkward tension.

“Sheesh… Fine, have it your way,” grumbled the captain.

Meanwhile, Noriko had been listening to this entire conversation as she stood at the sink doing the dishes, her back turned to the men.

And with that, the dinner party ended on a sour note. Once their guests had all left, Koichi practically dragged his tired, slightly intoxicated body over to the box where the bundle of photographs wrapped in oilpaper lay. He looked them over again for what felt like the thousandth time. Their faces were so familiar he could almost hear their voices—all of them cursing his name.

Only when Noriko broke the silence did he snap out of it.

“I have to say, your coworkers are quite the amusing bunch,” she said, clearly trying her very best to sound chipper. “What a ridiculous notion, though. As if you and I would ever get married and start a family together.”

Her oddly bright tone of voice in saying this, however, betrayed her actual feelings on the matter all too well—and Koichi couldn’t even bring himself to look at her.


MARCH
1947

March 1947

WHEN HE FINALLY GOT BACK ASHORE AFTER A long, busy stint of minesweeping work, Koichi climbed on his motorbike and headed home to see Noriko and Akiko for the first time in what felt like ages. Slinging his laundry bag over his shoulder, he walked into the house, eager to take a load off—but was greeted by a very unexpected sight.

Noriko was waiting for him, sitting on her knees with a smile on her face, wearing a fashionable Western-style dress, much classier than anything he'd ever seen her in before. It almost looked like a clerical worker's office uniform.

"Welcome back!" she said. "I just got home myself, actually."

"From where?" asked Koichi. "And what's with that outfit?"

"You like it? I started a new desk job over in Ginza."

This was the first he'd heard of this. He didn't understand. "But why?" he asked. "Don't I earn enough money to support us already?"

Noriko turned her back to him—but through the mirror on the low dresser behind her, he could see that she was wearing the same forced smile he'd noticed her wearing more and more often lately. She mustered her resolve and began to explain.

"I've been thinking it's high time I learned to be more independent," she said. "Plus, you'll never find a wife if there's another woman living in your house forever. And have you seen Ginza lately? They're rebuilding so fast over there its unbelievable."

It almost looked like she was tearing up a bit—to the point that, despite her smile, she looked both sorrowful and indignant at the same time.

Koichi then had the sudden realization that a part of him was flustered by this. To be sure, he and Noriko had been coexisting in this vague, undefined pseudo-relationship for longer than was advisable. Yet he'd never imagined that she'd actually been planning to leave of her own volition. To him, seeing her so resolved to stand on her own two feet and rebuild her life made her shine more brightly than even the newly reconstructed streets of Ginza. But the thought of her leaving him alone to embark on her own journey also left him with a deeply lonesome feeling in his chest.

"Well, this is sudden," he said, hoping she wouldn't sense his disappointment.

"Believe me," said Noriko, "I've been thinking about it for a long time."

Had she really? For how long exactly?

Had Noriko, who'd always worn a smile as she briskly and efficiently did all of the housework, who'd raised Akiko with so much love despite their lack of relation, and who'd always seemed so happy and grateful to be living here, truly been planning to leave all along? Had this always been nothing more than a temporary nest to her, to be discarded as soon as she found her own wings?

Koichi felt slightly betrayed at the notion. But on further reflection, he recognized that it had been him who'd put her in that position—so at the very least, he had no right to hold this decision against her. But now Koichi was unsure what to do; the realization that he needed her more than she needed him left him reeling and insecure. Only now that he was faced with the threat of losing her did Koichi realize just what an important part of his life she'd been.

He'd taken her for granted, plain and simple.

Just then, however, Koichi thought of something that might just sway her resolve.

"What about Akiko?" he asked. "If you're going to start working, then who's going to take care of her?"

But Noriko had already prepared a perfect answer to this. "Sumiko-san offered to look after her during the workday," she said. "She seemed rather enthused by the idea even. Said it would be no trouble at all after having raised three rambunctious boys of her own."

The Akiko question had been his only angle of attack for potentially changing her mind, and it had been a total misfire. Noriko really had been thinking about this for quite some time; she'd left no room for argument or doubt in her mind.

"Well…if that's really what you want, I guess," said Koichi.

"It is," said Noriko. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go pick up Akiko from Sumiko-san's house."

Noriko kept her head down as she briskly passed him by, so Koichi didn't notice the tears welling up in her eyes as she left.

Just then, the United States National Military Establishment received a series of highly peculiar yet deeply troubling damage reports.

Pacific Fleet destroyer USS Lancaster was attacked and disabled by an unknown enemy. No further details known at this time.

Intercepted an urgent distress call from Pacific Fleet attack sub USS Redfish reporting pursuit of massive undersea organism through Pacific waters. After successfully photographing target, Redfish made contact and was destroyed.

Reconnaissance teams detected high levels of radiation emanating from residual enemy creature skin tissue remaining in vessel's hull.

The photograph of the creature mentioned showed nothing but a few massive, spikelike dorsal fins bursting forth from the surface of the ocean. But whatever this unidentified creature was, it was wreaking havoc on the U.S. Pacific Fleet. And what's more, it was radioactive—likely an abomination mutated by the recent nuclear tests at nearby Bikini Atoll.

By rights, this should have been a matter the U.S. Navy pursued and dealt with behind closed doors before any of this information ever became public knowledge. But it was not a time for American forces to be making any brash or sudden movements, and the creature was rapidly approaching Japanese waters besides.

Supreme Commander Douglas MacArthur issued a letter to the Japanese prime minister informing him of all of this and stating with regret that due to the recent state of unrest with the Soviets, he could offer no U.S. military support at this time, calling instead upon the Japanese government to begin strengthening its own security forces.


MAY 1947
OGASAWARA ISLANDS

May 1947
Ogasawara Islands

THE SHIP'S HULL LOOKED LIKE IT HAD BEEN RENT asunder by massive claws. It was amazing that the vessel—a U.S. Liberty-class cargo ship—was still afloat at all, as it listed at a sharp diagonal angle.

Not far from the large hunk of scrap metal, two small minesweeping boats, *Shinsei Maru* and *Kaishin Maru*, were moored. Koichi and his crewmates looked on at the wreckage in awe and horror.

"What the hell could have done this…?" said Captain Akitsu, mouth agape. "Some sort of giant shark…? A whale?"

"No shark or whale could do that kind of damage, I assure you," said Noda.

"Some new Soviet secret weapon, maybe?" Mizushima wondered aloud.

"Does that look like weapon damage to you?" said Noda.

"Well, what do *you* think it is?" said the captain.

"This could only have been done by a living organism. One the size of a small mountain, no less…"

"So you don't have any idea either, got it. Gee, thanks for the diagnosis, Doc."

As Koichi looked at the floating wreckage, however, only one word came to mind.

"Godzilla…" he whispered.

All of his crewmates turned to look at him, puzzled by this unfamiliar word.

"Look there!" Koichi shouted, pointing his finger to the surface of the water, where a number of deep-sea fish were floating—dead, their insides expelled from their mouths. "I saw the same thing on a small island during the war, when I…had to make an emergency landing. They said it was an omen, and sure enough, that same night, a giant monster—nearly twenty meters tall—attacked the island. And if we assume it's only continued growing since then that creature could have absolutely committed this level of damage."

"Really, now… And you saw this thing?" asked the captain.

"Yes. It was like a dinosaur straight out of prehistoric times, only far more imposing. 'Godzilla' is what the local islanders called it."

"Godzilla…?" Noda repeated in earnest.

Seeing the serious expression on his learned companion's face, Captain Akitsu hurriedly spoke up. "Pshaw," he said. "No way something like that could actually exist. You were probably just half asleep and mistook an enemy tank or something for—"

"Yes, I didn't expect you to believe me," interrupted Koichi. "But the fact of the matter is that the entire Odo Island garrison was wiped out by a beast called Godzilla."

"Wait… Did you say *Odo* Island? I thought the Americans did that…"

The purported U.S. assault on Odo Island, which should have been exempt from the Allies' leapfrogging strategy, had become, it seemed, something of an infamous unexplained mystery among war veterans who were in the know.

"No," said Koichi, shaking his head. "You should know as well as I do that there was no reason for the U.S. to put that island in their sights. By the time I was there, it was little more than an emergency landing site for malfunctioning suicide fighters."

"Hang on…" said Mizushima with a gasp of realization. "Does that mean *you* were a kamikaze pilot, Shiki-san?"

Though he hadn't intended to reveal this originally, Koichi took ownership of his own slip of the tongue with a firm nod of affirmation. "Believe me, or don't believe me—it's up to you," he said. "But if this damage was done by the same creature I saw back then…then it must have grown ten times more powerful and ferocious since the time I encountered it."

Sensing the fear in Koichi's voice, the other men began to tremble as well. An eerie silence fell over the deck of *Shinsei Maru*. Whatever this Godzilla was, it was a force to be reckoned with—and not to be taken lightly.

"Wait a minute," said Mizushima. "Why was it we were called out here, exactly? Don't tell me they expect us to fight that thing in a ship like this?"

"I'm afraid that's exactly what they expect," said Noda, his expression resigned.

"But that's impossible!" said Mizushima, a panicky edge in his voice. "I mean, if an American warship can't take this thing down, then what the hell are we supposed to do to it in a dinky little tugboat like this?"

"Buy them a bit more time, they hope."

"For *what*?"

"*Takao* is on its way here from Singapore as we speak."

This ship name caused a sudden shift in Mizushima's expression.

"Wait, you mean the heavy cruiser?" he asked. "The *flagship* of its class?"

"Yes," said Noda. "It was supposed to be scuttled last year, but the Americans thought it might still be useful for situations such as this, so they've repaired it and now are sending it home. Even its original crew members were deployed to Singapore to retrieve it."

This revelation was enough to make Mizushima's fear of whatever sort of beast Godzilla was to melt away in an instant; now

he was almost jumping for joy.

"Oh, hell yeah!" he shouted. "That's awesome news! I mean, *Takao*'s a beast!"

"Well, assuming we can stall for time long enough for it to show up, yes," said Noda.

"And why's it gotta be our job, huh?" the captain muttered. "Why can't the Americans just take care of it? It's their ship, ain't it?"

"They don't want to do anything that might raise Soviet alarms, presumably. Not when tensions are already so high between them. They'd rather we just handle any minor conflicts ourselves. Which I assume is why they're returning *Takao* to us, arms and all."

"You call this 'minor'? And hell, we've only got a 13mm machine gun to defend ourselves with until it gets here."

"I believe the idea was for us to use recovered sea mines, actually."

In a word, yes. The U.S. expected *Shinsei Maru*, outfitted with nothing more than a 13mm machine gun and a few salvaged sea mines, to fend off a beast that took out a massive armored cargo ship in one claw swipe.

"Oh, now I get why they called us out here!" Captain Akitsu said with a laugh. "And to top it all off, we have to fish out our main source of firepower from the drink too! Just lovely!"

"We're also under strict orders not to speak of this to any outside party under any circumstances, I might add," said Noda.

"Ah, yes! Their favorite move—just cover it up with a gag order! This country never changes, I tell ya… Maybe it doesn't even know *how* to anymore."

Shinsei Maru spent the rest of the night out there on the open ocean, gathering sea mines as they could, until eventually morning crept up over the horizon.

There was still no sign of Godzilla. Koichi had been taken off of watch duty to instead do a bit of modification work on the mines they'd recovered thus far.

Traditionally, moored naval mines were crowned by four Hertz horns—leaden protuberances enclosing glass tubes filled with sulfuric acid that, when shattered via contact with the hull of a ship, would allow an electric current to flow from the battery to the fuze, thereby triggering the explosion of its payload.

Koichi's task was to remove those contact horns and solder on hardwired electrical line in their stead, which was connected to a remotely controlled detonator switch that would allow the crew to detonate the mines at will. These remote-controlled mines would be *Shinsei Maru*'s primary line of defense against Godzilla.

The Hertz horns were extremely delicate, however, and there were four to each mine; if even one of them were to break for any unexpected reason, the mine would explode, no doubt killing the entire crew—so this was nerve-racking work indeed.

Noda emerged from the ship's interior with two freshly brewed mugs of coffee (which he'd been so excited to finally procure recently, after wartime shortages), and walked over to offer one of them to Koichi, who broke away from his work and took a moment to appreciate the warm, bitter scent as it wafted up into his nostrils.

"You know, it's funny," he said. "When I smell coffee, I feel like our society's finally making real, tangible strides toward recovery."

"Have you not slept yet, Shiki-san?" said Noda. "Here, let me take over."

"No need—I just finished up. Now we've got two mines locked and loaded, all wired up and ready for action."

"Good work. Sorry to ask that of you; I know it's a stressful task."

"Don't worry about it. I couldn't sleep anyway."

"Not even a wink?"

"It's hard when I think about facing Godzilla again…"

"I know what you mean. When I think back on the war, I have trouble sleeping too sometimes."

"It's a weird feeling, you know? Like, I want to avenge my comrades, but at the same time…I can't deny that I'm scared to death of that thing." Just then, Koichi's expression dropped, and he quickly got up and leaned over the edge of the boat to peer down into the water.

"What's wrong?" asked Noda, also rising.

Koichi pointed down at the surface of the water near the side of the boat, just below where they'd both been sitting moments ago.

"It's happening again…"

Then, as if they'd been waiting for these words as their cue, scores of deep-sea fish began to surface from the depths, one after another, all of them dead with their insides out, burst open by the sudden change in pressure. A few even had their eyeballs popped out. It was just like what Koichi had seen back at Odo Island and near the wrecked cargo ship the day before—but there were far more of them this time, and their numbers were still growing greater by the second.

"Is this what you mentioned before?" said Noda.

"It's coming…" Koichi whispered. Then he raised his voice and shouted, "Sound the alarm! It's Godzilla! Godzilla is here!"

Captain Akitsu immediately emerged from below deck with Mizushima in tow and quickly started barking out orders as he struggled into his jacket.

"So, it's finally time, eh?" he said, clearly a little high-strung from the circumstances. "All right, kid! Go get those mines ready to drop at any minute! Shikishima, you man the machine gun!"

Koichi, terrified by the ominous number of fish, offered a counter-suggestion: "Let's get out of here," he said. "There's no way

we'll stand a chance in this boat. If we leave now, we might still be able to get away in time."

While the damage to the American cargo ship had already hinted at the idea that Godzilla had grown far larger and stronger than he'd been at Odo Island, the exponential increase in the number of dead fish carcasses only lent further credence to that theory.

"Yes, Captain," said Noda. "We should retreat and assess the situation before doing anything hasty."

But the captain ignored their pleas and climbed the ladder to the upper deck to take his place behind the steering wheel, where he took the ship's compass in his hand.

"Doc, you go watch our rear," he said. "Report the moment you see anything."

"Captain!" Noda cried.

With his spare hand, Captain Akitsu grabbed the radio handset and started transmitting to their partner vessel.

"*Shinsei Maru* to *Kaishin Maru*," he said. "The big boy's gonna be here any minute now. Brace yourselves."

"No worries here," came the reply from the other ship. "We'll bag the bloody monster and take home all the glory for ourselves."

"Why, you little…"

The captain looked over and saw the crew of *Kaishin Maru* jump into action.

"Captain, please!" Mizushima cried.

"No way, kid," he replied. "If we run now, *Takao* won't have time to catch up. And where do you think that monster's headed if we don't stop it, huh? I dunno about you, but I for one don't wanna see Tokyo go down in flames again."

"I thought you hated taking orders from the government!" said Noda.

"You're damn straight I do. It's gonna be a shitty job, no doubt about that—but someone's gotta do it."

The captain seemed dead set in his resolve. And to be sure, if Godzilla was to be stopped before it made landfall, then *somebody* was inevitably going to have to risk life and limb to do so. But was this really a problem that a wooden minesweeping vessel should be sent to solve? How could it possibly stop a force of nature like Godzilla?

The answer, as it turned out, was that it couldn't—as became cruelly evident in the very next moment, when the seas began to swell and Godzilla burst its giant head forth from the water, clamped its mighty jaws down on the hull of *Kaishin Maru,* and dragged the whole ship back down beneath the waves.

It all happened in the blink of an eye, the whole crew of the other ship being dragged to their watery graves before they even knew what hit them.

And what's more, judging purely from the size of its head, Godzilla had grown far more gigantic even than Koichi had feared, its features more gnarled and rocklike as well. It looked so different and mutated now, in fact, that he almost wondered for a moment if this wasn't an entirely different beast altogether.

Captain Akitsu, too, got goose bumps as he finally came to terms with the fact that this was no ordinary sea creature they were dealing with. No sense of duty or justice could help them here; to oppose Godzilla was akin to defying a god.

"Okay, yeah… We're gettin' the hell outta here!" he exclaimed.

Thinking of nothing but escape, the captain pushed the throttle up as high as it would go—but this sudden increase caused the engine to let out a tortured wheeze, and soon the propeller came to a complete stop. Mizushima and Koichi looked at each other with eyes wide as a cloud of black smoke and the smell of burning oil spilled out from the engine room, almost as if to spell their doom.

"Doc!" cried the captain. "What's wrong with the engine?"

"I'm working on it!" shouted Noda, poking his head out from the fumes, his face pitch black with soot. He wiped the sweat from his brow with his upper arm, then dove back into the cloud of smoke, tool in hand, to try to fix the issue.

But just across from them, where *Kaishin Maru* had been just minutes ago, Godzilla's dreaded dorsal fins now reemerged like volcanic crags from the surface of the water—appearing larger and larger as they now made a beeline toward *Shinsei Maru*. With each passing second, they grew ever closer; if they collided with the little boat at this velocity, *Shinsei Maru* would surely be shredded into a cloud of wood chips. Their impending doom was looking them dead in the face, just a few seconds away—when, all of a sudden, Noda leaned his head out from the engine room window again.

"Okay!" he shouted. "Hit it!"

Captain Akitsu gripped the lever and threw it forward—full throttle—and the engine sputtered to life once more. But that alone did not mean the crew were out of harm's way just yet, as it took several moments for the old boat to limber up and set into motion. Only when the gigantic dorsal fins were just inches away did the little ship finally begin to slowly putter away, escaping collision by only a hair's breadth. Godzilla's dorsal fins came so close to shredding *Shinsei Maru*'s stern, Koichi could feel the spray of water they displaced in their passage.

But just when they thought they'd outmaneuvered the beast, Godzilla slowly turned its heading and began to give chase. Even at full speed, there was no way the tiny boat could possibly outrun its pursuer. The whole crew knew they were facing certain death.

"Quick! Drop the mine!" the captain shouted.

"It's already right behind us!" Noda shouted back. "There's not enough time!"

"Well, figure it out!"

After one last look of protest toward the captain, Noda hoisted up the first mine hanging from the davit crane at the rear of the ship

and pushed it out over the sea. As soon as it was in place, he hit the release mechanism, and the mine fell into the choppy waters in *Shinsei Maru*'s wake, lolling from side to side as Godzilla grew closer and closer. Then at last, when it was only meters away from the creature's massive dorsal fins, the captain gave the order:

"Now, Doc!" he yelled. "Blow 'er up!"

"It's still too close to us!" Noda cried.

Mizushima reached over and snatched the detonator from Noda's hesitant hands.

"Here goes nothing!" he shouted.

BOOM!

A massive pillar of water burst forth, and in an instant, Godzilla's dorsal fins were erased from view. The explosion shot forth a spray of seawater that fell harder and faster on the little boat than a sudden squall. The men kept their eyes peeled and watched with rapt attention as the mist cleared, wondering if perhaps they'd dealt the beast a fatal blow.

But through the pillar of water soon emerged Godzilla's enormous head—still in hot pursuit and utterly undeterred by their attack. It opened its massive jaws and let out a roar as if mocking the crew's pathetic attempt; even detonating an explosive mine at point-blank range had no effect on it whatsoever.

"Well, so much for that!" shouted Noda.

"Oh man, oh man, oh man!" cried Mizushima.

"Shikishima!" the captain barked. "Lay into it with the machine gun!"

Koichi climbed up onto the emplacement and gripped the gun with both hands.

For a split second, the horrors he'd witnessed back on Odo Island flashed before his eyes.

Godzilla attacking.

His comrades in danger.

His finger hesitating on the trigger.

Koichi noticed that his hands were trembling.

"Shikishima!" shouted the captain, impatient. "Come on already!"

Snapping out of it, Koichi took aim and began firing at the beast. Once he'd let the first shot fly, he found it almost impossible to stop due to the adrenaline, and he kept firing like a man possessed until he'd exhausted the entire magazine, and then the next. But Godzilla paid those measly bullets no mind whatsoever and just kept gaining on *Shinsei Maru*. There was no doubt about it; this was a new, far more fearsome Godzilla than the one he'd encountered on Odo Island, which had at least shown *some* response to bullets—and from infantry rifles even.

"It's no use!" Koichi cried out. "I can't even put a dent in it!"

As he turned over his shoulder to shout this at the captain behind him, Godzilla raised its massive head from the surface of the water and opened its gigantic jaws—baring its fangs as though it meant to swallow the *Shinsei Maru* whole. But seeing the creature with its mouth open like this gave Noda an idea.

"Wait a minute… What if we tried feeding it into its mouth?" he suggested.

Working together to operate the davit crane, Noda and Mizushima hoisted the second mine up and dropped it into the water. In just seconds, it floated right up to the edge of Godzilla's chin. If they were to detonate it at this distance, *Shinsei Maru* would no doubt sustain heavy damage as well—but that was still preferable to ending up in the beast's stomach. Taking cover beneath the machine gun emplacement, Mizushima twisted the key in the detonator—but there came no explosion.

The mine simply floated listlessly like an errant buoy in Godzilla's gaping mouth. Glancing at one another in horrified

realization, Noda and Mizushima quickly scrambled to reel in the electrical line that connected it to the detonator—only to find that the wire had been severed, shredded by Godzilla's sharp fangs. Now the disconnected mine simply danced on the waves, just barely prevented from floating out of the creature's mouth by the teeth that had somehow kept it fenced in thus far. But it was only a matter of time until the mine slipped through the gaps and out to sea. Their final remaining weapon was going to get swept away without even having a chance to fire. But they had no way of detonating it now that the wire was cut, and Godzilla was moments away from reaching the ship and swallowing it whole.

But then Koichi had an idea.

"Get down!" he shouted.

As soon as Noda and the others had taken cover, Koichi opened fire with the 13mm machine gun—taking aim directly at the mine inside Godzilla's open mouth. He kept firing into the back of the creature's throat, which seemed to anger the beast, as it started swimming even faster toward the ship. But just when all hope seemed lost, one of the machine gun bullets miraculously fired out at the optimal angle, and hit its mark.

Then, a massive explosion.

The blast was so powerful that it shredded *Shinsei Maru*'s stern and sent the whole ship airborne for a brief moment before gravity brought it crashing back down to the sea. A great torrent of water battered the deck like a waterfall. Koichi could only writhe helplessly in pain beneath the downpour, unable to breathe. A broken-off piece of the stern hit him straight in the head, leaving a large, bloody laceration all across one side of his face. Mizushima, too, was hit by debris, leaving him with a fractured bone in his left arm. The entire rear portion of the vessel now lost, *Shinsei Maru* rapidly became inundated with water.

The men clung to the sinking ship for dear life, all the while watching the giant cloud of mist and waiting for Godzilla to reappear.

If they hadn't managed to deal some serious damage to it with that last attack, there was no chance to make it out alive. When the haze finally cleared, they could see the beast floating limply on the surface of the water—with nearly half its face blown off from the explosion.

"Did we do it?" asked Akitsu.

"I think we might have," said Noda.

But not a moment later, Godzilla's immense powers of regeneration kicked in, and they could only watch in horror as the beast's mutilated face began to reconstruct itself with unbelievable speed. In almost no time at all, everything from its giant eye to its enormous fangs was indistinguishable from how it had been just minutes ago, as if nothing had ever happened. Once it was fully healed, the creature regained its senses, then lifted itself upright to tower over the ocean as it let out a mighty roar.

Godzilla was unkillable.

And *Shinsei Maru*'s total destruction was inevitable.

Godzilla reared its head back, opening its mouth wide as if to crunch the tiny boat between its jaws—when all of a sudden, there came the sound of cannon fire whistling through the air. The beast's body was pelted with explosive after explosive.

"What's going on?" Noda exclaimed—then turned to see a truly unbelievable sight.

The heavy cruiser *Takao* had just arrived like a guardian angel coming to their rescue.

Godzilla cried out in anger, then changed course and swam to face *Takao* while her crew was readying the next bombardment. By the time the ship opened fire, the beast was already deep beneath the waves, and their shells were useless—simply exploding underwater like depth charges as Godzilla slipped lithely through the barrage. Before they knew it, the creature was already upon them.

"Oh no…" Koichi whispered.

Not a moment later, Godzilla burst forth from the water directly beside *Takao* like a breaching whale—then used its falling momentum to deal a heavy blow to the ship as it came crashing down onto the bridge, crushing the captain and crew members within. Godzilla thrashed with its mighty claws and dug its teeth into the conning tower, ripping it root and branch. Its central systems disabled, the crew scrambled to rotate the six 20.3cm guns on *Takao*'s foredeck to take aim at the beast, then opened fire…

Even a behemoth like Godzilla could not withstand a point-blank bombardment from this caliber of cannon fire, and after a moment's delay, the creature relinquished its grip on the vessel and fell backward into the sea, sinking deep into the ocean's depths. *Takao*, though battered and bruised beyond recognition, had emerged victorious.

The surviving crew members on deck let out a triumphant roar. They'd made a grueling voyage from Singapore and just lost their captain and so many of their fellow shipmates in an instant—but they'd paid the creature back in kind. The crew of *Shinsei Maru* offered silent eulogies to the brave sailors of *Takao* who'd just given their lives to stop Godzilla's rampage in a battle that seemed to be unwinnable.

But then…

From somewhere deep below *Takao*, a bluish light began to glow beneath the waves, growing brighter with every second. First there was just one light, but then came another and another, like a string of rosary beads. It was like they were witnessing the birth of a divine dragon as the lights coalesced to form a single, curving silhouette. It was an awe-inspiring sight to behold.

"Wh-what's that?" Noda breathed as he trembled with some primal brand of fear.

In the next instant, a great pillar of light shot forth from the water, piercing straight through *Takao*'s hull. The pillar expanded,

engulfing the entire ship in its light. The cruiser's hull buckled, then burst to pieces.

This was not the sort of explosion one would expect to see if the ship's magazine had simply caught fire and all of the munitions on board detonated simultaneously. No—this was a different type of explosion entirely. It was as if all of the iron and other components that comprised *Takao*'s hull had superheated so rapidly that the ship almost instantaneously changed from solid to gas—the ship evaporated and fizzled away in a single phreatic eruption.

What little remained of *Takao*'s flaming wreckage and her crew was quickly swallowed up by the sea; a moment later all that was left of was a billowing cloud of smoke on the water—from which Godzilla then slowly emerged, its whole body covered in bright-red sores.

Just what *were* those bluish beads of light anyway? And how had *Takao* been completely vaporized in a matter of seconds? And for that matter, what had happened to Godzilla down there, to leave it so badly seared and scarred…?

Perhaps due to the injuries it had sustained, Godzilla seemed content to abandon its rampage for the time being and promptly retreated back beneath the waves, leaving only a giant column of water in its wake. *Shinsei Maru* was now all but wrecked, struggling to stay afloat as her crew hung on for dear life.

A few moments later, Koichi lost consciousness.

When he next awoke, he was lying in a hospital bed.

Seeing that he'd finally come to, the visitors at his bedside—Captain Akitsu, Noda, and Mizushima, whose arm was in a sling—all turned to look at him.

"'Bout time you woke up," the captain said with a sigh of relief.

"Where am I?" asked Koichi.

"A hospital in Yokosuka. We all got airlifted here right after you passed out."

"Were there any survivors from *Kaishin Maru* or *Takao*?"

The captain simply shook his head.

So many lives had been lost.

"And what about Godzilla?" asked Koichi. "Did it escape?"

"There's been no sign of the beast since then," said Noda.

"Wait… But it was headed straight for Tokyo! If they don't put out an evacuation order right now, we'll have another huge disaster on our hands!"

"I'm afraid the government has no intention of telling the public."

"Why not? Don't they have a right to know they're in danger?"

"Most likely they're hoping to prevent widespread panic and hysteria."

"What? They *should* be panicking! If we don't evacuate soon, we're all done for!"

"Perhaps, yes. But it seems no one wants to take responsibility for the mayhem that will surely ensue," said Noda.

"Information control's the one thing our government's good at, after all," the captain said derisively.

Just then, a pale-faced Noriko rushed into the hospital room with Akiko in tow.

"Oh my god, you're awake!" she cried. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Yes, of course," said Koichi. "Now, please—there's no need to panic. I'm just fine, as you can see."

Yet even after they returned home, Noriko still seemed pensive and on edge. He suspected she was upset with him somehow,

judging from her reproachful gaze.

"Is something wrong?" he finally asked.

"What happened out there?" she replied.

"I already told you: I was injured while we were trying to disarm a bomb. It's really as simple as that."

"Liar. You're hiding something from me, aren't you?"

Koichi faltered a moment at this incisive accusation.

"I could always tell, you know," she said, "that there was something bothering you deep down. Something you weren't telling me. Does this have something to do with that?"

This was quickly becoming a full-blown interrogation.

"What is it that you're so…so *tormented* by?" she asked.

"It's nothing you need to concern yourself with," he replied, raising his voice despite himself. But this only incited an even greater surge of emotion from Noriko.

"How can you say that?" she asked. "You saved my life, gave me a place to stay, and we've been living together for more than a year—and now you're telling me I'm still such a stranger to you that you can't even let me in a *little* bit?"

There was nothing he could say to this.

"If there's some secret burden you've been shouldering," she continued, "I wish you'd at least share it with me so that I could lighten your load a little."

Koichi was desperate to find some way to escape from this situation—but he could tell from the intensity of Noriko's gaze that there was no getting out of this.

"I was a kamikaze pilot," he confessed. "A deserter who abandoned his mission."

"You…what?" said Noriko.

"On the day I was sortied," he said, "I lied and claimed my plane was having mechanical problems so that I could make an emergency landing at a place called Odo Island."

Koichi walked over to the wooden box that had become a makeshift altar in the corner of their home, took the bundle of photographs wrapped in oilpaper, and brought them back to show Noriko.

"These pictures belonged to the mechanics who were stationed there," he said. "Every single one of them are dead now."

"What happened?" asked Noriko.

"That same night I landed there, this…this horrible, dinosaur-like monster attacked the base. The officer in charge ordered me to shoot it with the machine guns on my Zero fighter. But I didn't… I got cold feet and failed to carry out my duty yet again. And as a result, all of those men were killed by the beast. Men who would have survived the war and been reunited with their families by now if it weren't for me."

Noriko had wondered for quite some time now what these photographs were but had never found the nerve to ask. But now that she finally knew the truth, she could only bite her lip and swallow her breath.

"And now that monster has reappeared…" Koichi went on. "We just encountered it at sea. Godzilla, they call it."

"Godzilla?" Noriko repeated. "*That's* what wrecked your ship?"

"Yes… And once again, I couldn't do a damn thing to stop it."

Now that the dam had burst, these feelings which Koichi had bottled up for so long were all flowing out at once in a single, muddy stream of emotions.

"So you see. I don't deserve to still be alive right now," he said. "I should have died back there along with the rest of them."

"Don't say that!" said Noriko. "We both survived for a reason—I know it. And the best thing we can do to honor the memory of the

dead is to go on living."

"Please, as if you have any right to speak for them…"

"But I do, though! I lost both my parents in the air raids too, remember? And even as the flames took them, they told me to run—to save myself. So yes, I've decided I'm going to do whatever it takes to survive, no matter how hard things might get. Because I know that's exactly what they would have wanted."

To think of the hell she'd gone through, even as a civilian, left Koichi at a loss for words. This was the first time she'd revealed to him the reason she'd been so determined to live on and persevere in the aftermath of the war, never losing sight of herself no matter how exhausted and impoverished she became. It was a sobering reminder, and for the briefest of moments, Koichi almost felt a ray of hope from her encouragement. But the feeling didn't last for long. Because there was a big difference between the sort of living Noriko described and simply clinging to life, as Koichi had been doing. He covered his face with both hands, closing himself up inside his own shell once more.

"I can't do it," he said. "Every night, I see them in my dreams…telling me to hurry up and join them already…asking how I have the audacity to still be drawing breath…"

"Those are only *dreams*, though," said Noriko. "They're not real people. They're just specters you invented in your own head."

Koichi vehemently shook his head. "They're not, though. I've been carrying their memories with me ever since that fateful day. They're always right here watching over me—I can feel them. And at night, when I'm asleep, they come into my dreams and blame it all on me, again and again."

Just like before, Koichi could feel the line between dream and reality begin to blur.

"Or am I even alive right now, for that matter?" he asked, the veins in his eyes bulging red as he glared at her and devolved into raving madness. "What if I died a long time ago back there on the

island? What if I'm just a slowly decaying corpse, and you and Akiko are just figments dreamt up by my rotting, worm-infested brain?"

Noriko mustered her nerve and grabbed Koichi by the head, clasping him tightly to her breast. The sound of her steady heartbeat snapped him back to his senses. "We're alive, you see?" she said. "All of us, including you! Can't you feel it?"

As Koichi crumpled to his knees, he wrapped his arms around Noriko's back and started weeping like a baby.

"Here, Akiko, have a taste, dear. It's daikon—your favorite. Yes, that's it. Be sure to get some broth too now."

When Koichi next awoke, he could hear Noriko over in the kitchen, offering Akiko a taste of some fresh miso soup she'd just cooked.

"Is it yummy?" asked Noriko. "That's a good girl. You like daikon, don't you, sweetie?"

After watching this scene play out before him a moment, Koichi turned in his bed to face the bundle of photographs on the memorial beside him.

"Can we…finally put this to rest already?" he whispered as if asking the dead men for their permission. "Because I think I'm ready to give living another shot."

It was at that moment that Koichi Shikishima at last regained his will to live.

The coastal defense ship *Ikuno* was on a regular patrol cruise through the Uraga Channel. After the yet-unexplained sinkings of *Takao* and *Kaishin Maru* and the troubling reports from *Shinsei Maru*, she had been dispatched to the area as a precautionary measure by the government. Despite not fully believing the outlandish purported

cause of said disasters, the government thought it prudent to be prepared for the worst.

The crew of *Ikuno* would soon learn that the testimony given by *Shinsei Maru*'s crew had been no exaggeration—as when they first caught sight of the beast beneath the water, it appeared to eclipse the entire length of their boat with its sheer size.

"Dear Lord…" said one of the men. "Is that it…?"

"Quick!" said another. "Call in a report to HQ!"

The gargantuan beast appeared to be making a beeline for the skyline of the newly reconstructed capitol—but a string of mines strung all across Tokyo Bay by a Sokuten-class minelayer was currently in the process of cordoning off all access to the city by sea. This "mine blockade" would serve as a final line of defense that could ensnare and destroy the beast in the event that this so-called "giant monster" actually showed up.

Unfortunately, these plans were interrupted prior to completion when the captain of said vessel emerged from the radio room, his face pale, to make an announcement.

"We just got a report from *Ikuno*!" he shouted. "The monster's headed straight for Tokyo Bay as we speak!"

"Wait, so it actually exists?" said one of the men on board.

"Only a matter of time before it gets here, then," said another.

Yet another man, who'd been monitoring the mine laying process with a pair of binoculars, suddenly gasped.

"What is it?" said the captain.

"No way," said the man. "I don't believe it…"

The captain pulled out his own pair of binoculars and had a look. Through the lenses he could see a long line of buoys their mines were hanging from—alongside a giant, jagged set of dorsal fins so large, they almost defied comprehension.

"Is that thing really alive?" said the man.

It was a fair question, given that whatever it was looked more like a moving island than a living organism. But the captain couldn't even formulate an answer. Instead, he gripped his transmitter and made a frantic call to HQ.

"This is the Final Defense Line!" he shouted. "We have a visual on the target near Zone 4; proceeding with detonation to prevent its forward advance into Tokyo Bay!"

"Almost there!" said the other man with binoculars. "Just a little more!"

Only seconds later, the giant dorsal fins plunged straight into the mine blockade.

"Now!" shouted the captain. "Detonate!"

One by one, the mines in Zone 4 of the defense line exploded in quick succession.

"Did we do it?" asked the captain as they waited for the upheaval of spray to fall.

"No…" the other man said in disbelief. "That didn't even slow it down!"

The dorsal fins cut through the water onward into the bay, as if nothing had even happened. The captain clutched his transmitter and made another desperate report:

"The blockade has been breached! I repeat, the blockade has been breached! The beast is headed straight for Shinagawa! It's unlike anything we've ever seen! Send out a preliminary civilian alert immediately!"

Meanwhile, at the Shikishima household, Koichi was at home playing with Akiko since Noriko was away at work and he happened to have the day off.

Akiko was proudly showing off the new beanbag routine she'd recently mastered, and just as the first few notes of the theme song

to the recent hit radio drama *The Ringing of Bell Hill* began playing on the radio, an ear-piercing siren rang out through the neighborhood.

The sound alone brought forth traumatic memories for many of his fellow countrymen, who immediately rushed out into the streets wondering what was going on. Koichi, too, held Akiko close to his chest and listened; this was an air-raid alarm.

Were they really being bombed by another country again? But by whom?

Koichi considered various possibilities—but most of all, he feared that the war wasn't actually over yet. The radio quickly changed over to an emergency broadcast.

This is an emergency news flash. This is an emergency news flash. A giant sea creature has just made landfall after emerging from Tokyo Bay. A state of crisis has been declared. All citizens are asked to exercise extreme caution and take shelter if you can. The creature is currently advancing toward Ginza. Anyone in the vicinity should follow local police instructions and evacuate immediately. I repeat, a giant sea creature has just—

"A giant sea creature"—that was what the newscaster had said. And Koichi knew this could only mean one thing: Godzilla!

"How did it get here so fast?"

Then he remembered where Noriko was right now, and his legs nearly gave out from under him. Her new desk job was at a department store in Ginza.

"Akiko…" he said. "Can you walk yourself over to Sumiko-san's house?"

Immediately sensing that the situation was serious, Akiko looked at him and nodded without a word of complaint.

Meanwhile, on Harumi-dori Avenue in Ginza, civilians were flooding into the streets from their buildings, scrambling through the streets in an attempt to escape but unsure where to go. There were truck drivers panicking and crashing their vehicles into streetlight poles in the pandemonium. There were little girls with tears in their eyes, wailing for their mothers after falling and getting separated. There were people screaming in pain as everyone in their buildings tried to rush out all at once, pushing and shoving until they clogged every exit. Shouts of anger were interspersed with shrieks of terror, until suddenly, there came a low rumbling from deep beneath the earth, and for a moment, all of their voices fell silent.

Overhead, several electric train cars from the Tokyo tram network were sent flying through the sky like tin toys. Then came the stomp of an enormous leg like a massive tree, surely at least ten meters in diameter. Those who actually saw the beast cried out louder and more desperately than ever before as they ran for their lives from what could well be described as a walking mountain.

With its every hulking step, the air trembled, and the earth quaked. Slowly but surely, this mountain that should not be walking propelled itself forward down Harumi-dori Avenue toward the world-famous Nihon Gekijo Theater, scrapping automobiles by the dozen with each capricious swipe of its enormous tail. Those who'd only just managed to shove their way out onto the streets were now utterly unsure where to run, but their instincts compelled them to flee in the direction opposite Godzilla.

When the beast set its foot down atop the Sukiya Bridge, the whole structure collapsed beneath its weight, sending late evacuees who were still racing across the bridge flying through the air, then tumbling into either the concrete remnants thereof or the Sotobori moat that ran beneath. With every successive step the creature took, the bridge crumbled even further, crushing the pedestrians underneath and snuffing their lives out in an instant.

At the same time, a train on the Yamanote line had just departed Tokyo Station toward Yurakucho, oblivious to the carnage

that was currently unfolding in Ginza. Then suddenly the train's operators spotted a detached tram car hurtling through the air toward them. Screaming, the driver reflexively slammed on the brakes just as the tram car landed vertically in the middle of the tracks dead ahead. This braking was so abrupt that it sent the standing passengers to nearly lose their balance and fall over.

"What the hell was *that* about?" said one of them.

"Did we hit something?" said another.

The disgruntled passengers turned their angry gazes toward the driver's compartment—but just then, there was a low booming sound, and the whole car shook.

"An earthquake?" Noriko wondered aloud.

She turned in her seat on the train to look out the window toward the Nihon Gekijo, where she saw something truly unbelievable: a titanic creature, no doubt more than fifty meters tall, was now stomping its way through the city streets in their direction.

When the other passengers saw what she had, they couldn't comprehend what they were looking at; they simply stared, mouths agape, as their train car shook with the creature's every step. All the way down Harumi-dori Avenue, people were fleeing en masse from their buildings. It was only then that Noriko realized what the strange, distant clamor she'd been hearing ever since their train left the station had truly been.

The sound of people screaming in desperation as they ran for their lives.

Suddenly, Noriko remembered what Koichi had told her a few days prior.

"Is that…Godzilla?" she whispered to herself.

Then, as if in answer to her question, the creature leaned forward and let out a deep, resonant roar, the mere reverberations of which were enough to shatter the train's glass windowpanes. Instinctively, the passengers shrieked and wailed as they finally

realized the true gravity of their predicament, then started rushing toward the train compartment's exit doors. Noriko was helpless to do anything as the flood of people hurried past her, trapping her in her seat.

Godzilla grew closer, and before long, the only thing she could see out the window were its two massive feet. Then all of a sudden, a shrill, metallic crunching noise rang out through the entire train, and the whole compartment turned on its side. As the floor sloped diagonally, all of the passengers who had just regained their footing minutes before tumbled and slipped toward one end of the coach.

Godzilla had lifted the whole train up with its mighty jaws.

Through the window, Noriko could see the city streets growing farther away as the train car was lifted several dozen meters into the sky. The door that connected to the adjacent compartment was now directly beneath her. She could only cling to her seat and watch as the other passengers fell right past her, groaning and crying out in pain as they piled on top of one another in one giant heap of bodies.

She had to avert her eyes from the ghastly scene and focus all her mental energy on thinking of some sort of way out of this dire situation. But considering she was currently suspended in midair, dangling in a train car that was directly connected to the one Godzilla was still clenching between its jaws, escape was impossible.

Just then, there was a loud creaking sound, and the entire bottom half of Noriko's train car fell away, unable to bear the weight of the other train cars pulling down on it. Once again, she could only watch helplessly in horror as it and the other passengers tumbled down onto the streets below, where they splattered like bugs against the concrete.

Only a moment later, the side panel of the seat to which Noriko had been clinging came loose as well, and she nearly fell to her own death—but luckily managed to grab hold of one of the train's stanchion poles, which was now almost fully horizontal. This left her hanging directly over the gaping hole left by the compartment's

other half when it fell away, gripping the pole for dear life with both hands. But this was only delaying the inevitable; she knew her arms couldn't support her body weight for long.

Meanwhile, Godzilla turned hard on its heel and started walking in the opposite direction. Somehow, Noriko managed to maintain her grip through the centripetal force of this rotation, and the subsequent impact of its first ground-quaking step—but just barely. She could feel her palms sweat, and her hands beginning to slip; she knew it was only a matter of time now before she fell onto the buildings below.

But as the creature took another step, she looked down at her fate—and saw the still waters of the Sotobori moat directly beneath her. After a moment's hesitation, she released her grip and closed her eyes as she dove feet-first into the water from several dozen meters above. At almost the exact same moment, Godzilla opened its jaws and released the train—which then fell right behind Noriko into the moat. The mangled, broken cars made a massive splash as they hit the water, causing a huge wave that momentarily swallowed up Noriko as she desperately swam away, gasping for breath.

Just across the street from the Nihon Gekijo and the headquarters of the *Asahi Shimbun*, a small group of radio reporters and cameramen had gathered on the rooftop of the Mazda Building, hoping to capture this larger-than-life threat on tape.

One of them, a reporter by the name of Tokuda, had been so stricken by shock and disbelief upon emerging from the stairwell and seeing the full scale of the beast that he nearly turned tail and ran, but his sense of journalistic duty helped him suppress the urge and step in front of the camera to deliver the truth to the citizenry.

"It's a sight that beggars belief, folks! This gigantic monster, the likes of which we've never seen, is now tearing through the streets of Ginza! To my eye, it looks to be at least fifty meters tall! All of these buildings, many of which were only just reconstructed,

are now crumbling once more beneath its wanton rampage! The whole area is now covered in flames, smoke, and debris all over again! You'd be forgiven for thinking we were looking at a scene taken straight from the Great Tokyo Air Raid!"

Godzilla hurled itself into the Nihon Gekijo building, ripping out entire floors' worth of structural components as it thrashed its arms from one side to the other. Journalists from the *Asahi Shimbun* HQ building next door were now rushing out onto the rooftop to bear witness to this unprecedented tragedy with their own eyes.

Then, as soon as it was finished demolishing the beloved theater, Godzilla spun its whole body around, swinging its massive tail like a whip, reducing everything in its radius to dust in one swift, devastating motion. This included the newspaper building as well, which crumbled into a heap of rubble along with the journalists on its rooftop.

"I can't believe what I'm seeing, folks!" said Tokuda. "With a single swipe of its tail, the monster just leveled the *Asahi Shimbun* building!"

Having demolished that entire side of the street, Godzilla now turned and started making its way toward the K. Hattori watch and jewelry shop. Seeing that the beast was now moving in their general direction, the reporters atop the Mazda Building started shaking in their boots. The only thing keeping them here was their journalistic drive to leave a record of this disaster for future generations.

"Looks like we might be in trouble here, folks…" said Tokuda, practically wringing the words from his throat as he held back the urge to run.

But Godzilla did not attack the Mazda Building. It simply walked right past.

Seeing this gargantuan creature cross right through his line of sight, the reporter couldn't help but marvel at the sheer majesty of the beast for a moment. Gazing up at it from below, the silhouette of

its giant head in profile against the setting May sun looked almost divine.

Just then, Godzilla's foot grazed the corner of the first floor of the Mazda building, taking out a critical piece of the building's structural integrity on which all of the upper floors relied. With nothing left to support them, the building soon began to collapse under its own weight, causing the rooftop to slant sharply. The reporters all fell to their knees and started sliding down the crumbling surface, before eventually falling diagonally to their doom along with the entire building. Tokuda let out a scream in the face of imminent death—the last thing his tape recorder captured, aside from the low boom of the building's upper half slamming against the street.

Having artlessly dismantled the Mazda Building, Godzilla carried on down Harumi-dori Avenue toward the K. Hattori watch and jewelry shop.

But somewhere amid the chaos that lay between it and its destination, Noriko stumbled alone through the crowd of fleeing civilians like a wandering ghost.

She was all out of energy. The turbulence and fall from the broken train car had exhausted nearly all of her stamina before she even hit the water—and then it was another desperate swim to the bank of the Sotobori moat before she could finally drag herself back onto dry land. From there, she somehow managed to push herself back to her feet and run as fast as her wobbling legs would take her through the rubble that remained of the Nihon Gekijo, her soaking wet clothes clinging tightly to her skin. But she couldn't stop running—all around her, people were still being hit by falling debris from the theater and crushed to death. So she ran and she ran until at last she'd used up the very last ounce of her remaining energy, and now she could only stumble ploddingly away from Godzilla as it stomped its way toward her, step by lumbering step.

She knew the monster was right behind her. But she could hardly bring herself to keep moving. She wanted to be freed from

this nightmare right now. Perhaps being crushed beneath the beast's massive foot would be a welcome relief, she found herself thinking—just as a fleeing man bumped into her and she fell to the ground.

"Out of the way!" the man barked, but Noriko paid him no mind.

She didn't have the strength left to stand back up at this point.

Surrounded by all of this chaos, she couldn't help but be reminded of that horrible night she lost her family in the firebombing. In her current state, she was too dazed and weak to even tell whether it was Godzilla or an air raid these people were fleeing from.

If I just lie here on the ground like this, I'll soon be at peace.

But just as she came to terms with her fate, her addled mind was jolted from its delusional state by the sudden feeling of someone pulling her up by the arm.

"I won't let you die!" shouted a voice.

She couldn't believe her eyes.

It was Koichi. He'd cut backward through the crowd to come and rescue her.

Stumbling to her feet as Koichi practically dragged her along with him, Noriko dug deep and urged her aching muscles onward despite her stamina being long since depleted. But somehow, Koichi had given her a second wind, so she ran. And ran. And ran.

Suddenly, Godzilla came to a stop and whirled its massive tail around again, mowing down all of the signboards and street vendor stalls that lined the avenue. The people who were running directly behind Koichi and Noriko were sent flying along with the rest of the debris, most of them getting crushed and maimed by the rubble before they even hit the ground. The two of them had just barely managed to avoid meeting the same fate—when all of a sudden, they heard the sound of explosions from high above.

Godzilla was being shelled by artillery fire.

The bombardment was coming from the direction of the National Diet Building, where a set of brand-new Type 4 medium tanks—which had been kept secretly in reserve but gone unused in the war due to the fighting never reaching the mainland—had just opened fire on the beast. But when an errant shell hit one of the nearby buildings instead of the beast, the whole area became clouded over with dust and smoke from the resulting debris. Still, the assault had stopped Godzilla dead in its tracks, so the fleeing civilians turned and waited anxiously for the dust to settle to see if the beast had been felled.

Surely, no living creature could withstand so many direct hits from a tank gun.

Or at least, that was what everyone wanted to believe.

Everyone but Koichi, who'd seen what happened to *Takao*.

He knew the beast would never succumb to a mere tank gun.

And when at last the smoke cleared, sure enough, Godzilla was still standing tall. The beast's eyes were trained on the National Diet Building, its rage palpable in its eyes. Koichi could almost feel the remaining hope of the people around him being snuffed out.

Then, suddenly, something very peculiar began to occur.

The dorsal fin at the tip of the Godzilla's tail suddenly jutted outward and slowly began to glow with a pale-blue light. Then the next dorsal fin did the same, and the next, continuing all the way up the creature's spine until its entire back was lit up with these extended, glowing dorsal fins. The people could only stand there, stock-still, watching in awe and horror as though they were looking at some sort of wrathful god.

"No… It's just like last time…" Koichi murmured.

Wasn't this the exact same bluish light he'd seen glowing up from the bottom of the ocean before *Takao* was vaporized by that massive ray of heat? If so, then Koichi knew exactly what was about to happen next…

As Godzilla reared its head back, Koichi could see fumes illuminated by that same bluish light beginning to steam from its open mouth. Then, all at once, the extended dorsal fins jammed themselves back into the creature's spine, as if to apply some sort of triggering pressure, like the implosion mechanism of an atomic bomb—and a ray of blinding, bluish-white light shot forth from Godzilla's mouth and screamed through the air in the direction of the National Diet Building.

For a split second, the world went silent.

The extreme high temperatures of Godzilla's heat ray vaporized the entire building in an instant, skipping over the liquefaction process entirely. The edifice turned from a solid directly to gas. This former solid mass swelled to an enormous volume, resulting in a form of steam-blast eruption beyond all human knowledge or comprehension, creating a massive fireball that expanded with supersonic velocity, utterly engulfing everything in its path.

The resultant blast tore the surrounding buildings to shreds like papercraft, reducing everything in a six-kilometer radius to dust. Seeing the oncoming danger as the massive cloud of debris rushed toward where the two of them were standing, Noriko shoved Koichi as hard as she could into a narrow side alleyway behind the K. Hattori building—just moments before the giant shockwave swept her away along with all of the other rubble and debris, leaving nothing in its wake.

The rapid expulsion of air created a vacuum at the explosion's hypocenter, resulting in a subsequent backrush of air that sucked all of the shattered building fragments and debris back toward ground zero like a violent wind. Koichi curled up in the small alleyway and braced himself against the storm, praying this raging tempest would pass him by—until, at last, the air was calm once more.

After staggering to his feet, he emerged from the narrow alleyway and stumbled out into a world he no longer recognized. He couldn't see a single other breathing body anywhere around him. He turned his head down the street toward Miharabashi, looking for any

sign of Noriko. But all he could see was the fallout from the blast that had taken her—layers of smoking rubble on top of rubble.

"Noriko… Noriko!" he cried out, his voice trembling.

But he knew there would be no answer.

Looking back over his shoulder, he could see Godzilla still towering high above the wreckage, standing in place as its body healed the damage it had inevitably sustained simply by firing such a ray of devastation. Behind the beast, a giant mushroom cloud was billowing up into the sky where the National Diet Building had once been.

Then, slowly, the beast began sauntering its way toward Shinagawa—just as an ominous black rain began to fall. As the tar-like droplets pelted his face, Koichi let out a screaming, curse-like howl at the top of his lungs as Godzilla walked away, utterly indifferent.

"Estimates of the damage dealt by the gigantic creature that made landfall yesterday now place the number of casualties at nearly thirty thousand dead or wounded, with no less than twenty thousand homes and buildings completely or partially destroyed. Rescue workers in the immediate wake of the disaster have also detected dangerously high levels of radiation along the path of the rampage, which will no doubt hamper recovery efforts."

Beneath a sky so bright and blue it almost made the disaster from the day before seem like nothing more than a bad dream, Tokyo police were now stationed around a circular exclusion zone twelve kilometers in diameter that had been cordoned off around Ginza. It was all they could do to hold back the crowds of people—which had to number in the tens of thousands total—who had parents or children in the area, or husbands, wives, or lovers that had never come home the night before. All of them were desperate for answers. Desperate to know if their loved ones were safe.

"Based on the fact that the creature appears to be radioactive, experts now believe that it's highly likely the beast was mutated somehow by the series of nuclear weapons tests conducted last year at Bikini Atoll, which may also explain how it grew to such an enormous size. Researchers are eager to analyze what appear to be fragments of the creature's carapace-like hide that have been discovered among the wreckage, but which have yet to be salvaged due to the high levels of radiation they give off."

Just beyond the police line, a small group of investigators in protective clothing were measuring said levels of radiation in the nearby rubble—the numbers on their Geiger counters almost too harrowing to be believed.

It was a night of soft rains over the Shikishima household.

After Noriko's colleagues from her department store job had all paid their respects and left, the only ones who remained after the wake were Sumiko, Akiko, *Shinsei Maru*'s crew, and a despondent Koichi who looked as if his soul had been gouged out of his body. On the altar stood the photo of a smiling Noriko that Noda had taken at the housewarming party, now serving as a memorial portrait of the deceased.

"What a damn tragedy," said Akitsu. "Gone way too soon."

Koichi didn't even acknowledge these condolences. He just kept gazing into thin air, clutching his bottle tightly.

"So what's gonna happen to Akiko now?" said the captain, trying again.

When Koichi still refused to speak, Sumiko stepped in to answer for him.

"When times are tough, we all have to come together and help each other out," she said. "You don't mind coming to play at Aunt Sumiko's house while your daddy's away at work, do you, Akiko-chan?"

"Where's Mommy?" asked Akiko.

Sumiko leaned down and held the girl close, stroking her hair. "Don't worry, Akiko-chan," she said. "Your mom just had to go away for work for a little while. But I'll be here with you in the meantime, okay?"

"But I want Mommy!" said Akiko. "I don't want anybody else!"

As the child started bawling, Koichi lifted his leaden body up off the floor and dragged himself over to the next room, as if trying to escape the sound of his own responsibility. Just then, his knee bumped the corner of the wooden box on which the bundle of photographs had been laying, scattering them across the floor. He looked down at the faces of the soldiers and their family members, all of them staring right back at him.

"So you won't let me off that easy after all. Is that it?" he said aloud.

Suddenly, Koichi began to laugh—cackling almost, at first. But then slowly, his laughter took on a more pitiful tone and sounded more like a whimpering wail.

"This is all my fault…" he murmured. "I never should have let myself believe this could be more than just a dream…"

Just then, Noda came in from the other room. "As it happens, Shiki-san…" he said, leaning in to whisper in the other man's ear. "There's currently a top-secret operation under development in the hopes of eliminating Godzilla once and for all. Mind you, the whole thing's being spearheaded by private citizens with little to no government involvement, and there's no guarantee it'll even work, but…would you be interested in taking part?"

Koichi's eyes lit up.

SPECIAL DISASTER COUNTERMEASURE SYMPOSIUM read the signboard at the entrance to the venue as Koichi filed into the

auditorium and took his seat. Captain Akitsu, Noda, and Mizushima were there as well, the latter still wearing a sling around his broken arm. He tried calling out to Koichi when he saw him enter but quickly lowered his good arm mid-wave upon seeing the grim expression on the other man's face. The captain, meanwhile, was looking around the assembly hall, sizing up the other attendees.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said. "Looks like everyone here but us is—"

"Yes, they're all ex-naval officers," said Noda, interrupting.

"Yeah, exactly. Good eye, Doc. Surprised you can tell."

"Whoa. No kidding?" said Mizushima, glancing excitedly around the room.

Just then, a hushed stir ran through the audience as a group of four ex-Navy captains entered the room, led by Captain Hotta of the destroyer *Yukikaze*—followed by the captains of *Hibiki*, *Yukaze*, and *Keyaki* in turn. Captain Hotta signaled the men, who'd reflexively risen from their chairs, to sit down, then began to speak.

"Good afternoon, everyone," he started. "My name is Hotta, and I was once the captain of *Yukikaze*. As you're all aware, our great city of Tokyo recently suffered a cataclysmic attack by an enormous creature of unidentified origin and is now in a state of crisis, with no telling when the monster might return for another rampage. And yet, our country no longer has its own defense force capable of protecting its citizens, and any military action taken by Allied occupation forces will inevitably run the risk of escalating tensions with the Soviets, and is thus considered completely off the table. In other words, we have no choice but to stand and face this threat ourselves as a private citizens' militia."

The notion sent the audience astir with doubtful murmurs.

"That is why you've all been gathered here today," Captain Hotta continued. "After negotiating with the government, the most assistance we were able to secure was the provision of four

decommissioned destroyers, which had previously been repurposed for use as repatriation vessels. But that is all we can expect."

Another commotion ran through the auditorium.

One of the audience members raised his voice to interject. "You're really asking us to climb back aboard warships after all this time?" he said.

"I saw that thing over in Ginza," said another. "We have no chance of defeating it."

"There's not even proper weaponry left on those ships, is there?" asked a third.

The audience's demeanor had devolved into outright heckling.

"Yeah, what do you even expect us to do?" shouted a voice.

"How 'bout a proper explanation already, huh?" yelled another.

As Hotta stood there flustered, suddenly Noda stepped onto the stage behind his back with microphone in hand.

"Er, yes, well…" he said. "I'd be happy to explain more about the plan itself, if you'll all just simmer down for a moment."

The other members of *Shinsei Maru*'s crew could hardly contain their shock at seeing Noda take the podium.

"Wait… *Noda-san*?" said Mizushima.

"First, allow me to introduce myself," said Noda. "My name is Kenji Noda, and I'm an ex-naval technician. It was I who originally drafted the plan for the operation being proposed here today. Now, the first thing to note here is that Godzilla—the name by which the creature is known in Odo Island folklore and that I'll be using to refer to the monster going forward—seems to be all but impervious to conventional firearms. I was there when it sank *Takao* and witnessed firsthand as it took several direct hits from the ship's main battery, then completely regenerated a few moments later."

This drew forth an even greater commotion from the audience.

"Wait, that thing sank *Takao*?" said one attendee.

"How the hell are *we* supposed to do anything to it, then?" said another.

Murmurs spread throughout the auditorium like wildfire. Everyone seemed to have considered Noda's account of the ship's fate as merely a rumor up until now. But it was no rumor; it was indeed Godzilla that sank *Takao*.

"Quiet, please," said Noda. "Yes, I know it seems quite daunting. But that is precisely why I'm proposing a radically different approach."

Noda then turned to face a large water tank that a man in a white lab coat had just brought in and placed next to him near the podium. "First, allow me to give you a simple demonstration," he said. "Now, this tank is filled with salt water with the exact same density as seawater. And as you can see here, we have a little wooden figure meant to represent Godzilla—which we've made just heavy enough that it's only barely able to remain afloat."

Noda placed the wooden block—carved into the shape of Godzilla, attached to a platform connected to several tubes—into the tank. Although it was clearly bottom heavy, the figure's upper half still floated above the surface of the water like Noda had said.

"But let's see what happens," he went on, "if we then pipe some Freon gas into the tank, enveloping the wooden block in bubbles…"

One of the audience members snorted derisively at this. "Psh," he said. "Like a few bubbles are going to make a difference."

"You wouldn't think so, right? But you might be surprised," said Noda.

Noda twisted the spigot on the compressed gas cylinder attached to the tubes feeding into the tank, and several streams of tiny Freon gas bubbles quickly enveloped the wooden Godzilla figure—which then suddenly began to sink, much to the audience's disbelief.

“You see,” Noda explained, “the wooden block can only float because it’s slightly less dense than the seawater around it. But by enveloping in a pocket of gas, we create a layer of separation between the two, thereby leaving nothing to keep the block afloat. This is the basic principle behind the operation I’m suggesting: to sink Godzilla to the bottom of the ocean through the use of a similar mechanism.”

Akitsu leaned over to whisper in Mizushima’s ear.

“So hey, uh…” he said. “Since when has Doc been such a big shot?”

Noda then instructed his assistant to kill the lights and turn on the slide projector. Once the room was dark, the screen behind him lit up with a black and white contour line map of Sagami Bay.

“As you’re all no doubt aware,” he said, “the Sagami Trough is by far the deepest stretch of ocean within our immediate vicinity, with a maximum depth of over 2,500 meters. We propose to strap several massive tanks of Freon gas to Godzilla’s body, then letting them foam at the surface of the water to create a ‘bubble membrane’ around the submerged part of its body—thereby sending it plummeting to the bottom of Sagami Bay. The rapid change in pressure in such a short span of time should kill the beast instantly.”

Noda then turned away from the screen to face the audience again. With the map of Sagami Bay superimposed across his face as he stared against the projector, his usually amicable face now bore an eerie expression that no one in the audience—not even his crewmates—had ever seen from the man before.

“That is the plan: to defeat Godzilla by harnessing the power of the sea,” he said. “Welcome to Operation Wadatsumi.”

Out in the audience, Akitsu still had his doubts. He remembered the corpses of all the deep-sea fish, killed by the change in water pressure simply because they swam to the surface too quickly in an attempt to outrun Godzilla. Did this not imply that the beast itself was unaffected by water pressure altogether?

"Didn't it come *from* the bottom of the sea, though?" he said, speaking up. "Wouldn't that mean it can withstand any amount of pressure down there?"

"It's not about the amount of pressure, per se," Noda quickly responded. "It's about the *change* in pressure. By my calculations, using the Freon gas method, after just thirty-five seconds of sinking, every square meter of its body will be under 250 atmospheres of pressure. Such a dramatic change in pressure is not something that any organism could possibly withstand, even if it can live and thrive on the ocean floor."

"So then…" said Koichi, rising from his chair, "you're sure that this will actually kill Godzilla, beyond a shadow of a doubt?"

Noda hesitated a moment. "Well, in fairness…there's still much we don't know about the beast, so it's hard to say," he conceded. "All we can do is postulate based on the laws of physics and build our strategy around that."

The crowd stirred once more at his obvious lack of confidence.

"But I do genuinely believe this is our best bet!" Noda added in a fluster. "Especially since we now know that it's impervious to firepower…"

"Can we kill it or not?" asked Koichi, still adamant.

Noda's scientific integrity compelled him to answer honestly.

"…I can't say for certain," he confessed.

Upon hearing this, Koichi kicked his chair in frustration and started stomping out of the venue.

"But there's a good chance!" Noda called after him. "Please, Shiki-san…just hear me out at least."

Koichi stopped dead in his tracks, standing there motionless in the aisle a moment before begrudgingly retaking his seat.

"Now let me explain the actual logistics," said Noda, indicating to his assistant to advance to the next slide. The projector screen

now showed a diagram featuring two boats towing a long cable that ran between them with gas cylinders placed intermittently along its length. "As you can see here, we will be using two of our destroyers to first encircle Godzilla and wrap a large cable around it. Attached to that cable will be several large cylinders filled with Freon gas, which we will release all at once after creating a massive 'bubble' beneath the beast—using leftover 46cm explosive shells originally meant for *Yamato*. The initial acceleration due to gravity as Godzilla falls into this newly created air pocket, combined with the sudden surge of gas bubbles enveloping its entire body, will cause the creature to go into an effective state of free fall—losing all buoyancy and plunging 2,500 meters to the bottom of the ocean in a matter of seconds."

"And what if that still doesn't kill it?" Koichi demanded.

"Not to worry—there *is* a backup plan. If you'd all be so kind as to join me over by the windows…"

The audience members got up and followed Noda over to the windows. Down in the courtyard below were a group of workmen standing near a large box-shaped mechanism of some sort. When Noda gave the men the signal, they flipped a switch—and a gigantic, yellow raft-shaped balloon burst forth from the box-shaped mechanism with an explosive *boom*. Another man in workwear standing next to Noda proceeded to explain.

"I'm Itagaki, from the Toyo Balloon Company," he began. "What you just saw was an inflatable flotation device based on those that were previously used on naval warships… It is, in essence, a giant life raft, which inflates almost instantaneously via the release of compressed carbon dioxide. And it is our plan to use a great number of these to bring Godzilla rushing back to the surface of the water as soon as it hits the ocean floor."

"So even if the immense increase in pressure doesn't kill it," Noda said, taking over, "we find it extremely unlikely that the creature will be able to endure the intensity of such rapid intense decompression immediately thereafter. Again, there's no guarantee it

will work… But all we can do is try and exhaust every last option available to us."

The audience members stirred restlessly on their feet as if - unable to decide how they felt about this whole proposition. They'd be no doubt subjecting themselves to potentially fatal danger by signing on to this operation. But it was also true that they were among the remaining few who possessed the skills and experience required to pull it off. And perhaps more conflicting than anything: If they agreed to this plan, it would mean they could be Navy men again, if only for one last mission.

"I can't tell you how much it pains me to ask you all to risk your lives at sea again, having just survived such a terrible war," said Captain Hotta. "But I'm afraid that is the situation we now find ourselves in. We cannot rely on help from the Japanese government or the U.S. military. The future of our great nation is in our hands, and our hands alone."

Just then, one of the men from the audience stepped forward.

"I'm sorry… I can't do it," he said with a pained expression, as if it had been a struggle to wring the words from his throat. "I have a family to look after. And I'm not the only one either. The same could be said for most of us here."

Seeing this as their chance, several other men spoke up to say their piece.

"Why does it have to be us putting our lives on the line?" said one.

"We already got the short end of the stick during the war," said another.

"Everyone, please!" said Captain Hotta, an anguished look on his face. "Don't misunderstand. This is not an order by any means. If for whatever reason you do not wish to take part, you are free to return to your homes. We have no authority to stop you."

Only now that they'd been given express permission to leave did the men freeze in place, as an awkward, silent tension fell over the auditorium. Then at last, a single man stepped forward and, after giving a quick bow, hurried out of the venue with his head down in shame. Then another man followed after him, and another, until quite a few of the attendees had filed out of the building. For those who yet remained, the pressure was now unbearable—until all of a sudden, one man raised his hand to ask a very simple question:

"Just to clarify— there's at least a *small* chance we might survive this, right?"

"Why, of course there is!" Noda answered hastily. "A good chance even!"

"Well, hey. That's better odds than we had during the war at least."

This got a fair chuckle from the men who still remained in the auditorium.

"Well, I guess *someone's* gotta do it," said one of the other men, scratching his head sheepishly. "Might as well be the folks who actually know how to run a ship, right?"

"Whaddya say, fellas?" said another man. "Are we doing this or what?"

All of the men in attendance let out a cheer, and the venue regained its previous air of camaraderie. It seemed everyone had found their resolve to stand and fight once more.

"My friends," said Captain Hotta, lowering his head. "Thank you."

The audience members nodded right back at him, one and all.

At a cheap, rundown little outdoor izakaya in a corner of the black market, the men of *Shinsei Maru* sat huddled around a small table, enjoying a round of drinks. For once, even the black market

felt like a ghost town, due in large part to the recent Godzilla attack and related evacuations.

"Have to say, I'm pretty impressed, Doc," said Akitsu, his face already bright red from intoxication. "Can't believe you concocted that whole crazy plan all by yourself."

"Well, it's only because I've had a direct encounter with the beast. It seems that's the main reason my proposal won out over the other submissions," Noda explained.

"Ah. Guessing that's why the three of us got invited too, then," said Mizushima as he filled Noda's sake cup. The younger man was obviously quite pleased to have been sitting in the esteemed company of so many ex-naval officers.

"So, what's your theory, Doc?" said the captain. "You think it's only a matter of time before that thing comes back for another go-around or what?"

"I think it's safe to say that after its recent rampage, Godzilla probably sees Tokyo as part of its territory now," said Noda. "Worst case, I wouldn't even be surprised if it tried to come back ashore within a week or so."

"Damn… That fast?"

"But you said you've got that big network of radiation detector buoys set up now, right?" said Mizushima.

"Well, yes," said Noda. "We can't rely on eyewitness reports alone, after all. We need to be able to monitor its movements somehow."

"But even then, how can you be sure it'll come ashore from just the right angle to stumble into the little trap you've got set up?" asked the captain.

"That's going to be the tricky part, yes."

"Wait. You mean you don't even have a plan?"

"Who do you think I am? Of course I have a plan. You see, we have these great big underwater megaphones—which we used during the war to fool acoustic torpedoes—and we're going to use them to play back a recording of Godzilla's voice that was caught on tape during its last rampage."

"Its *own* voice? The hell is that gonna do?"

"Ideally, it should fool the creature into thinking there's another of its kind vying for its territory so that it comes running to defend it, thereby falling straight into our trap… Well, that's what we hope anyway."

"You *hope*? Are we just betting our country's future on hopes and dreams, then? I mean, that 'flotation device' or whatever that your balloon buddies whipped up? I don't think there's a chance in hell that thing works as planned. It's a load of bunk, I tell ya."

"Well, what do *you* suggest we do, then?"

"Ooh, ooh! I know!" Mizushima cried excitedly, raising his hand. "We can use the destroyers to *pull* it back up from the bottom of the ocean!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Noda said, flatly rejecting the idea. "Godzilla weighs no less than twenty thousand tons. Two destroyers don't have nearly enough horsepower to lift that, let alone anywhere near as fast as our current method will."

"Well, all I'm trying to say, Doc," said Akitsu, "is that your little plan's got more holes than a block of Swiss cheese, I'm sorry to say."

"Again, if you have a better idea, I'm all ears."

"Noda-san," said Koichi—the first word he'd uttered all night. "Do you think you could get your hands on a fighter plane?"

"A *fighter* plane?" Akitsu seemed thrown off by this. "What the hell for?"

"In the event that Godzilla doesn't take the bait and makes landfall, I could always lure it back to Sagami Bay by angering it with machine gun fire."

"Pretty sure there aren't any Japanese fighter planes left, man," said Mizushima, the team's resident war buff. "Probably all got scrapped after we surrendered."

"Even if you *could* find one, let's not forget that the beast has a deadly heat ray," said Noda, similarly skeptical of the idea. "Trying to lure it via aircraft would be akin to gambling your life away."

"I'm willing to take that gamble," said Koichi. "Besides, a fighter plane is more maneuverable than a destroyer. The heat ray I might be able to dodge."

Akitsu, who was by now completely hammered, glared at Koichi as if trying to bore a hole straight through him. "You're not just sayin' this 'cause you wanna get shot down in a blaze of glory, are ya?" said the captain. "You must have some kinda death wish."

"You're drunk," said Koichi.

"Wait, I get it. You just wanna avenge Nori-chan, don't you?"

"You got a problem with that?"

"Oh, so *now* you give a damn about her…"

The captain grabbed Koichi by the collar and dragged him up out of his seat, knocking over the decanter on the table in the process. The sound of shattering pottery rang out through the bar.

"How come you didn't man up and make her your wife before, huh?" said Akitsu. "Don't tell me you couldn't tell how she felt about you."

Koichi ripped the other man's hand off his collar.

"Of course I did," he spat. "You don't think that's what I wanted?"

"Then why'd you let her get away?" the captain demanded.

For a moment, Koichi hesitated, unsure if he should be quite so open about his emotions. But these were his crewmates; he wanted them to know how he truly felt.

"Because, this war isn't over yet," he said. "Not for me."

Sensing for the first time the true depth of the darkness that still hung heavy over Koichi, the other members of *Shinsei Maru*'s crew fell silent.

A few days later, after Noda dropped him a line with good tidings, Koichi drove his motorbike out to an old abandoned aircraft hangar in the suburbs.

"So you actually found a plane?" he asked, lowering his kickstand.

"We did indeed," said Noda, as he waved Koichi into the hangar. "But it's a bit of a peculiar one, just to forewarn you."

At Noda's signal, a group of workers pulled back the massive cloths draped over a large object in the center of the hangar. What ultimately emerged from the resultant cloud of dust was indeed a fighter plane—though it was unlike any Koichi had seen before.

The man in charge began to explain. "What you see before you is the close-range fighter Shinden, which was in active development by the navy at the tail end of the war. Designed as a land-based interceptor meant to take out B-29 bombers via hit-and-run tactics, it was projected to hit top speeds of over four hundred knots, features a nose-mounted canard, and boasts heavy firepower with four 30mm guns. It's a unique and innovative machine on just about every count."

As Koichi marveled at this remarkable aircraft, Noda stepped in to offer some additional context. "Only a scant few prototypes were actually produced during the war," he explained. "Kept here in storage, waiting for a mainland battle that never came. But with all of the turmoil and confusion following the end of the war, they seem to have been forgotten about. Left here to rust in an abandoned hangar."

"But it can't fly in its current state, I'm guessing?" asked Koichi.

"Yes, that's the main issue. We're in need of an exceptional mechanic. Someone skilled enough to repair its entire fuselage. And I'm afraid such talent is in short supply."

There was only one person Koichi knew who might be capable of such a task—Tachibana. And upon having this realization, a plan began to hatch itself in his mind. Perhaps Tachibana was just the man they needed in order for him to pull this off. Who else but him would even think of taking on such a job?

"Actually," said Koichi, "I think I might know someone who fits the bill."

"Oh really now?" said Noda.

"He got my Zero fighter back in flying condition in no time at all, after I did a real number on it by making an emergency landing on a beat-up runway. He's the perfect guy for the job, I guarantee it!"

"Well, now. That's quite the handy acquaintance you have, it sounds like."

Noda readily agreed to Koichi's proposal—which meant all Koichi had to do now was find the man…somehow. Because if anyone could help him carry out the plan he'd just come up with, it would have to be Tachibana.

After the recent Godzilla attack in Ginza, the demobilization bureau had been forced to establish a temporary headquarters over in the Kanda neighborhood.

Hoping to track down Tachibana's whereabouts, Koichi had come to the bureau, where he'd had to make his case to one of the clerks in the family register department. After much persistence, the man—who was merely a supplementary worker brought in from Kansai to help during the state of emergency—ultimately agreed to have a look.

"Let's see here," said the man. "Mr. Sosaku Tachibana, correct? A maintenance worker stationed at the Odo Island garrison? Yes, I'm afraid we don't have any current address on record for the man, sorry to say."

"Damn," said Koichi. "No leads at all, then?"

"I could certainly keep looking, but it would take quite a while, you understand. We're downright swamped with search requests at the moment, and we only handle them in the order we receive them. Could be weeks, maybe months before we get back to you."

"But I need to get in contact with him as soon as possible! It's urgent!"

"Oh, I'm sure it is. But so are all the other requests I'm looking into at the moment. Everyone and their mother has been coming in here throwing the word 'urgent' around lately, believe you me."

Koichi prostrated himself before the man, practically slamming his forehead against the counter. He had to track down Tachibana within the next few days—not weeks or months. Seeing this desperate behavior, all of the other clerks working at the counter and visitors passing behind him stopped what they were doing and turned to look at Koichi.

He knew Godzilla would be returning soon. He could feel it in his bones.

There was no time for modesty. "Please! It's a national emergency!" he cried.

"Sir, I sympathize, I really do…" the clerk responded in a hushed voice. "But I can't drop everything to try to move mountains for you. I'm sorry."

It seemed no amount of begging and pleading would get him anywhere, given that there was apparently no readily accessible information on file.

"Wait… In that case!" said Koichi, changing tack. "Can you at least tell me what unit he was assigned to prior to being stationed

on Odo Island?”

After receiving the addresses of several ex-soldiers who’d previously served with Tachibana, Koichi quickly set about sending letters to each and every one of them.

In these letters, he wrote the following:

Dear Sir—I am a man who spent the final days of the war on Odo Island alongside one Sosaku Tachibana. And I am writing to you and your fellow comrades today to inform you that the tragedy that wiped out the Odo Island garrison was not due to a sudden and unprovoked attack by the Allied forces, as has been publicly reported.

In truth, it was Tachibana himself who took aim and fired at a passing American ship in anger, despite the futility of such a gesture. When the American ship then naturally returned fire, all of the young men of the Odo Island maintenance team were killed in the retaliatory bombardment. It was also during this bombardment that Tachibana fled from his post, abandoning his duties to save himself by escaping into the nearby hills. As the only other survivor of the Odo Island tragedy, I, Koichi Shikishima, have taken it upon myself to inform all of you of the truth behind the disaster. I feel it is my duty to the deceased to let the world know the truth and ensure that your former comrade’s disgraceful crimes do not go unpunished.

Koichi set down his pen, then sealed and stamped yet another envelope before placing it on the stack of over a dozen identical letters he’d already written.

But even still, the search for Tachibana remained fruitless. Recognizing what little time they had left, Noda invited Koichi out to

the cheap, rundown bar they often frequented in an attempt to persuade him.

"We're doing everything we can on our end as well," he said, "but he's proving to be an awfully difficult man to find. There are other skilled mechanics out there, Shiki-san; let's just cut our losses and try to find someone else."

"Just give me a little more time," said Koichi. "Please."

"Why are you dead set on this one particular person? Godzilla could return any day now, and we need to prepare ourselves for that as soon as possible."

"I realize that. But it has to be him. And I'm sure my message will reach him soon."

Noda was flummoxed. He couldn't begin to fathom why Koichi was being so adamant about finding Tachibana, but he didn't want to quench the fires of determination that were burning in the other man's eyes. Losing Noriko and falling into a depressive spiral had left him little more than the empty husk of a man. To Noda, it seemed as though this vendetta against Godzilla was the only thing keeping Koichi alive at this point. They could afford to wait another day or two, Noda supposed—but no more time than that.

On the way home from the bar that night, just a stone's throw away from his house, Koichi was suddenly accosted by a voice calling out his name. But when he turned around to see who it was, he felt a sharp pain near the bottom of his scalp. As his vision swam, he realized he'd just been clubbed over the head with something.

Koichi shot awake in a panic as he felt a bucketful of water splash against his face. His hands were tied behind his back with rope, and he was lying on his back on the dirt floor in the mudroom of his home. When he lifted his gaze, he saw the very man he'd

been searching for staring down at him: Tachibana, trembling with rage.

As soon as Tachibana could see that Koichi had come to, he threw a handful of letters and envelopes in the bound man's face.

"Is this some kind of joke?" he demanded. "You sending out letters full of goddamned lies to all my old comrades?"

Koichi's message had reached its intended recipient.

"Tachibana-san…" he said. "Is that really you?"

But his eager expression only served to amplify the other man's rage. Tachibana got down on his knees and socked Koichi in the face, then grabbed him by the collar.

"You and I both know damn well what happened on that island!" he barked. "And it sure as hell wasn't *my* fault! What the hell do you think you're trying to pull here, huh?"

"Sorry…" said Koichi. "It's the only way I could think of to draw you out of hiding."

"Why, you miserable little—"

"You saw the beast that rampaged through Ginza. You can't tell me that wasn't the same creature that attacked us at Odo Island. It was Godzilla, wasn't it?"

Tachibana had no answer to this. He just kept kicking Koichi in the ribs or alternatively punching him in the face. Before long, a large welt began to form over one of Koichi's eyes.

"I need you to repair a fighter plane for me…" he pleaded. "So that I can kill that monster once and for all!"

"You?" said Tachibana. "Don't make me laugh."

"No, I mean it! That's the whole reason I needed to find you! And why I sent out all those letters too! Please, you have to understand!"

This entreaty from Koichi clearly caught Tachibana off guard, as he hesitated for a moment—before asking, "And why the hell

should I lift a single finger to help *you* of all people, huh?" and giving Koichi one last kick, then stomping out of the room. Still bound, Koichi wriggled like a worm to crawl across the mudroom in pursuit. He couldn't let Tachibana get away. Not after how hard he'd worked to track him down.

"You have to help us!" Koichi begged. "It's something only you can do!"

"Yeah? And how's that?"

"We were able to blow a hole in Godzilla's mouth before by feeding it a naval mine. It was way more effective than even the main cannons of *Takao*—which means it's more vulnerable on the inside than the outside. Don't you see what I'm saying?"

At last, it seemed Tachibana caught Koichi's meaning. The fiery gleam in Koichi's eyes grew even brighter as he stared up at him like a man possessed.

"I'm going to fly a plane filled with explosives straight into the monster's mouth…" he said. "It's the only way we'll ever kill Godzilla!"

Tachibana turned and looked down at Koichi.

"You mean…a kamikaze attack?" he said.

Koichi could tell the other man was on the verge of breaking.

He just needed to deal one final blow to push him over the edge.

"This war of ours…" he said. "It's not over for you yet either…is it?"

The next day, Koichi sat with Noda in the hangar, waiting for Tachibana to arrive.

"That's quite the shiner, I have to say," said Noda, marveling at Koichi's swollen eyelid. "Hard to believe you got it from tripping and

falling."

"Pretty embarrassing, I know," said Koichi. "Guess I must have had a lot more to drink last night than I realized. I hardly even remember what happened."

"Well, I can hardly blame you for wanting to celebrate a little after finally managing to track down Tachibana-san."

Just then, a loud voice echoed through the hangar as Tachibana and a pair of assistants—both of whom had also been maintenance engineers—entered the building.

"So this is it, eh…?" he said. "A canard configuration. I'd heard rumors that they were working on one but never imagined they'd actually produce a full-on prototype."

Noda and Koichi both hurried over to greet them.

"Tachibana-san!" said Koichi. "Thank you so much for coming."

"So you're this Tachibana-san, then," said Noda.

"I am," said Tachibana. "And I take it this is our elusive short-range interceptor? The J7W *Shinden*… Hard to believe it's not just a fairy tale."

"Do you think you can make it airworthy, by any chance?" asked Noda.

Tachibana gave the plane a quick once-over with his assistants, then turned and gave Noda a confident nod. "We'll do everything in our power to get it flying," he said.

"Oh, thank you so much!" said Noda. "You're a real lifesaver, truly!"

As Noda joyously shook the other man's hand, Tachibana and Koichi exchanged a meaningful glance in acknowledgment of the top-secret plan they'd hatched together.

Meanwhile, at the Zushi naval port, work was already well underway to load the necessary materials for Operation Wadatsumi onto the participating vessels. Alongside *Yukikaze*—which had been hastily remodeled for the purposes of this mission—were crates upon crates filled with Freon gas cylinders, rapidly inflating flotation balloons, and 46cm shells, all arranged at the rear of the vessel in a neat, orderly fashion. Behind them was a large crane, which had been specially installed on the ship's stern, as well as a massive coil of thick, reinforced marine wire.

All around the harbor, people were hurrying to and fro, encouraging one another as they strove to complete all of the necessary preparation work within the next two days, since there was no telling when Godzilla might reappear.

Watching them go about their work, Noda seemed slightly less enthusiastic; if anything, his expression was even a bit grim. Noticing this even from afar, Akitsu—with Mizushima in tow—walked over and called out to the other man with concern.

"What's the matter, Doc?" he said. "Can't be havin' the mastermind behind the whole operation lookin' so glum right before it starts. That's just bad for morale."

"Well, not to be pessimistic about my own plan, but I'm starting to think we'll need a bona fide miracle in order to actually pull this off," said Noda.

Akitsu couldn't disagree with that. And yet, even so…

"That may be true," he said, "but we're sure as hell not gonna get a miracle by sitting on our asses and doing nothing either."

"A fair point," said Noda.

"Plus, just look at these guys' faces."

It was only after being told to do so that Noda realized it—all of the men running frantically around the harbor seemed awfully excited to be there. Elated, almost.

"They're not stupid," said Akitsu. "They know damn well they're putting their lives on the line here, even though the odds are against us. But see how their faces are beaming with pride in spite of all that? They're downright giddy to have the chance to serve their country again. To make a difference this time around."

"You think that's what it is…?" said Noda.

"I mean, aren't you and I in the same boat, Doc? This is an opportunity to prove we didn't live through a goddamn war for nothing. For all of us."

Standing in the background, Mizushima nodded firmly at this assertion as well.

On the surface of the ocean, a faint light flickered rapidly in the darkness as the Geiger counter embedded in one of the radiation detection buoys finally picked up the signal it was looking for. This information was quickly relayed to Noda, who called for an emergency meeting of all the main actors in Operation Wadatsumi. Once everyone had been assembled, Noda came rushing into the room with his assistants—with a large, rolled-up sea chart in his hands and a stern but composed look on his face.

"Just one hour ago," he began, rolling the sea chart out on the table, "we picked up a signal on one of our Geiger counters located just east of Hachijō-jima, at 33.1 degrees north, 140.46 degrees east. Since then, we've gotten two more signals from buoys due north of that one—here and here."

Using a pair of rulers, Noda drew a line between the three points, then continued tracing its trajectory to its natural conclusion: Tokyo.

"Gentlemen, Godzilla is on its way," he said. "At its current speed, it should arrive at the Sagami Trough around 1100 hours tomorrow morning, which means we'll need to set sail no later than 0800 ourselves in order to meet it there."

Then, Noda paused for a moment, his expression clouding over a bit. He knew the rapid-rising flotation device was running a bit behind schedule. He turned to the representatives from the Toyo Balloon Company, who glanced among themselves in turn.

"Do you think you'll have it ready in time?" he asked.

"You'll just have to take us on board with you, I fear," said the company president. "We could really use those extra three hours in transit to make some final adjustments. And for an operation like this, we don't want to settle for anything less than perfection."

"I appreciate that, but…it would mean putting your lives at risk as well."

The president of Toyo Balloon just smiled at this. "Don't worry about us," he said. "We've seen our fair share of war too."

Noda simply nodded at the man, this reassurance having relieved his anxieties a bit. Then he turned over his shoulder to address all of the other men in attendance.

"Well then, everyone," he said, "I'd like to ask that we all go home tonight and try to spend what little time we have remaining with our families and loved ones."

"So in other words, be prepared to die?" asked one of the men.

Noda looked at the man for a moment, then gently shook his head. "You know, it's quite sad really," he said. "For so long, this country has been treating human lives as something far too disposable. Placing its citizens in poorly armored tanks. Neglecting supply line issues to the point that more than half of all our military casualties were due to starvation or disease. Building fighter planes without even the most basic of ejection mechanisms. In the end, we even resorted to suicide attacks—lauding our so-called 'kamikaze' pilots as if they'd chosen their 'honorable death' of their own volition.

"But not this time. I don't want us to make the same mistake. I would rather take pride in this being a citizen-led operation that did not produce a single casualty, than be seen as a group of martyrs who sacrificed their lives for their country. So no. Don't think of this as a fight to the death. Think of it as a fight to go on living—in the future we all deserve. A future we can all be proud of together."

By the end of this stirring proclamation, all of the men in attendance were nodding over and over, clearly overcome with emotion. Everyone except Koichi, who still carried a darker brand of resolve within his chest and quietly excused himself from the venue.

Later, as the other three members of *Shinsei Maru*'s crew were walking back to the station together to return to their homes, Mizushima was the first to break the silence.

"Guess tomorrow's the big day, huh?" he exclaimed with feigned bravado. "Man, I'm practically shaking with excitement!"

It seemed he could hardly contain the strange mixture of determination and trepidation he now felt—but his eagerness wouldn't last for long.

"Sorry, kid," said Akitsu. "You're not coming with us."

"Wait, huh? What do you mean, I'm not coming?"

"I mean exactly what I said: You're staying right here on dry land."

"You'd just be a liability with that broken arm of yours anyhow," Noda chimed in, sounding almost amused by the notion.

"So what?" said Mizushima. "Shikishima's injured too, and *he* still gets to go! Is it because I never got the chance to go to war? You think I'm totally useless, is that it?"

"Do me a favor, kid," said Akitsu. "Don't ever say you 'never got the chance' to go to war again, all right? That's a privilege—not a handicap."

Mizushima couldn't believe his ears; he stopped dead in his tracks.

"So that's it, then?" he said. "You're just going to leave me behind?"

He stood there, stock-still, as the other men continued down the road.

"Why won't you let me come with you?" he cried out, clearly on the verge of tears. "We've always been a team until now, haven't we? Please, I want a chance to fight for my country too! You can't just leave me behind like this—it's not fair! Noda-san! Captain!"

But the other men refused to hear his pleas as they coldly walked away.

Instead, Akitsu simply whispered under his breath:

"This country needs your generation, kid… Its future's in your hands now."

On the way home, Koichi stopped by the house next door to pick up Akiko, who was being babysat by Sumiko just about every day now.

"Thanks so much for all you've done," he said, bowing his head to the older woman. "I couldn't have made it through these past few weeks without you."

This polite expression of gratitude, though clearly genuine, struck Sumiko as a bit needlessly over-the-top—to the point that she grew concerned. As she watched Koichi take little Akiko away, she recalled what she'd overheard about a plan to defeat Godzilla and wondered if perhaps Koichi would be taking part and had already mentally resigned himself to a grisly fate.

Once they were back in their own home, Koichi sat Akiko down on the raised wooden floor at the edge of the mudroom to wipe the bottoms of her feet.

"Did you have fun with Auntie today, Akiko?" he asked.

"Uh-huh," said the girl. "I made a picture."

"Hey, that's wonderful. Glad to hear it."

Akiko held out a folded-up sheet of paper in Koichi's direction—the picture she had drawn.

"What's up?" asked Koichi. "Oh, is this for me?"

He took the piece of paper and unfolded it in front of her. Inside was a picture of what looked like a family of three, drawn crudely in crayon.

"Is this supposed to be me here?" Koichi asked.

Akiko nodded with a gleeful smile.

"Very cute," said Koichi. "And who's this?"

"That's me! And this one's Mommy," said Akiko, pointing. Then she looked up at Koichi with innocent eyes. "Um… When's Mommy coming home, Da—"

Suddenly, Akiko clammed up—as if realizing she'd just made a slip of the tongue.

"It's okay, sweetheart," Koichi said gently. "You can call me Daddy."

"Really?" said Akiko. "I can?"

"Of course. I mean, I'm your dad, aren't I? What else would you call me?"

There was something in Koichi's gentle tone—something perhaps only a child's intuition could pick up on—that made Akiko feel very worried all of a sudden.

"Daddy…" she said. "You're not going to go away too, are you?"

This pointed question threw Koichi for a loop.

"Of course not," he said, flustered. "Why would you ever think that?"

"Well, be-because…" Akiko stuttered. Then as if frustrated by her inability to express where this vague apprehension was coming from, the young girl's eyes suddenly began welling up with tears.

"There, there, kiddo. Don't worry—Daddy's not going anywhere."

Yet, these words did not reassure Akiko. If anything, she seemed to interpret some hidden meaning within them and burst out bawling. Unable to bear the sight of her crying, Koichi scooped her up and held her in his arms, patting her back all the while. It was a good thing Akiko couldn't see his face as he was doing this, though, because his expression was grim—as if some new resolve had just hardened within his breast yet again.

Koichi didn't sleep much that night. He lay by Akiko's side as she cried herself to sleep, and when the morning light poured in over her tear-stained cheeks, he reached over and readjusted her futon for her. As he looked over at her, sleeping softly and soundly, he found it very difficult to want to get out of bed.

But he knew it was time to leave.

Moving carefully and quietly so as not to wake her up, Koichi dressed himself and grabbed the bundle of photos wrapped in oilpaper along with the portrait of Noriko on her memorial shrine, before taking one last look back at Akiko.

Hers was the peace he knew he needed to protect.

Noda had called this a fight for the future they all deserved.

He couldn't be more right, Koichi thought.

Just before he left, Koichi laid a thick envelope addressed to Sumiko by Akiko's bedside, then said one last goodbye to the house and all the memories within its walls.

After parking his motorbike outside the hangar, Koichi walked in to discover that Tachibana and his crew were already waiting for him on standby, having stayed up the whole night to put the finishing touches on his plane.

"Is it all ready to go, then?" asked Koichi.

"Just about. I can wheel it out for you in no time," said Tachibana

Koichi looked up at *Shinden*—now fully restored to its former glory.

"I knew you were the right man for the job," he said.

He climbed up into the cockpit, and Tachibana flipped open the metal door on the nose of the plane. Inside the compartment were *two* large missiles, both with their stabilizing ailerons torn off.

"Here's that firepower you ordered," said Tachibana. "Saved around 140 kilos by removing two of your machine guns, plus 120 rounds for another 80 kilos, as well as your primary fuel tank for a whopping 400 kilos. And in their place, we've got you loaded up with two No. 25 bombs in the nose, and one No. 50 inside the fuselage."

"Thank you, Tachibana-san," said Koichi. "Now I can finally give that monster the payback it deserves."

As Koichi ran his hand along the inner wall of the cockpit, all of a sudden, he felt the metal gently begin to quake beneath his fingers. Wondering what might be the cause, he looked down—only to see that it was his hand, not the cockpit, that was shaking.

"Well, isn't that pathetic," he said, chuckling derisively under his breath. "Looks like some part of me still wants to live after all… Ha ha…"

"Yeah, and so did all the men who died on the island that day," said Tachibana. "They all had families and loved ones they couldn't wait to see again. But they never got the chance because they got crushed like insects. And that's on you."

"I know."

Koichi stiffened his expression and pulled out the oilpaper bundle—which now contained not only the photos from the men on the island but the portrait of Noriko and Akiko's drawing as well.

"You see this? It was drawn by a little girl named Akiko. I want to protect her future. And so I *will* stop Godzilla…even if it costs me my life."

Only after saying this did Koichi realize his hand was no longer trembling.

"Looks like you've finally found your resolve," said Tachibana. "Now let me tell you something very important. You see this handle? It's the safety release for your explosive payload. Be sure to pull it right before you fly in for the kill. And this guy right here…"

Tachibana proceeded to explain what the lever beside his seat was meant to do. But upon hearing its function, Koichi could only look up at the other man's face in confusion. He couldn't believe the words coming out of Tachibana's mouth.

The time for takeoff drew ever closer.

Back in Koichi's neighborhood, Sumiko stepped outside to find Akiko standing all alone in front of her home, holding something in her hands.

"What's the matter, Aki-chan?" asked Sumiko. "You all by yourself?"

"Auntie," said Akiko. "I think this is for you…"

Akiko held out a thick envelope, which Sumiko cautiously accepted. Inside was a stack of bills, a bankbook, and a letter from Koichi asking her to please look after Akiko and use the money enclosed to support her. She could use the bankbook to withdraw more funds as necessary from the account, which according to the ledger contained quite the hefty sum. It was all of the money he'd saved up from his minesweeping work.

Seeing Sumiko so taken aback by this, Akiko began to grow concerned.

"Is Daddy coming home again?" she asked.

"It'll be all right, dear," said Sumiko, deeply shaken by the depth of Koichi's resolve. "Don't you worry about a thing."

At the edge of Sagami Bay, just off the coast of Miura, a small wooden minesweeper was moored. As the men on deck watched through their binoculars, a radiation detector buoy nearby suddenly began flickering wildly. Upon closer inspection, the men could see the corpses of deep-sea fish floating on the surface all around the buoy.

Godzilla had arrived far sooner than expected.

Panicking, one of the watchmen grabbed his radio.

"This is *Kuroshio 12*. Detecting a major signal on the Geiger buoy at 35.033 degrees north, 139.41 degrees east. Also observing large numbers of deep-sea fish corpses!"

All at once, a group of submarine chasers was dispatched—each towing a large underwater megaphone connected to its stern. From these megaphones, an audio recording of Godzilla's ominous roar was being broadcast throughout the Bay; it was a recording discovered among the rubble in Ginza, taken by a reporter who'd stayed on the rooftops to capture the beast's rampage to the very end.

This was more than enough to trick Godzilla into thinking another beast was attempting to lay claim to its territory.

Back at port, the operation's harbor broadcasting team began transmitting to all vessels to keep all parties informed of the developing situation, which was already far removed from what they had originally planned.

"We now have multiple reports of deep-sea fish surfacing near the halfway point between Izu Oshima and Sagami Bay. We expect that Godzilla will appear any minute now. Luring via underwater megaphones is currently underway. All ships, prepare to weigh anchor ahead of schedule at 0720 hours."

Yukikaze and the other destroyers were all ready to go.

Noda stood on deck with Akitsu, waiting to set sail.

"Looks like Mizushima-kun gave up on trying to come with us, eh?" said Noda.

"Can't help but feel bad for the kid," said Akitsu. "But it's for his own good."

"Honestly, I wish we didn't have to involve Shiki-san in this either. He's an ex-kamikaze pilot, after all. I worry he might try to do something drastic."

"He's got Akiko waiting for him at home. He wouldn't abandon that little girl."

And then it happened—a muffled *boom* rang out from the ocean, and something truly massive and engulfed in flames and smoke came flying through the air toward the harbor. Carving a parabolic arc through the sky, the enormous object crashed right into the building they'd made into their operational HQ, setting it ablaze. As the building crumbled beneath the object, they could make out through the flames that it had been one of their submarine chasers. Godzilla had caught up to one of their underwater megaphones and promptly returned the invitation to sender.

For a split second, all of the men in the harbor froze in place.

Then after a few moments' delay, came the emergency alarm.

"The decoy unit's been wiped out! Godzilla has entered Sagami Bay! All Wadatsumi vessels, move out immediately!"

Akitsu cast his gaze out over the bay.

"Look!" he said, pointing his finger. "Over there!"

Just a stone's throw away from port, a cavalcade of massive, jagged dorsal fins was carving through the waves in their direction.

Godzilla had already arrived.

"How did it get here so quickly?" Noda exclaimed.

The mines they'd placed near the entrance to the harbor exploded one by one, but Godzilla paid them no mind. Its reptilian spine slithered lithely through the water as it made a beeline for the shore.

"Evacuate the harbor! It's about to make landfall!"

Meanwhile, *Shinden* had been wheeled out from the hangar and now sat idling by the runway, its engine humming so softly it was hard to believe it hadn't been flown in years. Then came the transmission from the naval port:

"Godzilla has breached the final defense line! It's coming ashore!"

The situation had already turned dire. It was now or never.

"I'm off, then," said Koichi, before taxiing onto the runway.

He gave one last salute to Tachibana and his assistants before shifting the engine lever into full throttle. *Shinden* skated down the asphalt, slowly picking up speed before eventually inching up off the ground and taking flight.

He quickly discovered that the amount of torque produced by the plane's giant propeller, combined with its atypical shape, caused *Shinden* to veer slightly to the left; Koichi had to do a bit of counter steering at all times just to keep her airframe horizontal.

She was a fussy flyer, that much was for sure—but *Shinden* could accelerate far faster than the late-war planes Koichi was used to thanks to the remarkably greater efficiency of the high-octane fuel

it used. *The difference is night and day*, Koichi thought as he nodded in admiration of the craft. He adjusted his trajectory, then increased his speed even further, shooting off through the skies in Godzilla's direction.

Back on the ground, the maintenance crew gazed up at *Shinden*'s vapor trails as Koichi zoomed away, leaving them behind to head into battle.

"Time to end this, Shikishima," Tachibana muttered. "Once and for all."

There was no longer even a hint of condemnation in his voice.

The naval port, meanwhile, was in a state of total pandemonium.

Godzilla had already climbed ashore—at an incredible speed that defied even their most conservative of estimations—before their destroyer unit could even weigh anchor to go and meet the beast in Sagami Bay.

Noda and Akitsu now stood helplessly on deck, gazing up at Godzilla as it made landfall, the rippling waves from its every step rocking *Yukikaze* beneath their feet. Then, raising its legs up high, it climbed up onto the shore, stomping right over the flaming wreckage of the submarine chaser it had thrown and the ruins of their HQ building as it crossed the harbor and started making its way inland.

"Well, shit," said Akitsu. "What do we do now? Our whole plan's ruined."

"We set sail regardless," said Noda. "The operation won't work if we can't utilize the full depth of the Sagami Trough. We'll just have to place our hopes on Shiki-san, and pray he can lure it back here."

A desperate broadcast rang out over the harbor's loudspeakers:

“All ships, move out immediately! I repeat: All Wadatsumi vessels, move out!”

The four destroyers upon which the core of the operation hinged—*Yukaze*, *Keyaki*, *Yukikaze*, and *Hibiki*—formed an imposing fleet as they made for the Sagami Trough. But unless Koichi could guide their target back to them, there was little these erstwhile warships could do to help. Even what little firepower they had remaining after being remodeled to serve as repatriation boats was all but useless now.

Eventually, one of the dispatchers emerged from the communications room on the bridge of *Yukikaze*—now their effective operational HQ—with a message. “Noda-san!” said the man. “We’re getting a transmission from Shikishima-san!”

The dispatcher patched Koichi’s voice through the bridge’s speaker system.

“This is Shikishima speaking,” said Koichi. “I’m in the air. Will now proceed to lure Godzilla back to operation waters.”

“Good!” Noda said into the radio. “We’re almost in position ourselves!”

“Copy that. I’ll try to be there as soon as possible.”

“Listen to me, Shikishima!” shouted Akitsu, practically ripping the receiver out of Noda’s hands. “Don’t you go pulling any heroics on us! If you orphan that little girl again, I’ll drag your ass back up out of Hell myself, you hear me?”

There was no reply.

“Shikishima! Do you hear me?” Akitsu barked again—right as the transmission abruptly cut off. “Goddamn him. Did he just hang up on us?”

The lack of response from Koichi only exacerbated Noda’s fears.

"Shiki-san," he said. "You wouldn't…would you?"

From *Shinden*'s cockpit, Koichi gazed out over the fields and small mountain towns sprawled out below him. To think each and every one of these tiny houses had its own Akiko, its own Noriko, its own Koichi—whole families, simply trying their best to live their lives in earnest. He refused to let Godzilla destroy a single one of them.

With renewed resolve, Koichi faced forward once again.

He could see the creature dead ahead, just over the next hill.

From this distance, even Godzilla didn't look so imposing.

Having taken Akiko into her home and attempted to reassure the girl until she finally cried herself to sleep, Sumiko was already feeling frazzled and at a loss when the telegram arrived. But when she actually read the words that were written on the page, the shock was so intense, it was all she could do to keep herself from fainting.

With trembling hands, she thought of Koichi and the path he'd chosen.

"Oh, God," she said, hyperventilating. "Not like this."

By the time *Shinden* reached her destination in the skies over rural Kamakura, Godzilla had already leveled every residence in the vicinity to the ground.

Koichi opened fire with his 30mm gun as he flew right past the tip of the creature's nose. The 30mm rounds, of course, did no damage to the beast whatsoever—but the maneuver still drew Godzilla's attention, which was exactly what Koichi wanted. It set its sights on *Shinden*, and when Koichi flew in for a second pass, the beast lurched its massive head forward with no less than twice its

usual speed. But with a last-minute tilt to one side, Koichi narrowly escaped its jaws.

Only a moment later, however, the creature swung its entire body around—bringing its massive tail hurtling straight at *Shinden*'s cockpit.

"Whoa!" Koichi exclaimed. Reacting instantly, he extended his wing flaps to serve as an air brake. By increasing the drag on his plane, he was able to stall ever so slightly in midair and dodge the creature's tail whip. "Damn, that was close…"

He was taken aback by his reaction speed; any slower, and he would have no doubt been swatted out of the sky. All the hours he'd put into learning how to maneuver out of an enemy's line of fire in mock battles had finally paid off.

After several close flybys, circling the beast like a pesky gnat, Godzilla was officially frustrated enough to make *Shinden* its new primary target. As the creature changed course, Koichi began luring it slowly but surely back to Sagami Bay.

On the bridge of *Yukikaze*, Akitsu, Noda, and the others were watching with rapt attention through telescopes and long-distance binoculars.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Akitsu, whistling in admiration. "He actually pulled it off. Look at that big brute, chasing after him. He must've pissed it off big-time."

"Now it's our time to shine," said Noda.

At last, Captain Hotta gave the order to every Operation Wadatsumi vessel:

"All ships, begin final checks!"

One by one, transmissions came in over the radio in reply:

"Cable ready!"

"Freon cylinders ready!"

"All circuits connected and responsive!"

"Flotation device is good to go. Just checked everything one last time."

The four cruisers aligned their bows and started advancing toward Godzilla as the creature stepped back into the ocean near Enoshima with a gigantic splash. Then, slithering its massive body, the creature swam like a crocodile in pursuit of *Shinden*, with only its head and dorsal fins poking up from beneath the surface of the water. Koichi adjusted his course to match Godzilla's speed, zigzagging back and forth so as not to ever get too far away from the beast as he goaded it toward the Wadatsumi fleet. When the two were finally close enough, Hotta gave the next order from the bridge of *Yukikaze*.

"Send out Unit One!" he said. "We'll run the maneuver as planned!"

As his subordinates all repeated the order back to him in confirmation, the first pair of destroyers—*Yukaze* and *Keyaki*—broke free from the line and began moving in parallel toward Godzilla's position. In *Shinden*, Koichi carried on straight through the gap between the two ships before rapidly climbing to a higher altitude.

It was only then that Godzilla noticed the two boats headed straight for it. The sight of the destroyers made the creature recall the bombardment it had suffered at the hands of *Takao* and how irksome that had been. Then, like clockwork, each of Godzilla's dorsal fins began to give off a pale blue light as they jutted out one by one.

"Yes, that's it," said Noda, watching from the bridge of *Yukikaze*. "Go on."

As the final dorsal fin extended from the top of Godzilla's spine, the creature's mouth opened, the same blue light swirling in its throat.

Meanwhile, on *Yukaze*, there was strangely little panic. And more curious still, there was not a single person standing on the bridge—only several lines of rope, fastened to both the walls and the steering wheel to hold the ship's rudder in place.

Yes—both the *Yukaze* and the *Keyaki* were unmanned and advancing toward Godzilla without a lone human aboard, their bows pointed straight at the beast as it charged up its ultimate attack.

Then, sure enough, Godzilla's dorsal fins locked back into their original positions, and a blinding beam of bluish white light shot forth from the creature's mouth, aimed straight for the two destroyers.

It was the same heat ray that had razed Ginza to the ground.

In an instant, the two ships were transmuted into white-hot fireballs, which then exploded and evaporated much of the surrounding ocean in the blink of an eye.

When the resultant shockwave hit *Yukikaze* and *Hibiki*, it nearly blew the men who were standing on deck overboard. All of them clung for dear life to whatever structural supports they could find and braced themselves against the oncoming wall of force from the blast, followed by a massive tidal wave—which would have tossed their ships like toy boats had their bows not been pointed directly into the explosion.

On the bridge of *Yukikaze*, everyone was completely silent. Presumably, none of them had witnessed Godzilla using its heat ray in Ginza and then lived to tell the tale. And Noda and Akitsu had only seen a vague cloud of glowing light from beneath the surface of the water before it vaporized *Takao*. But now, having finally witnessed the creature's deadliest attack with their own eyes, they could only stand there, mouths agape, rendered speechless by its sheer destructive might.

"Good god," Captain Hotta eventually mumbled. "*That's* its heat ray?"

"We're doomed!" cried one of the other men on the bridge, practically sobbing. "Captain, please! It's too powerful! Order all ships to retreat immediately!"

"No, stay the course!" said Noda. "We'll proceed with the operation as planned!"

"But we don't know when it'll fire that heat ray again!"

Ignoring the other man's pleas, Noda turned to Captain Hotta. "It needs time to recover before it can fire its heat ray again—that was the whole point of using the decoys!" said Noda. "This is our only chance! We have to move *now*!"

At Noda's urging, Captain Hotta finally collected himself.

"Commence Operation Wadatsumi!" he ordered.

From the rear of each of the two vessels, several giant gas cylinders, courtesy of the Toyo Balloon Company, were slowly lowered into the water one after another. There were ten cylinders in total, all connected to a massive cable which ran between the two ships and which trailed behind them like a giant fishing net as they advanced toward Godzilla's position.

As the ships spread out in opposite directions to circle around the beast, Godzilla chose *Yukikaze* as its first victim and turned its upper body to face its new target. But before the beast could move from its current position, Koichi dove in from above and pelted it with a spray of 30mm rounds. This successfully drew Godzilla's attention back to the plane, and the beast turned yet again, stretching its massive body upward to try to lunge at tiny *Shinden* as it passed—but it was a futile attempt that Koichi easily evaded.

The crew on the deck of *Yukikaze* was grateful to Koichi for distracting Godzilla as they continued feeding out the cable's remaining slack into the water behind them. Once it was fully reeled out, forming a giant arc around Godzilla, the next step was to close the circle and tighten the cable around the beast's torso—a task for which a large crane had been specially installed at the rear of *Yukikaze* alone. By extending the crane out to one side, with the

cable running down from its apex into the water, they would create a small gap which *Hibiki* could pass through to close and then tighten the circle.

Captain Hotta was calm at the helm as the other ship approached. In order to pull the maneuver off, *Hibiki* needed to pass directly under the crane, which would necessarily bring the two ships within just meters of one another.

"*Yukikaze* to *Hibiki*," he called over the radio. "Adjust course, four degrees portside."

Hibiki was charging straight toward *Yukikaze*—any minor discrepancy in either ship's heading at this point would result in a head-on collision. And yet, Captain Hotta's many years of experience told him to trust his intuition.

"Course adjusted, four degrees to port!" said the other ship's captain.

"*Hibiki* approaching portside, Captain!" said one of the men nearby. "Remaining clearance, twenty meters… Ten meters… Five meters!"

"Brace yourselves, men!" Captain Hotta shouted out. "We may take some minor damage, but we'll be just fine! *Hibiki*, maintain course! All ships, prepare for impact!"

As *Hibiki* passed through the narrow opening between *Yukikaze* and the cable hanging from its crane, the hulls of the two ships scraped harshly against one another, the impact rocking everyone aboard both vessels.

"Crossing complete, Captain!" called out one of the men on deck.

It seemed they'd successfully closed the loop; all that was left now was to tighten it around Godzilla's waist. To do this, both ships simply needed to continue full speed ahead and pull the cable taut. Noda stepped out onto the bridge wing to monitor this process.

"Yes, that's it…" he whispered to himself. "Keep going!"

Only as the circle grew smaller and smaller did Godzilla finally notice the cable being tightened around its flanks. And while the creature surely couldn't comprehend what the purpose of the device was, it seemed to recognize, instinctively, that this was not something it should allow to occur. And what's more, it had been plenty long enough now since the beast's first shot of its heat ray. So once again, the beast's dorsal fins began to give off that ominous, pale-blue glow—as one by one, they jutted out from its spine.

"No… Not yet!" said Noda.

He looked up at the tension in the cable running through the crane above him; just a bit more, and they'd have it fully tightened. He could only watch in anguished anticipation as Godzilla's final dorsal fin extended, and a bluish light began to accumulate inside the creature's mouth, each excruciating second feeling like an eternity.

Akitsu was already standing by on the bridge with his hand on the switch, ready to deploy the mechanism as soon as Noda gave him the signal.

Godzilla reared its massive body back to unleash its heat ray once more.

But just then, the cable running from the crane drew taut.

"Okay!" Noda shouted. "Hit it!"

"You got it!" said Akitsu, flipping the switch.

All at once, the 46cm explosive shells hanging from each of the Freon gas cylinders exploded underwater, creating a massive air pocket directly beneath Godzilla. Then, just as it was sucked down into the cavity, powerful streams of pressurized gas began jetting out from each of the ten cylinders, enveloping the beast in an effervescent haze. With the bubble membrane complete, Godzilla lost all buoyancy and went into a state of free fall, plummeting down to the bottom of the sea with astounding momentum.

"Did we do it?" said Koichi, watching from high above in his *Shinden*. He couldn't believe they'd actually managed to pull off Noda's Freon gas plan without a hitch.

On deck, a pair of watchmen were monitoring the cable's depthometer:

"Current depth: 1,500… 2,000… 2,200… 2,500! Target depth reached!"

Deep beneath them, the Freon cylinders emptied the last of their gas.

And as soon as the bubbles dissipated, an unfathomable amount of water pressure slammed against every millimeter of Godzilla's body—crunching its joints, constricting its muscles, and extinguishing the light from its dorsal fins all at once.

The men of *Yukikaze* peered down into the water with bated breath, with the lapping of waves against the side of the ship the only sound.

The cable was still firmly attached.

Eventually, one of the deck hands called up to the bridge wing where Noda, Akitsu, and Captain Hotta were standing to give the announcement: "I can confirm. we've sunk Godzilla, sirs!"

Akitsu just stared down into the water in disbelief.

"So then… Is it actually dead?" he mumbled.

But not a moment later, there came a powerful tug on the cable—the force of which caused the men on *Yukikaze* to lose their collective balance as the ship listed to one side.

Godzilla seemed yet to have survived, even with its body under such enormous pressure.

"Pesky little son of a…" Akitsu muttered.

"Had a feeling it wouldn't be quite so easy," said Noda. "Looks like we'll have to use our backup plan after all."

Noda rushed inside and flipped the switch on the rapid-rising flotation device.

All at once, the pressurized inflation units atop each of the Freon gas cylinders burst into gigantic balloons—each the size and shape of a ten-meter life raft—creating a flower-like pattern around Godzilla's waist. With the power of explosives, the balloons were able to push back against even the deep-sea water pressure as they inflated with an ultra-high pressure gas, pulling Godzilla's massive body back toward the surface. As it rose higher, and the water pressure lowered, allowing the balloons to inflate larger and faster by the second—rapidly accelerating the creature's ascent.

Now the beast was being dragged up toward the surface with nearly the same speed at which it sank. And as it did, turbid white tumorlike growths began to break out all over its hide—starting from the parts of its body that had most recently taken damage and then subsequently been regenerated.

The men at the observation booth on deck read from the depthometer:

"Current depth: 1,200… 1,100… 1,000…"

Godzilla was in pain—so much pain, all inflicted in such a short span of time by *Yukikaze* directly above it. As the creature was dragged up to the surface, there was nary a thought in its decompression-addled brain. Only a seething, compulsive hatred.

All of a sudden, the cable that had been hoisting Godzilla back up to the surface came to a complete stop.

"Target no longer ascending!" yelled the deckhand. "Current depth: 803 meters!"

Up on the bridge wing, Noda clutched his head in his hands.

"No, no, no!" he shouted. "Why did it stop?"

His curiosity would soon be sated, however, when the mangled remnants of several giant balloons soon rose up to the surface, many of them shredded to pieces.

"You've gotta be kidding me…" said Akitsu. "It ripped them off?"

"*Yukikaze* to *Hibiki*!" Captain Hotta shouted into his radio. "Full speed ahead! We'll drag Godzilla up by pulling in opposite directions!"

"What?" said one of the other men on the bridge. "Even with both our ships combined, there's no way we'll have enough horsepower to lift that thing!"

"We're out of options! We have to try everything we can!"

Yukikaze and *Hibiki* split off in opposite directions, full speed ahead, to pull the cable taut and again lift Godzilla up from the depths. But just as the crew member had pointed out, their steam turbines weren't nearly up to the task. Soon, the vessels were making no forward progress whatsoever, the excess output from their engines doing little more than drumming up choppy seas behind their sterns.

Eventually, there came a shrill, metallic creaking sound.

"The crane won't hold at this rate!" shouted a worker from the Toyo Balloon Company—mere seconds before said crane split in half from the tension and toppled over. After narrowly escaping its fall, he and his fellow employees simply looked at the broken crane—then at the shredded balloon fragments—with solemn, mournful expressions.

Even pulling as hard as they could, and kicking up a massive spray behind them, the two destroyers were now effectively treading water.

Operation Wadatsumi would be a failure, cut short in its final stretch. And Godzilla had no doubt recovered from the damage dealt by their sinking maneuver at this point—meaning the cable that connected the *Yukikaze* and *Hibiki* to the beast was now an active danger to them both. Should the beast decide to drag them down beneath the waves, or simply hold them in place while it fired its

heat ray from underwater, like it had done to *Takao*…there would be nothing they could do. Nowhere they could run.

Chances were, not a single one of them would survive. And then Godzilla would climb ashore and wreak havoc upon the mainland all over again. But with no other options available to them, Noda and the others could only watch in agonized suspense as their boats tried and failed to haul the cable up from the tumultuous seas.

"The engine won't last much longer!" cried a voice, practically screaming through the speaking tube from down in the engine room.

Was there nothing else they could do?

Having made it this far, and come so close to pulling it off, it would be far too pathetic to simply lie down and die at this point, leaving their fates to Godzilla's whims.

Just then, a familiar voice rang out from the boat's internal speakers:

"This is *Fuji Maru* from Yokohama Tugboats! We'll do what we can to help!"

It was a voice Noda and Akitsu knew all too well.

"This is Mizushima speaking," it said. "Are you there, Captain?"

"You're shitting me!" said Akitsu. "Is that you, kid?"

"You bet your ass it is!"

One by one, several other voices came flooding through the speakers:

"This is the *Toyo Maru*, also from Yokohama Tugboats! We're here to assist as well!"

"This is the *Nikko Maru*, from Toyo Steamships! Just tell us what to do!"

"*Shiokaze Maru No. 3*, at your service!"

Unable to believe their ears, Noda and the others rushed out onto the bridge wing to see a veritable fleet of well over a dozen tugboats heading straight in their direction.

"How's *that* for a liability, huh?" said Mizushima, sounding quite proud of himself.

Mouth agape, Akitsu pulled off his hat and swung it against the breeze.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said with a giddy smile. "Talk about a sight for sore eyes!"

Captain Hotta couldn't contain the excitement in his voice either.

"All right, you tugboats—come get in line!" he exclaimed. "Let's see if we can't haul this sucker in, shall we?"

The crew members were practically jumping for joy as they prepared the ropes. Before long, both *Yukikaze* and *Hibiki* each had more than ten tugboats tied to their bows, ready and waiting to serve. Though they were each quite small individually, tugboats were specifically designed for the purpose of transporting larger ships just like this and had the horsepower to match. As their high-powered engines kicked into gear, their fleet of tiny vessels began to slowly pull the two warships apart, each of them kicking up a massive spray of seawater in their wake.

"The depthometer's moving again!" cried the watchman.

"Come on!" Akitsu shouted from the bridge wing. "Get up here, damn you!"

And then at last—Godzilla's massive frame breached the surface of the water.

The beast's hide was covered in hideous blisters due to the sudden change in pressure, which only made it look far more monstrous than ever before. Like the deep-sea fish that always preceded Godzilla's appearances, its eyes had turned a watery white and were bulging slightly out from their sockets. Godzilla writhed in

agony as the two fleets pulled the cable tighter around its waist, as if they meant to sever the creature clean in two.

The beast looked to be in its death throes. And despite the sense of victorious relief this gave the men aboard each of the ships, they also found themselves trembling with a sort of uneasy guilt at the sight. This otherworldly creature—who by rights should be far beyond the realm of mortals—was about to have its life extinguished by human hands. They asked themselves: *Was this what it felt like to kill a god?*

But they would receive no answer, as even the question was premature.

Beneath the waves, Noda could see a bluish light beginning to glow.

It was right where the creature's tail would have been.

"No…" he gasped. "Was that not enough to kill it?"

He couldn't believe it. The beast still had the strength left to fire its heat ray. Bit by bit, the light slowly crept up Godzilla's spine—its dorsal fins jutting out one after another. For the men aboard *Yukikaze*, it felt like watching a countdown to their doom.

There was nothing else anyone could do.

How had they come so far, just to fail?

Such were the disparate thoughts running through Noda's brain as he and the other crew members stood there in silence on the deck, watching the blue light gather around Godzilla's mouth, savoring their last few, fleeting seconds in this world.

But just then, like a bolt from the blue, they heard the windblown wail of a propeller engine whirring past as a fighter plane pierced through the skies above them.

"What the hell is he doing?" said Akitsu.

"No… he can't be!" Noda gasped.

"Wait, is that," Mizushima mumbled. "Hold on…"

The three men all had the same exact thought simultaneously.

It was the one thing they feared Koichi might do.

Especially now that the chips were down and so many lives were on the line.

"Don't do it, Shikishima!" Akitsu shouted at the top of his lungs.

But his voice was drowned out by the sound of the waves and the engine's roar, as *Shinden* raced over the surface of the water toward Godzilla's gaping mouth. Koichi could hear the sound of the bombs shifting in his fuselage from the turbulence, and the photo of Noriko he'd brought from her memorial altar fluttered on his instrument panel.

In that moment, it almost felt like she was smiling at him—with that same, beaming smile he could still picture so clearly in the back of his mind even now.

Koichi pulled the safety release for his explosive payload.

And then gripped the lever just beside his seat.

Shinden pierced the back of Godzilla's throat with a shriek that filled the sky.

Followed by a moment of silence—then the fighter's payload detonated deep inside the creature's gullet. Then, with a thundering boom, almost the entirety of Godzilla's head was blown to kingdom come in a massive explosion.

"*Shikishima*!" Akitsu screamed.

The three men standing on the bridge wing, as well as all of the crew members down who'd been watching on the deck below, knew exactly what had just transpired.

They simply stood there, staring at a headless Godzilla, with a mixture of conflicting emotions swirling through their heads. Relief.

Bewilderment. Gratitude. And not a small amount of anger directed at Koichi for the selfish yet selfless choice he'd made.

Tachibana, too, knew what had happened the moment he heard the blast over the radio at the hangar. He swallowed hard and turned his gaze toward the sky.

Just then, Noda spotted something out of the corner of his eye. "Wait!" he shouted. "Look there!"

He pointed up at a large white object falling slowly from the sky.

It was a parachute.

Just before Koichi had taken off, Tachibana had explained to him one other very important feature of *Shinden*, which none of the other planes he'd flown had ever come equipped with. It had to do with the plane's German-made ejection seat.

"When you pull that lever," Tachibana had said, "you'll be launched out of the cockpit."

Stunned, Koichi had looked up at Tachibana, unable to believe what he was hearing.

Yet for once, there was nothing but kindness in the other man's eyes.

"You need to live," he said, placing one hand on Koichi's shoulder.

Koichi could feel the warmth in his grip.

When he thought of all the men who'd lost their lives on Odo Island and considered how emotionally significant this gesture must have been for Tachibana, all he could do was lower his head and stare down at his knees.

Finally, over the radio, came the words that Tachibana had been waiting to hear:

"Pilot ejected! He's alive!"

Tachibana had been leaning over the table in anticipation—but now he nearly fell backward into his chair as he breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

He nodded, satisfied. He nodded again and again.

Godzilla's gargantuan body—still glowing blue from the heat ray it had been charging—slowly began to disintegrate, with beams of blinding white light piercing its hide as the creature crumbled to pieces in the ocean.

Koichi looked down from high above in his parachute as what for years had tormented his dreams and waking nightmares returned to the sea from whence it came.

It was finally over.

He could have been proud.

His heart should have been racing with excitement.

But in that moment, all he felt inside was one simple thing: *It's over*.

The men on the ships' decks, too, wore solemn expressions as they watched Godzilla's final moments. Perhaps they knew, deep down, that what they'd done here today was something that, by rights, mortal men should not have been capable of.

One by one, the sailors raised their hands in salute as the monster fell away.

For these navy men, who'd all risked life and limb in an unwinnable war just three years prior, it was the deepest show of respect they could offer the dead. In truth, even the beast itself could be called a victim of that war, its body having been hideously mutated and scarred by a product of humanity's greatest folly.

Perhaps it was for this reason that they felt compelled to salute Godzilla as the creature sank beneath the waves, leaving only a cloud of black smoke in its wake.

When *Yukikaze* and *Hibiki* returned to port, the entire harbor was flooded with people who'd heard the news of Godzilla's death and come out to celebrate the ships' safe return. As soon as Koichi stepped off the gangway onto dry land, he was nearly pounced upon by a very emotional Mizushima, whose boat had docked before theirs.

"You did it!" he said, eyes full of tears. "You really did it!"

Noda and Akitsu playfully rustled Mizushima's hat on his head; the stubborn brat deserved his fair share of props as well for bringing in the cavalry in their hour of need.

Just then, Koichi spotted a familiar face among the crowd.

Sumiko, her expression distraught.

She had Akiko in her arms.

"What's the matter, Sumiko-san?" he asked as she pushed her way over.

The woman looked as though she was struggling not to cry as she shoved a telegram into Koichi's hands. Sensing it was urgent, he hurriedly unfolded the piece of paper and read what was written on it—then looked back at Sumiko in disbelief.

His gaze was desperate and begging for answers. But Akiko clearly had no idea what was happening, as she looked back and forth between the two. And Sumiko didn't offer any additional explanation. She just shoved him on the shoulder over and over.

It still didn't feel real to Koichi as he rushed up the staircase with Akiko in his arms. His feet felt uncertain beneath him, as

though he were running on clouds that he might fall through at any moment. But all he could do was pray the telegram had told it true—that it wasn't just some sort of cruel joke—as he raced down the hall and swung open the door to the hospital room.

And then there she was.

Sitting right there on a bed by the window.

She looked over at him with the same heartrending gaze he still remembered each time he pictured her in his mind and asked:

"Is your war…finally over now?"

With her head all wrapped in bandages, Noriko was in a sorry state—but she was still breathing, despite it all, and her conviction was as firm as ever. Staggering over to her bedside, Koichi knelt down and wrapped his arms around her. He couldn't say a word; he just held her close. Burying his head into her lap, he simply nodded. Yes—the war was over at last.

But as Noriko ran her fingers through his hair, something slowly began creeping up the back of her neck. A small, black sore, almost like a bruise. Shifting. Changing.

Meanwhile…

In the depths of the ocean, there was a loud thump—as one of the scattered remnants of Godzilla's body suddenly began to throb and pulsate like a beating heart.

At the bottom of the sea, nobody heard, and thus no one knew.

Only the scantest rays of sunlight, filtered through the rippling waves above, reached far enough into the briny deep to illuminate the harrowing truth yet lurking in its darkest fathoms—a truth from which there could be no escaping.

For the regeneration had already begun.

It was only a matter of time.

FIN

About the Author
Takashi Yamazaki

Takashi Yamazaki was born in 1964 in the city of Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture. After graduating from the Asagaya College of Art and Design, he began his career in 1984 at animation and visual effects studio Shirogumi Inc. In 2000, he made his directorial debut with the release of the film *Juvenile*. Since then, his work has received widespread international acclaim, and he is one of the most prominent Japanese film directors working today.



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