

# Trembling

*By Andrew Gilbertson*

© April 2013

**With consultation from Melissa Sternenberg & Sarah Kathryn Martin**



Heart brimming with anxiety, Jin Kirishima glared at the clock on the office wall, willing it to move faster.

The second hands clicked away at their steady rate- each click *clearly* taking longer than a second- and refused to give into the pressure of his anxious gaze.

His glance flitted nervously to the stairwell door across the main hall. It remained empty- but for how long?

Two minutes. Two minutes remained, down from a wearying seven and an agonizing five- but as each minute ticked by, time seemed to slow, exponentially lengthening, moving the final, long-awaited end of the work day farther and farther out of reach, maddeningly refusing to come any faster, seeming only to arrive more and more slowly.

Palms sweating, heart pounding, Jin anticipated the arrival of Yuki Odaka with weak and trembling knees.

It wasn't because Yuki was a supervisor, vastly outranking his own humble position. She wasn't his- didn't work for the same company, even- and Jin had never been especially intimidated by authority figures. (Well, that wasn't true. But only the ones in authority over *him*.)

And it wasn't because Yuki was his girlfriend, either. Her earlier work hours often allowed her to be there to greet him as his let out, and anticipating her intermittent after-work visits kept the workday bearable oftentimes.

Usually, Yuki's arrival to greet him, take the stairs down with him, often on the way to some sort of special date, was a cheerful encouragement, anticipation of the *good* kind.

But not today.

Only one minute remained, now- but what an endless, protracted minute it was. The second-hand seemed to circle the clock even more slowly than the seasons themselves encircled the year... Jin twiddled his thumbs anxiously, his ability to concentrate on his work having been completely lost at least ten minutes ago.

The second hand was in the home stretch, and Jin felt as if he would go mad, burst out of his own skin, with anticipation and cabin fever. Surely, time was literally, actually, measurably running slower... perhaps his own heart, pounding past the speed of light, was affecting general relativity and warping space and time?

It sure *felt* that way.

The second-hand clicked home. A low chime sounded over the PA system as Jin shot to his feet like a rocket and made for the crossing that led over to the stairwell and elevators, across the main foyer of the large workspace. He threaded his way through the maze of cubicles, dodging all obstacles, at a racer's pace, past dozens of coworkers who hadn't yet even begun to rise, or were still absorbed in finishing their work. Normally, Jin was one of those.

But not today.

His wobbly legs failed him, and for a moment, he simply tripped over nothing, banging hard into the cubicle wall of... what's-his-name, the guy that was always going on about sports. The man stared at him with wide eyes, startled from his computer terminal- slightly guilty-looking. Probably sneaking part of a game on company time again. Jin apologized weakly and moved onwards.

Tripping because of an ankle-wobble was the worst- it was like choking on your own spit because you swallowed wrong- it just plain made you look like an *idiot*.

Then again, he kind of felt like one right now.

He was never terribly coordinated or any kind of an athlete- he kept in shape as best he could, but that didn't make him any *good* at physical pursuits- but usually *walking* wasn't a challenge.

But not today.

Today, however, it seemed that every step was a slog through mud, a lead weight attached to each leg- he realized he was coming close to hyperventilating, and forced himself to breathe again.

No, the reason that each step across the thin, hard omni-tuft of hardened fuzz that could almost be called 'carpet' seemed to be sucking at his feet like quicksand, slowing him to a crawl as adrenaline flooded every nerve was entirely unrelated to who he was going to see.

Well, not *entirely* unrelated.

Emerging past the row of cubicles and into the common area in front of the elevators, Jin could see *his* supervisor, Akira Kochi, and he desperately prayed that the man would not call him over for a last-minute assignment, or engage him in conversation about the next day's activities; right now, he could neither abide, nor concentrate on, any delays. His attention was far too locked into his own task, the entire centerpiece and focus of the evening ahead- and *that* thought only sent another shiver of anticipation shuddering through him, and set sweat beading on his forehead. His hands were shaking- actually *shaking*.

Right on time (as she always was), Yuki's smiling face greeted him from the doorway, and the radiance of her smile momentarily chased his worries away. He started toward her at a brisk, giddy pace-

With a yelp and an ungraceful two-step, Jin pivoted out of a near-collision with the mail truck. The creaky wheels and rattling cart, pushed by an annoyed, confused looking middle-aged man, coursed by inches from his legs. He really *hadn't* been paying attention; ordinarily, you could hear that cart coming from about a mile away.

And yes, he realized as he glanced around, everyone *was* staring at him now.

*Perfect.*

Well, it's not as if his relationship with Yuki was any great secret- not like anyone couldn't have guessed where he was headed.

Cheeks reddening, trying to ignore the imagined weight of every eye in the place on his retreating back, Jin squared his shoulders, tried to pretend that nothing had happened, and complete his trek across the open floor.

He leaned against the door frame, slick and cool to the touch, and stopped for a moment, simply taking in the sight of her- standing on the dusty concrete landing, smiling at him with a bemused expression, immaculately beautiful even with the makeup that he maintained she didn't need.

"Hi," He breathed softly.

"Hi, yourself," She answered coyly, twisting the tiny handles of her purse around and around each other absently in her left hand- one of a hundred tiny habits that Jin found so endearing; even in the dim fluorescence of a barren concrete landing, she was radiant to him.

"Forget to practice walking this morning?" She teased, leaning in for a kiss.

Jin laughed, an over-anxious, slightly-too-loud, obnoxiously high-pitched titter to his ears. He cursed silently and tried to get a reign on his nerves- this was not how he wanted to do this. Yuki drew back, wincing for the harsh noise, and he leaned over to give her a too-quick, too-sharp peck on the cheek.

*No, no, relax... be romantic!*

"So anxious to see you that I tripped over my own feet, that's all!"

*Oh, very smooth.*

Her smile turned to a slight frown.

"Is something wrong, Jin? You look troubled."

Of course she would notice- she was keyed into his body language in a way that even he wasn't, and she could always tell when something was troubling him, even when he was working his hardest to hide it or pretend it wasn't. Usually, he'd just come clean about the reason.

But *not* today.

He lowered a hand to the outside of his pocket, casually running his fingers along the edge of the small ring box within to reassure himself that it was there.

"No, I just... wasn't sure if they'd ask me to stay late, and I didn't want to ruin our big night..."

*Yeah, that'll convince her, you terrible liar.*

Whether she bought it, or just decided not to press it, she let the matter drop, instead favoring him with a warm, reassuring smile- the kind that filled him with a kind of liquid courage, that made him feel like he could do anything- and for a moment, he decided that he might actually be able to go through with this. She was so wonderful, warm, giving, kind... so thoughtful and considerate of others; for her, he'd find the strength.

"Well, let's get going, then!"

Jin nodded, reached out to take her hand, took a step forward- though the entire room seemed to shake around him as he did so. Just nerves, of course... although... odd, that recalcitrant, tormenting wall clock was swaying, ever so gently, in the room outside. Hmmmmm.

His hip hit the railing beside the stairs hard, with an audible clink, and he cringed, bending over, and braced himself against the wall beside her; Yuki kept walking, unaware, and yanked him forward, stumbling, through the shared link of their held hands, which also jerked her to a stop.

Turning to notice his predicament, Yuki was all sympathy, but she couldn't keep the laughter out of her voice.

"Oh, poor Jin! That looked like it hurt! Are you all right?"

He nodded hastily, standing up straight, wincing at the ring-box-shaped bruise now forming beneath his pocket.

"Fine, fine, just... missed the stairwell... let's... walk it off..."

They started down the stairs, Jin with a slight limp. It served him right for not watching where he was going. He really wasn't paying attention tonight...

"I, uh, just need to stop in to the break room downstairs; I have something for us in the fridge..."

The ground seemed to shake again, and this time, Yuki noticed it too.

"That felt like..."

Unexpectedly, a wall of people was filling the landing in front of them. As they descended towards the sudden crowd, Jin turned to see a similar gathering departing the doorway that they had entered through- it seemed that every floor was taking to the stairs.

"What...?" He uttered aloud, baffled.

"Evacuation," Some helpful soul in the crowd before him uttered.

Jin groaned.

*Not now! Not today!*

As if on cue, a loud, high-pitched alarm shattered the murmuring undertone of the crowd.

"Oh, no!" Yuki cried, dismayed, breaking their mutual grasp and raising one hand to cover her ear ineffectually as the other dug through her purse.

Jin waved to get her attention as he went to cover his own ears from the piercing keen. He knew what she was thinking.

*"Don't worry!"* He shouted over the din. *"You left work half an hour ago- I'm sure your department is already gone. They're not your responsibility right now- you are!"*

She looked distressed as she raised her other hand to her ear, purse dangling from it.

*"They need me-!"*

*"They'll be fine!"* Jin insisted, not sure if she was catching all of the words. *"You can't get to them in an evacuation state anyway! Stick with me, you can join our evac route!"*

She shook her head, uncomprehending.

*"Stay with me!"* He shouted, simply, and that she heard. She nodded, uncertainly.

Outside, she could call them. Once she saw that there was nothing she could do beyond make sure that the employees for whom she was responsible were in good on-site hands (or hopefully, already back at their homes), Jin hoped that she would focus on getting to safety- sometimes, she spared too little thought for herself.

He'd just have to look after her himself, while she spent all of her time and energy looking after others. It was her way, and he loved her for it- even if, at times like this, it made him worry for her.

Jin cursed his luck as they both fell into line with the streaming employees. This was going to affect his evening.

He still imagined that he'd get the chance to propose...

But not today.

\*\*\*\*\*

Katagiri didn't like noodles, or rice. In general, it was the texture that he didn't care for- soft, moist, far too yielding and the mushy-same all the way through; neither crunchy nor airy and light, but maddeningly in the middle.

His sister would always tease him about having food preferences based not on taste, but on *texture*. And yet, he always had. It was not as if the thought of something oddly textured turned his stomach (usually)... but it put him off, made him grimace.

And yet, every time he sent one of the American orderlies (nearly a quarter of the hospital staff were not native, but relief workers from the Tsunami response teams who had grown roots and stayed behind when the disaster relief efforts were complete) to fetch him dinner, rice and noodles- and Teriyaki sauce; he *hated* the overly-salty stuff- were invariably the primary occupants of the trays they returned with.

Katagiri *hated* cultural stereotypes. Give him a hamburger any day.

Of course, a large part of that was likely due to the fact that no one really knew his preferences.

Because no one really knew *him*.

He didn't intend to go through life a solitary man. It just sort of... happened. He was a busy man. It was a consequence.

And it wasn't the usual movie melodrama about the demands of college and medical school, either. He'd always been able to keep those well in check. Not even the hazardous schedule of an on-call surgeon could really, truly be assigned the blame, if he was honest. He could manage that well enough as well.

Time was... his ally. He was always aware of it. He molded it like a potter did clay, sculpting it, re-arranging it, shuffling it... prodding, poking, stretching, smoothing... fitting one more item into his schedule, pulling a carefully ordered day apart, examining the pieces, and re-assembling them with the intricacy of a watchmaker intertwining cogs and gears, remaking a carefully planned afternoon on the fly to cram in one more desired item, one more fun thing, one more episode of his favorite show- finessing another 5 minutes here, another hour there- shaving time, multi-tasking, planning everything down to the second... which, he supposed, left him with a somewhat cranky disposition towards any unexpected event that disrupted or delayed his carefully planned schedule- and especially towards *anyone* that was

not so efficient or forward-thinking as he.

Still, despite the occasional frustration with an hour that simply seemed to vanish without a trace, throwing off his plans- or the inevitable, accepted, and exception-made-for allowances of his unpredictable work schedule, Katagiri was a master of managing time. It was never a matter of finding it that kept him too occupied to really be with people.

It was...

Was...

Actually, he didn't know what it was. Why he led such a solitary life. Oh, certainly, he didn't make new friends easily- who did?- but that wasn't it, not *really*... it was something else. Something he couldn't identify. It was if, even when in a crowded room, he kept himself too occupied to really be with people. He didn't know how, or why... merely that he had a lot of time- sometimes more than he preferred- to himself.

It left him great latitude to be productive, writing poems and prose, making amateur films. And it left him great time to consume his favorite shows, music, movies, video games. But it also, more often than he cared to admit, left him empty. Even every media and entertainment that he 'loved' couldn't replace the simple contact of human presence. And since the only presence around here seemed to be other doctors, nurses, and orderlies- each busy with their own schedule, in their own world of problems and responsibilities- as well as the sick, the dying, and the dead... he was left often-hollow.

But most of all, it left him with clueless but well-meaning youngsters bringing him noodles and rice, with the occasional stir-fry vegetable and sauce-drowned cafeteria 'teriyaki' chicken.

Still, beggars couldn't be choosers, and he was starving- so he dug in anyway.

The ambiance was not exactly what he would call 'classy'- old fluorescent lighting buzzed overhead, casting the entire Spartan room in a gloom- resulting from a single burned-out tube in the center of the room; somehow, the eyes could always tell when the room was less lit than it was *meant* to be, and that resulted in a dark, gloomy feeling- like a cave. The stark room was little cheerier even when it was sufficiently illuminated- scuffed but shiny tiles, white flecked with long streaks of grey of the kind that felt as if they belonged in a supermarket, largely unadorned walls (a clock, a basic calendar, and several cabinets the only exceptions) a shade of peach-beige that tricked the eyes into wondering if they were really that color, or some shade of white that the light was giving a hue to... a tall black refrigerator buzzed noisily in the corner, providing a steady, obnoxious ambiance. A small sink and a series of cabinets lined one wall- along the other, a black faux leather couch- too smooth and puffy to really be comfortable, always seeming like a stranger's guest couch- the kind you could never really be at ease on.

The hospital break room was just the sort of place to enhance a loner's feeling of isolation. To remind one just how empty life could be at times. To serve as a constant, nagging reminder of wants unfulfilled and needs unmet...

Actually, he supposed that, truth be told, he could be kind of a whiner at times. That probably didn't help things.

Barely had the first soft, slimy spoonful passed his lips than the door to the break room flew open, hitting the back wall with a bang.

Katagiri rolled his eyes.

*Overdramatic med students. Watch too much Grey's Anatomy.*

"Tanaka-sensei!" The young man shouted, eyes bulged wide and breath coming in great gulps. "You're needed in the OR, stat!"

*Stat? Definitely too much Grey's Anatomy.*

He swallowed the distasteful mouthful.

*I'm on break! Why me?*

"Of course. Brief me."

"Sir, we have a Code 9 incoming- and a patient in surgery now who can't be closed up, or moved- without your intervention, sir, he'll be dead within the hour!"

Katagiri was already rising from his seat, grabbing a fresh pair of gloves, muttering under his breath.

"That's not a briefing, that's a justification for taking me away from dinner. Useless med students..."

Katagiri *thought* that his utterance was too soft for the student to hear. If it wasn't... he wouldn't be shedding any tears.

Still, a Code 9 did explain *one* thing- why he, out of the dozens of on-staff doctors, was being called. His curse struck again. He supposed that, much as the numerous facets of his lonely personality made him sound like some sort of eccentric, gifted-but-lonely TV genius, he did in actuality have *one* special talent that set him apart, whether he considered himself just an average man or not.

Katagiri Tanaka, 'Doctor with the hand of God,' as his colleagues joked. In the rigors of surgery, his digits became rigid, rock-hard instruments of surgical precision (and yes, the pun was intentional- one of his standbys)- nary a twitch or distraction could cause his hands of stone to slip. Which meant, of course, that he was always called up in the face of a Code 9; every time that a routine procedure was threatened by extreme circumstances... which were themselves becoming all too routine.

Katagiri ambled unhurriedly toward the door, grabbing one last, mushy mouthful behind him as he walked away- the unpalatable meal might have to hold him for... who knew *how* long.

"Another Code 9? That's the third this month..."

"Sir, you're *needed!*"

Katagiri sighed and quickened his pace, leaving aside the unappetizing tray with mixed feelings. He grabbed his smock from beside the door, and set out at a brisk walk for the nearest wash station, the med student falling into step behind him, chart in hand. They fought their way upstream through a thickening crowd of evacuating doctors, nurses, orderlies, and patients.

"All right, what do we have...?"

"A malignant plexiform neurofibroma of the Oculomotor nerve, spreading along the Superior ophthalmic vein..."

\*\*\*\*\*

Apart from the rare tourist and the occasional Final Fantasy or Sailor Moon cosplayer, a flash of blond was rare to see within a mile of the Kasumigaseki district. On the opposite side of the downtown area from the more popular mall complex, even the occasional straggler or extremely lost tour group was seldom *that* lost.

Here, within the Hibiya-ku itself, where only the officials of the government (among whom there were few foreigners) walked, it was all-but unseen. And yet, a head of short-cropped blond curls- arrayed in a loose bowl cut that somewhat-unsuccessfully aped a common women's fashion of the district- was currently bobbing its way down the sidewalk towards the municipal building at a brisk clip, a head taller or more than anyone it passed. The head of hair halted briefly before a gaggle of police gathered around the base of the building- just long enough for the woman whose head it adorned to flash her credentials to the throng, which parted before her, before continuing on its way.

Debrah Lynd had, at nearly 7 feet tall, nearly always been a magnet for stares, never unnoticed within a crowd, no matter where she went... here, in the heart of a major Japanese metropolis, even more so. As a policewoman, she had a necessarily thick skin, but somehow, the subtle tingle of discomfort at being the center of attention had never quite gone away. At least, she reflected, as she rode the building's elevator up towards the top floor, she would be only a momentary distraction here- there were bigger things to attract the center of attention.

And of course, an overly-tall, blond, pale-skinned American policewoman was *obviously* the best variable to throw into this situation...

Not that she resented being thrust into this without any warning, but... she resented being thrust into

this without any warning. This wasn't her area of expertise, or even her jurisdiction. But apparently, she was the only non-Japanese face that the force could scrounge up on short notice- which was important, for some reason- and she was qualified... *barely*. And so, here she was, out of her depth (and yes, considering her height, she was aware of the irony of that turn of phrase) and thrust into a volatile situation.

At least she spoke fluent Japanese.

The elevator dinged, and she stepped out onto the tile floor, the soles of her fancy party shoes clicking on the white tile like a pair of metal-line tap shoes. (Obviously, even at a fancy party, flats were the order of the day; high heels would be an absurd and redundant extravagance.) She kicked off her shoes as she walked, never breaking pace, and did her best to tug on a pair of sneakers while doing the same, nearly causing her to take a swan dive into the tiling as she did so. Even as the discarded footwear tumbled off of the wall with a clatter, she allowed herself the luxury of a few seconds pause, leaning against the wall, to tug the new shoes into place- no sense entering the situation with a smashed-flat pug nose because she couldn't spare a second to change her shoes.

As she shoved open the door to the stairwell leading up to the roof, she took a deep, shuddering breath, and did her best to dispel her anxiety. She was a beat cop, patrol and protect... this dialoging stuff was nowhere near her comfort zone.

At the top of the stairs, she leaned on the heavy door- perhaps a bit harder than she'd meant to, and nearly stumbled for a second time as she emerged onto the oversized-sandpaper surface of the tar-paper-and-pebble rooftop.

An inauspicious beginning.

Beyond the edge of the rooftop's thin lip, the lights of the downtown plaza shone from every direction, and above it, the last rays of the sunset were just giving way to dusk, a near-full moon already hanging low in the twilight sky, on the rise. Up here, above the 8th floor, almost 70 meters up, it was cool and slightly windy.

She could swear that, as she regarded the view, she heard a distant rumble, like thunder in the distance.

Far more significant was the figure that stood silhouetted between Debrah and the lights, standing on the lip of the roof, staring out at the twinkling vista.

Debrah took a deep breath. She hesitated. Startling the man would be a very bad start- could even be disastrous. But she knew from experience that there was no right answer in this situation; calling out to the unwary person could be a sudden shock... but then, so could approaching close to make them aware of her presence, whether they noticed her approach, she spoke softly, or tapped them on the shoulder... Invariably, a shock would result, no matter how careful she was; a lesson learned to her detriment (well, her sometimes hard-of-hearing mother's detriment, at least) many a time in her childhood.

"Hello there!" She called out, and immediately regretted the over-chipper tone.

The man before her started, then half-turned, his voice a bleating tone of irritation.

"What? Hey-"

His voice was a hoarse croak, and he looked weary- no wonder, if he'd been verbally sparring with negotiators and counselors all day- and it had been close to 10 hours now, she thought- a bucket sat next to him for the necessities of the digestive process, and scattered fast food wrappers that kicked in the wind attested to the police's haphazard efforts to attend to the other half of it. Still, despite provision for his basic needs, the man had been standing, shouting, emotionally wrecked, in the beating sunlight, for longer than the average workday... he had to be getting punchy. His knees wobbled.

"-I said I didn't want to see another city representative, friend, relative, or policeman-!"

"-And as you can see, I'm none of the above," Debrah interrupted firmly, "In fact, I think you said you didn't even want to see another fellow countryman."

In the dim light, the man looked puzzled.

"No... no, I don't think I did."

*Just perfect. So it didn't even have to be me...*

"Well, either way, I'm here now- just to talk. To you. I-"

*Take control of the situation!*

"I heard that you were having a difficult time."

*Or, wait... were you supposed to not remind them of their troubles...?*

The man shook his head bitterly.

"If you count the inevitable realization that life is a pointless cycle of futility, a meaningless repetition of empty traditions and actions that will never last or be remembered, but ultimately demolished by the wastes of time... then yeah, you could say that I'm having a difficult time."

Debrah pursed her lips. She was pretty sure that antagonizing wasn't the right tack here... but she had to go with her gut.

"How long you been rehearsing that spiel?"

The man smiled wryly.

"Not a whole lot else to do up here, in between negotiators."

*Bingo. Connection made.*

"Well, maybe they won't have to switch 'em up anymore. Maybe I'll be the lucky winner. Name's Debrah Lynd. What's yours?"

"Kazuhiro."

"Just Kazuhiro?"

"Kazuhiro Suzuki."

She nodded, hoping desperately that she'd remember the name, and trying to keep her tone casual.

"Well, Kazuhiro... uh, San... I have to ask... if you had that much time on your hands and you were getting ready to jump, why didn't you do it already? I mean, if all those negotiators hadn't said anything you wanted to hear... why are you still up here? If you *really* wanted to kill yourself-"

"I was waiting for it to get dark."

"Oh."

*So much for that tactic. Oh well, small blessings- at least that gives me more time to work with than jumping in front of a train...*

"I wanted to see the stars one more time."

"So you came to the middle of the brightly lit city?"

"The countryside doesn't have many skyscrapers. It was a trade-off."

"Fair enough."

Kazuhiro paused, considering her, his head canted to one side.

"Aren't you supposed to be a little more diplomatic? Talk about how good life is, and positive emotions, and stuff?"

"Am I? Between you and me, this isn't really my day job."

"Well, it's almost nighttime, so that shouldn't be a problem."

Debrah considered.

*Laugh at his really lame joke, or not? Don't want to be too blunt...*

She smirked politely, and took a couple of extra steps towards him, her sneakers crunching too loudly on the gritty rooftop.

Kazuhiro tensed up.

She stopped and held up both hands in a placating gesture.

At this rate, they would be up here... who knew *how* long.

"Hey, easy. Bad light- I just wanted to get a look at your face."

He nodded warily.

"So, what's eating you? Why the dramatic rooftop escapades?"

He shook his head.

"What's the point? It doesn't matter. You're not going to talk me out of it."

"So? I'm curious. You jump, I'm gonna have to deal with the mess. Really gonna ruin my night. Can't you even tell me what I'm going to be going through all that hassle for?"

Something in his face closed off, and she silently cursed herself. Too casual, too callous- she'd pegged this guy for a straight-shooter, a black coffee, no lumps kinda guy... but it looked like even this more frank and honest conversation needed a little bit of artificial sweetener.

"Sorry, that was callous. A bad joke. I do that when I'm nervous. You nervous?"

He didn't answer. Hell. Now she was going to have to re-earn his trust. Maybe the pros had a script and an overly-cheery, sappy manner for a reason.

"Well, I am. Believe it or not."

He took a slight shuffle close to the edge- nothing dramatic or overt, but it was enough for her to take notice.

"Hey, Kazuhiro, hold it. We're not done here."

She winced. That came out harsher than she'd meant. She re-modulated her tone and tried again.

"Come on, man. I don't know you well, I admit... but you don't seem like a cruel guy. You aren't, are you?"

He didn't answer, but he gave his head a light shake.

"Didn't think so. So, tell me, Kazuhiro. Tell me why. You wouldn't be so cruel as to leave a girl hanging, wondering for the rest of her life why you did it, would you? Thinking that she failed you?"

That was uncomfortably close to the truth. She had no idea what she was doing here, and the man seemed to be able to tell when someone else was on a script; talking her through it wasn't an option. She was on her own, and if she didn't find a way to sweet tal-

There was a distant noise, like a subsonic rumble, and the building shook. She saw Kazuhiro wheel his arms, just a little, trying to keep his balance. In his agitated state, he didn't seem to have noticed the noise- he probably thought he'd just lost his balance for a moment.

Cripes. That happened again, and it might not matter if he decided to jump or not- Humpty Dumpty would take a *big* fall.

"Come on, Kazuhiro, please? Talk to me. Tell me why."

He shook his head bitterly.

"I told you, you can't talk me out of it. What's the point?"

There was another rumble, another brief tremor, and this time, he seemed to take notice, cocking his head like a dog hearing its master in the distance.

She had to get his attention, break through his malaise, *fast*, or she was going to lose him.

"Well, maybe you can talk me *into* it."

*That* got his attention. He turned to meet her eyes, and Debrah held his gaze, letting him see the truth in her words.

"I haven't got that great a life. Tell me why you think life's pointless. Why you don't want to go on. Maybe you can talk me into joining you."

\*\*\*\*\*

*Steam billowed up in front of Mariko Mitamura, obscuring the screaming children beyond it as an unbearable heat rose to scald at her face.*

*Annoyed, she waved the cloud away and set down the iron to cool off- she hated it when she triggered the water jets too generously. Beyond, through the living room window, she could see her children playing out in the yard, screaming and shouting and giggling and enacting some imaginary battle as some imaginary characters that she would no doubt find the height of ludicrous, meaningless silliness, and which their generation would no doubt spend the next 50 years on the internet idolizing, reminiscing about, and fantasizing about the gritty reboot of... all the while complaining that their own children's icons and areas of obsession were silly, garish, ludicrous cartoony figures that came nowhere close to the idols that they'd grown up with.*

*Beyond the children, waves lapped gently. The view from the beachfront property (well, not much of a beach- the grassy yard simply tapered down into the water, and in heavy rains, it could lap up close to the foundations of the house) was lovely, but the price was constant vigilance; so long as they had a back yard which could theoretically be drowned in, Mariko or her husband had to keep an eye on her children at all times while they played outside.*

*It was largely worth it- the children loved the sea, and Mariko and her husband, Takashi, were proud to live in one of the first reconstructed houses after the tsunami disaster- the Mitamuras one of the first families willing to demonstrate their defiance of the elements, their determination for life to go on as usual, by living right at the water's edge- but sometimes, it could be a hassle; as when her turn to watch the children and do the week's laundry happened to intersect.*

*From upstairs, she could hear a low, bass thumping bleeding through the ceiling- the strains of the pounding, driving, screaming music currently favored by their eldest, Katsumi, which she claimed helped her to concentrate on study, though Mariko could hardly understand how anyone could think with that audio assault pounding away at their skull, much less concentrate. And heaven knew that her grades hardly reflected any result of this supposed focusing power; though the mandatory evening study time Mariko and Takashi had implemented for their daughter was supplementing the prodigious amount of time already spent at juku, Mariko had begun to seriously doubt the prospect of her wayward, often-surlly high-schooler ever managing to pass her coming college entrance exams...*

*The noise jockeyed for position with the tumult of playing children outside, and the intermittent grinding screech of a circular saw chewing into wood from Takashi's workshop, a horribly teeth-grating, nerve-testing wail that seemed to suggest that neither the wood nor the saw was happy with the arrangement. She didn't begrudge him his own indulgent projects... but sometimes, the racket could drive her to the edge of madness.*

*Through the window, she could see the surface of the water disturbed by a hundred tiny ripples, as if the sea itself were boiling- the myriad tiny strikes of raindrops hitting the water. Well, the children would be inside any second, then, their rowdy play interrupted, full of energy and a whirlwind of chaos, probably tracking mud, too... Well, it was getting close to twilight, so it would've had to happen soon anyhow... she braced herself for the oncoming onslaught, culminating in an irrational and passionate resistance to bedtime.*

*Only... looking at the patio outside, she couldn't see a single dark spot appear, nor a single ripple in the mud-puddle that the children had- apparently, without her permission- excavated to play in.*

*There was no rain. Which meant...*

*The sea really was churning, bubbling, frothing from beneath.*

*Not again.*

*She sighed, and called toward her husband's workshop*

*"Papa, get Katsumi down to-!"*

*Her only answer was another screech of the buzz saw which drowned out the rest of her words.*

*She was sure he hadn't heard her, hadn't mean it, but that really annoyed her.*

*Katsumi's music throbbed. The children screeched. The buzz saw wailed.*

*No matter; she could outdo all of them. The moment the buzz saw ceased, she bellowed at the top of her lungs.*

*"PAPA! WATER'S CHURNING! GET KATSUMI!"*

*The saw's idling hum petered off half a second later, and Takashi was out the door in a flash, moving up the stairs- but by then, Mariko was already halfway to the back door. She flung it open, and it hit the end of its tack with a bang that cracked the glass.*

*That got the children's attention.*

*"INSIDE! Man the fortress!" She shouted, in a tone that entertained no dissent.*

*The children, knowing this drill by heart, dropped what they were doing, including the gravel-rakes that had become swords despite a half-dozen warnings not to touch them- there'd be consequences for that later- and dutifully rushed inside, Mariko right behind them.*

*Despite the light tone that they tried to maintain, couching the evacuation in terms of 'an adventure' and telling the children that they were 'manning a fortress to defend against the evil forces of Team Rocket (or the Armies of the Greeed, or the Dai-Zangyack fleet, or the Dopant hordes, or whatever their interest of the month happened to be at the time),' they could always sense that something was wrong, that the trappings of a game were simply the sugary spoonful to disguise a bitter medicine beneath- they obeyed, they cooperated, but when it wasn't just a drill, they neither smiled nor played. For that, Mariko grieved- in some ways, they'd lost their childlike innocence so early- that crucial ability to pretend that hardship was a game, that life wasn't so serious.*

*Katsumi stomped down the stairs, irritably, complaining the whole way as she flung open the cellar doors and began to descend; as usual, the put-upon teenager managed to make even a life-saving drill seem like an imposition to her all-important social life and free time.*

*"...say you want me to finish my homework but then you interrupt me to hustle me down to some..."*

*Takashi was right behind her, stopping to catch Mariko's eye as the children filed inside behind their older sister.*

*"She was on Skype with her friends." He noted with a frown.*

*"We were chatting about the math test!" Katsumi shouted up the cellar stairs- amazing that her hearing was so good, despite being bombarded by that racket day-in and day-out...*

*Takashi and Mariko descended into the stairwell last, slamming the heavy-steel reinforced door shut above them and bolting the titanium door bar over it. Then, they descended to join their children in the cavernous, well-stocked basement.*

*Each of them had a small cubicle-bedroom down here, as well as separate enclosures for a fully stocked pantry, and a bathroom which, since they'd stopped remodeling halfway through the process until more free cash managed to somehow present itself, was actually nicer than the one the kids had upstairs. A separate chamber off to the side, mostly walled-off with cinder blocks, contained the generator- and the cavernous main space was dominated by dozens of Space Titanium-reinforced support beams, bolstered by half a dozen cylindrical hydraulic springs, designed to withstand over 10 tons of crushing force- themselves bolstered by the weight-distributing shape of the overall dome in which they resided. All in all, a classic Serizawan Rampage Shelter, the kind that had been common around Tokyo and the outlying regions since the early 60s, from which the Americans had drawn inspiration for many of their Cold War fallout shelters.*

*They gathered together at the bottom of the stairs, and for the first time all day, everything was absolutely quiet and still, save for the buzz of fluorescent lighting warming up. In the semi-darkness, they waited.*

*Then, a great burst of noise- a crash of water, a heavy spatter of water across the roof as if a hurricane had convened itself directly above the house. There was a loud, sheering screech of noise like a rubber glove scraping a guitar-string- and dimly, beneath it, the sound of glass shattering.*

*Mariko glanced over at the stacked pile of windowpanes sitting over in one corner of the main room; ah, well... that had been expected.*

*A sudden hush fell over the outside; the calm before the storm.*

*Then, the sound they'd all dreaded- a great, shuddering boom, accompanied by a sudden tremor, like a half-second earthquake. And then, after a few seconds' pause, another one. And another.*

*As the rumbles churned in a steady rhythm, growing louder and stronger, the Mitamura family huddled together and waited for the danger to pass- hoping and praying, as always, that it would not fall upon them.*



Jin shuffled dutifully down the stairwell in the company of a hundred co-workers, a sea of moving flesh, contemplating terrible timing and opportunity lost.

No matter how many times Jin had to evacuate the office high-rise where he worked in the midst of an unfolding crisis, he never grew used to it.

Now that the alarms had stopped, everyone trundled along in silence... the perfect environment in which to withdraw and sulk, which Jin was. He knew he should be comforting Yuki- but somehow, it seemed improper to bring up her worries here, in amongst everybody, airing them for everyone to hear- and he knew that his voice would sound like a shout in the solemn silence. Still, even as he vacillated between frustration and self-pity, Jin kept finding himself drawn out of his funk by the sight of Yuki beside him.

Even here, in these tense surroundings, her face etched with worry, she was beautiful. Oh, Jin knew that she didn't consider herself to be- and who knew? Maybe by the standards of the day, she wasn't- he couldn't say, as he was hardly an objective observer. He only knew that to him, she was gorgeous, and anyone that thought otherwise was a fool. (A fool that he was glad of, for he couldn't imagine how she hadn't found someone far more attractive and talented than he long ago. He could only attribute it to an inexplicable blindness of the potential competition to all of the beautiful things about her, body and spirit- a blindness which he was grateful for!)

Her cheekbones were low and rounded, almost rosy atop her olive-skin. Below it, a chin that was likewise rounded, giving her face a soft, friendly feel that her thin, perfectly-formed lips, quick to smile, only enhanced. Almond-colored eyes sparkled beneath a closely trimmed crown of jet-black hair, kept in a sort of pseudo-bowl haircut of the kind that was popular in Tokyo in the 90s... there was probably a name for it, but Jin had no idea what it was. He simply knew that all of these and more- her figure, her curves, her long, slender legs, even her wonderful, smooth shoulders (the few times that she, a very modest dresser, actually wore a dress or shirt that bared them)... all of them added up to perfection in his mind. Whatever the world thought- whatever *she* thought- she was a veritable supermodel to him. And that wasn't even counting her true beauty- her beautiful soul. Her personality, her manner, the wonderful, incredible, oh-so-unique and special person that she was... she was everything he had ever dreamed of.

No, scratch that. The dreams and imaginings of adolescence, shallow and simple as they were, had never dared conjure anything as wonderful as she; she was more wonderful, more complex, more perfect than anything that he could have come up with himself.

That she would give any attention to an Otaku loser like him was incredible. That she could care about him- even love him in return- despite all of his flaws, floored him. He still couldn't wrap his head around it.

Yet he knew that she did- knew he felt equally, powerfully, strongly for her. Oh, how he longed to be hers- to be joined to her for the rest of their lives! To belong to her, and her to him, and both and neither and all the wonderful nuances in-between; to take her in his arms and know her in a way that only lovers could, in a passionate, intimate way that (he imagined) even then couldn't ever fully slake or satisfy just how deeply and truly and totally that he wanted to be with her- simply come up with the closest inadequate approximation that the limitations of mortal life would allow.

How he desired to be her husband; to wake every morning beside her and devote every waking hour to providing for her- whether at work (where, with her higher salary, she would probably be providing for *him*), or at home, where he could do his best to provide her with every comfort and pleasure and gesture of affection that he could manage- to always make her feel truly, totally loved.

Yes, he knew that time and apathy would probably dull his desires eventually, that he would not always crave to make her every waking moment a delight; his peers and elders always told him it was thus... and yet, he couldn't imagine a day where that could ever be true- and if he had anything to say about it, it would not come for a very, *very* long time!

How he longed to hold her, to caress her- to feel all of the wonderful and intimate parts of her that he'd never known... it was a struggle- *often* a struggle, even a supreme effort- but by mutual agreement, they were saving themselves for marriage; protecting a virginity that both had yet sheltered in their lives, for each other- or for some future mate, should their relationship not work out. Yuki always said that she wanted her husband to be the first man that touched her that way.

Jin wanted to be that man. Not for the touch itself, but for the commitment, for the closeness- he wanted to be the only one in her life close enough for that, and she the only one in his. Being apart from her- even for a day at a time- was driving him insane; he couldn't stand being apart from her for another minute! (At least the press of evacuating coworkers was keeping them well together for the moment...)

Even with that commitment- that desire to hold something sacred for each other (or whomever their future spouse might be), it was a challenge. Passion burned so strong sometimes, it was nearly impossible to overcome- without a generous helping of prayer, and sometimes judiciously-applied (if mutually unwanted) distance were the only things that kept them honest, with their eyes fixed on the prize, the accomplishment of outlasting the momentary desire to reach the day of some theoretical wedding with principles (and virginity) intact... saving themselves for marriage was hard work, and it took a heck of a lot of self-control; Jin had major respect for the rare couple that accomplished it. And while he believed that those that failed to do so were indeed doing something wrong, taking something that was not yet meant for them... he could hardly bring himself to *fault* them for it, to cluck his tongue and shake his head- not after experiencing for himself the kind of struggle that they were up against. He might disapprove of such failure, strive against it, but he could certainly understand it; it had almost claimed the two of them often enough.

He knew that a lot of people would consider him old-fashioned for even trying to save himself in that way. Oh, well... he lived by his principles and they by theirs. And, as always in his life, he had to do what he believed was right, even if it was scornful in others' eyes.

Personally, he looked forward to his theoretical honeymoon someday actually *meaning* something, being an exciting time of discovery and celebration, not just another vacation in a lifetime that would be full of them.

But there wasn't going to be a honeymoon in his future any time soon if he wasn't able to do the actual *proposing*.

He studied Yuki again, distantly aware that he wasn't really watching his footing in the jostling press of the crowd, and mentally crossing his fingers that it wouldn't result in yet another mail-cart-collision style disaster.

She was focused, determined, no-nonsense; a quality that was more necessity than nature for her- something that her job had required and thus a mode that she'd learned to project, combining a natural focus and determination with a sense of authority, command, and an apparent of knowing what she was doing- none of which she necessarily felt (but at least could fake convincingly). He knew that she was more competent, a stronger leader, than she gave herself credit for- over time, she'd become the leader that she projected to others; the performer had become the role. But she still thought of herself as a shy, less-than-capable girl, more child than adult, pretending to be capable of a job where she was in over her head; her self-image hadn't caught up to her competency yet. Jin suspected that it was that way for most adults deep down; there was no magical moment where one simply *felt* like an adult, as capable and assured as the adults surrounding one in childhood seemed to be; life as a grown-up, at some level, always felt like a scared kid, playing house, pretending to lead a grownup life, subconsciously terrified of being outed and discovered as the fraud you were- a know-nothing kid pretending to take on an adult's role... and all the while never realizing that one had long-since assumed that mantle in practice and reality and had been living as a grown up for some time now... because it always felt like there was something *more*; something real that was still to come that would really make one *feel* like an adult instead of a clueless teenager faking one's way through life.

Or maybe that was just him- and to a degree, Yuki. Not being a telepath, Jin had no way of knowing for sure.

He tripped and nearly fell as his step automatically sought out a downward step that wasn't there. He was on the ground floor, and his hard stamp onto the ground- a leg not yet decelerated because it expected another 5 inches of descent- pitched him forward, stumbling into the back of Kendra Sha'sahn, the Indian supervisor of overseas sales. She turned to flash him a sharp look, then reconsidered as she got a good look at him.

"Are you alright, mister-...?"

"Kirishima. Uh, Jin. Yes... yes, I'm all right."

Her eyes took on a gentle, sympathetic quality, and he belatedly remembered that she was a mother... of... four? Clearly mistaking the source of his current anxiety, she spoke in the same soothing tones that he imagined she would use to address one of her offspring, frightened of a winter storm.

"It will be all right, Kirishima-San. We'll get through this. We have in the past, and we will again; this is what we've drilled for."

*And carried out a dozen times that haven't been a drill*, Jin thought. Outwardly, he just nodded.

Satisfied with her impromptu mothering, Kendra placed a hand on his shoulder, gave it a squeeze, and then moved off into the crowd.

Ahead, the open doorway was a cool, dark portal to the cool autumn night that lay beyond. The last rays of the sun had faded to the haze of dusk sometime between when he had left his desk, and their arrival here- as Jin stepped out into the milling crowd in the parking lot beyond the door, he had to blink furiously, waiting for his eyes to adjust to anything beyond the bright lights of the city gleaming above and around him.

"I'm going to call Toru- he's in charge of the section evac in my absence..."

There was Yuki, moving off. He raised a hand, opened his mouth to tell her not to stray far-

"Hey, Jin!"

Jin sighed inwardly. It was Cho-ji, from accounting.

"Jin, we've got a pool going- want in?"

"No thanks, Cho-ji-san."

"Sure? We've got 20 to 1 odds on Jet Ja-"

"*No thanks*, Cho-ji-san."

"Front runner right now by a 5-1 ratio is King Gh-"

"*Not interested!*"

Cho-ji shrugged.

"Okay, if you insist."

He leaned closer conspiratorially, and Jin kept the distance between the two of them constant by walking away.

"I crunched the numbers, and between you and me, I personally think we're overdue for Manda..."

Jin was already out of earshot, shaking his head. It was all numbers for him- even in the middle of an evacuation. His constant prattle was endurable during tax season, but at a time like this... *oh, hell!* Now he'd lost Yuki in the crowd.

As sirens began to sound in the distance, Jin plunged into the milling crowd, intent to find the woman that- he hoped- would soon be his bride.

But before he could proceed even a dozen paces, pushing and shoving and 'excuse me'ing his way through the throng, his eyes were drawn up to the dusky skyline, where an unmistakable silhouette stood in stark relief...

\*\*\*\*\*

Katagiri whistled low as he approached the operating table, where the patient- a man in his late 30s- was already opened up, the crucial inner workings of his skull exposed to the dry, sterile Operating Room air. He could already see that this was going to be a tricky one.

The patient was opened up to the Superior Orbital Fissure, a foramen (or gap) between the lesser and greater wings of the spheroid bone... in layman's terms, a 'hole in the head' which human beings *did* very much need; within was much of the biological machinery that operated the eye.

There, Katagiri could see the source of the problem, centered around the Oculomotor nerve. The third of twelve cranial nerves, it allowed the majority of eye movements to function- as the building rattled, a deep, low vibration, Katagiri could already tell why they'd called him in- severing this nerve would have disastrous results for the patient, and so any operations around the delicate area demanded a fine degree of precision.

The nerve itself was exposed, already sliced open by the attending physician, and within... there was the neurofibroma.

It would be simplest to describe a neurofibroma as a nerve tumor, an abnormal growth centered around any of the body's numerous and sundry nerve fibers- it was common enough in those that suffered from neurofibromatosis... and not unheard-of in those that didn't. Ordinarily, it looked like a small, ugly little yellow sack, a bulging disc the color of pus... like a slightly jaundiced piece of ravioli.

*Mmmm... still hungry.*

But this...

This... was a run of extremely bad luck.

Firstly, of course, it was intertwined in the fibers of an important nerve- which meant excising a segment of the nerve to remove it was not an option.

Secondly, it was a plexiform neurofibroma- the same kind of nerve tumor, but one spread out along a particularly long segment of nerves. Instead of an ugly yellow pouch, this was a long, pink snake- it looked as if it were made out of chewed bubble gum- spread along the length of the nerve. A medical textbook would note that it, like others of its kind, 'diffusely involved the nerve', and didn't form a discreet mass that was amenable to excision.

In other words, it was spread all throughout the nerve in pieces and parts, and not in one single, self-contained, easy-to-remove chunk. That complicated things.

Fortunately, like most tumors, plexiform neurofibromas could be benign.

Unfortunately, *this* one was malignant.

And that was worse than usual, because... what, fourth? Fifth? He'd lost count of the factors stacked against him... because that meant that it was capable of spreading *beyond* the nerve. And this one did, puncturing the cell wall in an ugly starburst and entering the interior of the Superior Orbital Fissure.

And that was where it *really* got bad.

Because (sixth?) it had, as so many things in nature did, taken the path of least resistance in its growth, attaching itself to an existing structure to propagate against, like a drop of water running along a string, or ivy growing up a nearby wall. In this case, it had wrapped and intertwined the Superior ophthalmic vein, which supplied blood to the eye, a 'neighbor' of the Oculomotor nerve. Growing along the length of the vein... and, along *with* the vein, escaping from the cavity where it originated. It had left the Superior Orbital Fissure, and grown into the interior of the skull... all the way to where the vein ended, in the Cavernous Sinus.

And now, now, seventh and worst of all...

It was pressing up against the Internal Carotid Artery.

To be specific, it was up against the Cavernous Segment, or 'C4.' That was the technical terminology- very simple; it was the segment that lay within the Cavernous Sinus, hence it was the Cavernous Segment. That was easy to explain, even to a layman.

But few layman really needed an explanation for the Carotid Artery. It was one of the few arteries of the body that even the least medically educated knew about; it had been popularized by Hollywood as a site of instant death.

Katagiri approached the table- a pool of bright, cold light in the middle of a darkened room. Two orderlies- a slight girl with almond-colored bangs peeking out from beneath her surgical cap, and a somewhat rotund, large-boned man with a beady-eyed complexion- whose names he didn't know- waited at the periphery of the light, here to assist in whatever he might need. The attending physician handed his scalpel over to Katagiri, and broke for the door. Once he was clear, the three of them- and the sedated man on the table- might be the only living souls left within the hospital walls. As soon as the delicate operation was completed and the patient was stable enough to move, they would evacuate with him as well.

But they couldn't move the man now- nor could they simply close him up and begin the operation again later. This man was in extreme peril.

Leaning in close, Katagiri could see deeply into the Cavernous Sinus, a region formed by thick layers of pink-tinged dura mater. Within it, sealed within the lining membrane of the sinus itself, the Internal Carotid Artery passed through on its vital, life-sustaining route. And there, just before the Carotid branched off into the infolateral trunk, situated *just* unhelpfully behind the meningohypophyseal artery that sprouted from it, he could see the dark, ugly tip of the plexiform neurofibroma, pressing against the Carotid, threatening to cut it off. The artery was already swollen, bulging from where the increased pressure created a minor blockage that already threatened to be fatal. The intertwining strands of the ugly neurofibroma wrapped greedily around the Carotid like a sinister octopus, even as the main trunk that they spread from pressed deeper and deeper into the Carotid itself.

And this was where his steady hand was really needed.

Cut the Carotid, and it was all over.

The building rattled again, accompanying a low rumble, like thunder. This *wasn't* helpful. He was no God Of The Steady Hand, no miraculous force that could countermand momentum and absorb kinetic energy- he had his limits. Unexpected, random tremors like this...

*Blasted Code 9s!*

He was already sweating- something that the perceptive female orderly had already noted, stepping forward to mop at his brow with a towel, while the male held a tray out toward him. It glittered and gleamed with freshly sterilized instruments, each with a sharply honed, precisely angled cutting edge that could prove deadly to this patient with the slightest slip.

Katagiri grimaced, glad that his surgical mask hid the expression from the duo before him.

It was a risky operation at best- cutting around the blasted *Carotid Artery*, for heaven's sake!- and even more absurdly so in present conditions. But leaving it be was just as risky or more so. In many ways, the Superior Ophthalmic Vein was the least worrisome aspect- it should be easy enough to unravel the neurofibroma from once both ends of it were cut free of their crucial components... but severe neurological damage- or worse, instant death- beckoned him on either end, where the neurofibroma wrapped around far more critical components.

*And* his optimal angle of approach was largely blocked by the large, free mass lolling out of the side of the surgically-opened nerve... to really get his clearest, least encumbered shot at the tentacles around the Carotid, he'd have to clear the root of the neurofibroma away from the Oculomotor nerve first... an aggravating race against the clock, as the Carotid behind it was what really demanded his attention.

He sighed. Every second probably counted...

Selecting the proper instrument from his tray, he briefly locked eyes with the girl- though her mask hid her own expression just as his did, her eyes twinkled; he had the sudden- probably silly- impression of an encouraging smile.

Bending low over the splayed-open skull in an island of harsh light, Katagiri began his first incision...

The male orderly cried out, shocked, and Katagiri's insides jerked- the first test of his steady hand; his fingers around the potentially deadly blade hadn't wavered a millimeter. The building rocked- a second test- as he straightened, glaring at the fool. Adrenaline flooded every nerve in his body, making his legs feel like jelly-

*Mmmm... no, concentrate now, dinner later!*

-As a metallic tang flooded his mouth. His heart fluttered like a butterfly, juddering in his chest.

The shocked orderly's eyes were wide- fixed not on Katagiri, but behind him. They strayed briefly enough to catch the furious glare directed at him, and he gulped.

"I'm sorry, sensei! But... *look!*"

Katagiri turned as the man pointed toward a small floating rectangle of light in the surrounding darkness, a square of light floating in the blackness.

For a moment, Katagiri's brain couldn't make sense of the images before his eyes. Then, logic resolved them into a more complete picture... the large, windowed observation gallery above the OR; and within it, a ceiling-mounted television set, typically used to observe the procedures in greater detail.

He squinted, trying to make out the details.

This one had been turned to the local news, it seemed. And there, on the screen, was an unmistakable shape- the one that had shocked his assistant so. Oh, great. Just *perfect*. All he needed was for this Code 9 to turn out to be-

\*\*\*\*\*

Kazuhiro stood, stunned by her words. Debrah had meant them, sort of. Truth be told, she wasn't very happy with her life at the moment- she had yet to find a place in her life, a niche or rhythm, that she fit into any better than she blended into a crowd. Sure, she had the routine of her patrol beat- or at least, she had for a few years, until the Tsunami; she'd been here ever since, and she fit in even less in Japan than she had at home. She was glad to be able to have helped, but she was looking forward to flying back to Nebraska in a few months. And, much as she hadn't quite found the place that she was happy in life- and at the moment, was more than a little uncomfortable- she was hardly suicidal... she wanted to keep living and find that place, not give it all up. Even at her most depressed, she knew that things would get better- that life was ups and downs. And invariably, it did. Then it got bad again- sometimes immediately, sometimes after a long while. That was life's cycle. She knew, intellectually, that when you were in one of those valleys, it could seem impossible to ever get out of it... you easily believed the lie that life would *always* be like this, which was never true- whether things were good *or* bad. She'd never really felt that herself. She'd always been well aware enough that life was filled with change to give in to that kind of hopelessness, even when she was down.

Still, she understood how someone could... and she hoped that enough of the truth of her present dissatisfaction, enough of her earnestness (she really *did* care about what had brought him to this point, even if she had no intent of letting it bring her to the same point), was making it into her eyes to convince Kazuhiro of her honesty.

"You *really* want to know?"

"I really do!"

He paused to consider for a moment.

"Well, Deborah-"

"*Debrah*." She snapped, by habit.

*Crap.*

“Sorry, I-... sorry.”

Kazuhiro didn't look offended- thank heavens for that; she could've lost him then and there.

Instead, he looked sympathetic.

“Common mistake?”

“Yeah. Weekly, if not daily.”

His eyes got a faraway look.

“I remember, back in '07 or so... I think it was '07, maybe it was earlier... a sports team in the USA got two Japanese players. A Kazuhiro, and a Suzuki. Obscure enough, but every now and then you'd get a tour group...”

Debrah was embarrassed to admit that she actually knew exactly which team he was talking about, but she figured that wouldn't actually be a useful thing to say right now. More and more, she was beginning to realize how much knowing *not* to talk, just to listen, was an important part of this process. It was probably an important part of all polite conversation, of making people feel heard and valued and respected- but most people were selfish enough in their conversations not to really care about that, or even about ticking the other person off- just about getting their opinion thrown into the mix for everyone to marvel at its wisdom and acknowledge its rightness.

“...And that would get really annoying, so I know how that feels.”

*Crap. Listening! Right...*

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

Impulsively, she took a step forward.

“What are you doing?” Kazuhiro looked alarmed.

Debrah held up a hand- reassuring or warding off, she wasn't sure.

“Relax. I'm not coming anywhere near you.” She was headed toward the edge of the roof, at a spot a good ten feet or so away from where he was.

She took another crunching step forward. He didn't move any close to the edge. That was good.

“It just seemed like it might be easier for you not to have to shout...”

Another step.

“Besides, you've been up here for, what about ten hours now? That's got to be tiring- just standing here, talking to a succession of negotiators... on your feet all day...”

She risked two steps this time, and that brought her to the edge. Just past a decorative ledge that might or might not hold a person's weight- and could easily be leapt over in a single bound if Kazuhiro decided to make the leap- was a dizzying plunge down to the street below, where distant car alarms wailed, set off by the intermittent tremors.

Debrah took a deep breath.

Slowly, carefully, she lowered herself down, squatting on the edge of the building.

Kazuhiro was regarding her with curiosity.

Hands braced behind her posterior, she shifted all of her weight backwards and thrust her legs forward, over the edge.

She was sitting on the ledge of the building, leaning back on her arms.

She released a deep breath that she hadn't even realized she'd been holding. Good, that little maneuver hadn't sent her toppling over the side.

With a casual nonchalance that she didn't feel, she made a show of leaning forward to a normal sitting posture, arms at her sides, kicking her legs back and forth causally like a child sitting with her legs dangling over the dock, as if she were contemplating darting fish around the pylons instead of a prodigious drop to the street below.

“If we're going to talk, we might as well be comfortable. Wanna sit?”

She'd made a point of sitting far enough away, out of arm's reach, that he wouldn't think that she was trying to get close to tackle or grab him, force him away from the edge. Still, she patted the ledge next to her, an invitation to sit. Then, she held her breath again.

He stood there, regarding her curiously, in silence.

"Up to you. I'm just tired of being on my feet today. Thought it might be worse for you."

He still stood and stared.

"I don't bite. Well, okay, I make no promises about that- but hey, that'd just make things more interesting, right?"

*Did that come off as a bad innuendo?*

"Anyway, no pressure."

After a pause, Kazuhiro wordlessly moved to sit. Not as gingerly as she had, but he still took care not to fall in the process.

Debrah smiled inwardly, careful not to let any of it show on her face. That was a good sign. Hopefully.

"Hey- you were saying something before I so rudely interrupted...?"

He hesitated before speaking.

"Well... Debrah-san... it's really the cyclical futility of it all-"

"Hey, not the speech. Tell me for real."

His face darkened.

"You're mocking me."

"No, I just want to hear your honest answer. From the heart. No twenty-dollar... er... yen... words. Just the honest, unrehearsed truth."

*You're more likely to give me an opening to connect that way.*

Kazuhiro sighed, took a deep breath.

The faint sound of screaming accompanied a series of bangs and crashes that continued to shake the rooftop. If they'd both been standing, Debrah would have been worried for Kazuhiro's continued ability to stay balanced on the edge.

But that wasn't the only kind of balance that could be disrupted. Kazuhiro's face screwed up into an expression of horror and anguish, and he looked as if he were going to cry.

"It's them! THEM! What's the point of anything, when *they* keep on coming back? We rebuild in the aftermath, try to make a better life, and then they show up just to knock it all down again!"

A powerful smash jarred the building beneath them as if it had just been hit by a sledgehammer the size of a bus station. Debrah grabbed the roof lip in a white-knuckled grip to keep herself stable- noted that Kazuhiro, unthinking in his distracted anguish, was doing the same.

She turned back to the cityscape- and shrieked aloud, horrified, as she stared into a ruby visor the size of a city bus.

"Oh, no, *NO!*" Kazuhiro shrieked. "Here they come *again!*"

Debrah couldn't believe it. It was- was-

\*\*\*\*\*

*Godzilla. The King of the Monsters had arrived. Bellowing his screeching challenge into the sky, the distant reptilian leviathan trudged slowly over the outskirts of the city, the low, single-story strip malls and business buildings shattering under the crushing weight of his mighty steps. Large houses and parking*

garages, small business and low towers- these simply broke apart against his knee, his thigh- crumbling and brushed aside by the power of his stride. Larger skyscrapers, megaliths and towers, he might avoid, threading in-between, sticking to the streets like a man in a forest keeping to natural paths rather than bushwhacking- the massive constructs of human ingenuity and achievement the only equivalent in his gargantuan world to a forest- but these smaller buildings were no more than bumpy ground to him; he trod over them with no more thought than a man kicking a gopher-hill to scattered dirt-clods as he marched through a field.

The great lizard was roughly bipedal in shape- a sharp, saurian head with a pointed muzzle filled with a double-row of wicked teeth, his bumpy, knobby skin doing little to hood two reptilian (but surprisingly human in their own way) eyes, showing a puzzling match of wisdom and cunning, mindless animal savagery and instinct- and some even ascribed them an emotion... rage. It was a matter of debate- did Godzilla think? Was he intelligent? Did he reason, in his rudimentary way? Or was he merely a thoughtless beast? A mass of animal cunning and instinct, but an animal nonetheless?

No one had gotten the chance to ask him.

And others countered- did it matter whether Godzilla thought? Whether Godzilla reasoned?

Godzilla destroyed. And knowing that was enough.

The King of the Monsters was crowned with a small ridge of plated scales, like those of a stegosaurus, jutting, barely visibly, from the back of his skull like a tiny mohawk... running down the length of his back, growing ever larger and larger, massive, twisted, spiky spines in a row, some in the center of his back even larger than his own head- tapering all the way down to the tip of his tail (receding in size to the tiny, finger-nail sized plates that they started as on his head) in a single, unbroken row.

He had two arms, ending in claw-tipped fingers, and two legs, ending in the massive, trampling feet that laid waste to many a Tokyo street in their time. He was grey, green, blue- depending on the light that you viewed him in- covered in a bumpy, scaly hide like the trunk of a tree- and massive, towering over all but the largest skyscrapers- the humans that fled in panic from him so miniscule compared to his gargantuan height that some wondered if he could even see them on the ground- any more than a human could easily discern the tiny speck of a flea at his feet.

But, Godzilla was still some miles distant, at the edge of the city. Another, far more imminent threat dwelt in the heart of the city.

Gigan screeched a piercing keen, a high-pitch squeal that was partly the screech of a bird of prey, partly the buzz of an angry swarm of hornets.

Already, the cyborg creature was tearing apart the center of the sprawling metropolis, using the sharp, scythe-like claws that he possessed instead of hands (or feet, for that matter).

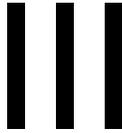
Like Godzilla, it stood erect- two arms, two legs, a tail- unlike the King of the Monsters, its every limb ended not in fingers, but in a wicked, curved blade. A single, cycloptic ruby eye, more a visor that curved 'round the front of its brow than a true eyeball- crowned the monstrosity's face, just above a snapping beak. Above that, a plume that suggested an avian origin (as did the overall look of the creature) spread into a bright, golden sail-fin across the biped's back, like the ridge of a Philipino Sailfin Dragon Lizard. Equally golden scales, shimmering and refractive, resistant to all known forms of damage, covered its chest- save for a great, massive slit- almost a trench- running straight down the middle, bisecting it from neck to groin. Emerging from this gap were a series of serrated, jagged teeth- ordered, precise, polished, regular- the very antithesis of Godzilla's organic, twisted, no-two-alike spine-plates, made of some nigh-indestructible alien alloy. And these ordered teeth held another advantage- in the most bizarre form of biological/mechanical mash-up since Ash from Evil Dead, the great teeth formed part of an internally-powered buzz saw, capable of moving with great, shearing rapidity... a lethal whirring blade of death for any that would approach the monster's chest.

Meter for meter Godzilla's equal in height, the olive-green creature seethed destructive malice, and a cruel, cold intelligence from the calculating circuitry that lay, side-by-side with flesh of an alien world, within its bizarre body.

There could be no question that the legendary dai-kaiju (or giant monster) born of the atom, Japan's most legendary lizard, was bearing down on the cybernetic intruder that dared to trample and crush and

*destroy within his stomping grounds. Whether Godzilla served as Japan's protector, or simply a vicious, territorial animal that guarded 'his' island territory with a jealous vengeance, Godzilla tolerated no interlopers; as was inevitable when two Kaiju were within a hundred miles, a showdown was nigh.*

*And the city that stood between them would pay the price.*



Katagiri worked feverishly, slicing away the trailing pieces of the plexiform neurofibroma with as much delicate precision as he could manage, doing his best to slice free a primary chunk that would allow him the best, least impeded access to the Carotid behind it. He had to be careful not to neglect the Oculomotor Nerve while he was at it, of course- and so the process was necessarily slow and steady, sacrificing speed for care- and it was growing all the more difficult, as the periodic tremors that continued to shake the OR seemed to come from two directions now- the new set fainter, but growing steadily stronger.

He shook his head- well, mentally, anyway; he couldn't afford the disruption of the physical motion- at the commotion outside.

*Kaiju.*

A Code 9. The city was under attack by giant monsters.

*Again.*

Was there no end to these behemoth's brawls?

Oh, from a physician's perspective, they were medical marvels, their titanic bodies operating on principles, with mechanisms, never seen nor imagined by mortal man. The amount that could be learned from them was phenomenal, their potential for research almost incalculable- as separate from humanity, as rife with potential for discovery, as the alien ecosystem of Jupiter's moons were to Earth's biosphere.

And yet, divorced from a purely clinical view, they were a cancer. Starting out as tiny cells, but mutated into enormous tumors- crushing, all-absorbing, deadly tumors that threatened the entire body to which they were attached, guaranteeing a painful and lingering death. The weapons invented to stop them, the battles held to thwart them, were like chemotherapy- a deadly poison that killed the patient just as effectively as the cancer, slowly dragging both down into an abyss... where death lay waiting, and nothing else.

Katagiri didn't believe that there was a cure for cancer; he didn't mean to seem heartless, but the very nature of the beast seemed to preclude any kind of true solution- just the slow killing sweep that would devour cancer and patient alike, hopefully extinguishing the former before it totally extinguished the latter. But no cure. Only a grim prognosis.

Did that mean, metaphorically speaking, that he believed that the world was doomed? Or just Japan, their seeming epicenter and special favorite?

But, no- against all his expectations, he'd seen patients survive cancer. Recover. Be healed. He didn't believe in a cure for cancer.

But he did believe in miracles.

And so, he couldn't give up, any more than he would give up on a patient with cancer. Like all good doctors, he would keep treating, keep hoping, keep searching for a cure.

To outsiders, the mad scramble of therapies and treatments in the face of seemingly-inevitable cancer might seem pointless- cyclical, futile- a waste of time and energy and money to grasp at straws when one could be facing one's fate with peace and restful acceptance.

But to the patient, inside that dreaded condition, some odd combination of desperation and hope worked together to make one think that perhaps cancer *could* be beaten. That there *was* a chance. That

no matter how much difficulty had to be endured, how much struggle, how many crazy ideas and new therapies and time and money and effort were expended, it was worth it... because one of them might *work*. That life- while it might not go back to normal- *could* continue.

And sometimes, it did.

That was how the world kept functioning in the face of this insanity, he imagined. It lived in crisis mode; life was not normal, lacking equilibrium, balance, tranquility- but rather than accept inevitable death and defeat, it struggled onwards, suspended in this balance between hope and desperation... having faith that it could triumph, even if common sense said to lay down and die.

And sometimes, there *were* miracles.

He held out his hand for the narrower blade that he'd requested- and endured about twenty seconds of standing, palm out, before the male orderly gave a soft "Oh!" and proffered the tool to him.

As he lowered the tool into the cavity and began his careful cutting anew, Katagiri's brow wrinkled in irritation. Just his luck, to be stuck with a fool-

The building rattled, and Katagiri saw the girl grab onto the linen cart to keep from stumbling; the big man fell off of his feet and hit the ground with a thump that shook the table even more than the footsteps of giants from without.

Katagiri held himself perfectly still. This tremor had been violent- too violent...

Eyes agog, he leaned in closely, nearly crossing his eyes at the delicate nerve bundle, trying to get closer while not blocking his own light... that small dark line- was that-

He'd sliced the bundle. Severed it. It was a disaster- the man's eyesight would be forever-

The probing tip of his scalpel moved the small, dark line... and with exceeding care, he picked out and away from the open skull, holding it up before his face.

An eyelash.

The nerve bundle was intact.

He stood there, trembling. It had been so close- even he had limits! Just a touch closer, and he could have...

A hand rested on his shoulder, gave it a reassuring squeeze. He turned awkwardly toward the orderly and acknowledged her gesture of encouragement with a hesitant nod. Then, gritting his teeth, he turned back to the precision task before him.

Cutting carefully around the edge of the bundles, he did not even look up to meet the other orderly's apologetic gaze as he clambered to his feet.

\*\*\*\*\*

"All right, listen up, everyone!"

The booming voice of Mr. Tezuka, as commanding in the twilight parking lot as it was in the board room (or so Jin believed; he'd never been invited to the boardroom to share a meeting with the company's owner, but he'd seen video of it), carried over the din, silencing it immediately.

"I believe we have everyone here- and it looks as if the Kaiju battle may move this way, so we're going to move out along our primary evacuation route. I want everyone to gather into groups of 30, quickly; ranking section head in a group will take the lead. If your group doesn't have one, find one from another group. Section heads, you know our route. If the battle moves to threaten it, move to the secondary. Everyone stay together. Where's Akira Kochi?"

"Here!" A voice called, not too far in front of Jin.

"Akira, I want you to stay here for 15 minutes, so long as it's safe. In case of any stragglers, I want

you to round them up and lead them to follow us- but the moment you feel you're in danger, I want you to get out of here. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Good man! All right, everyone- remember, this is hardly our first Kaiju. I want a quick, orderly evacuation, even better than that Ebirah/Biollante affair- and I'll see everyone back at work tomorrow morning!"

A nervous chuckle ran through the crowd at his optimism... no doubt many were indeed wondering if there would be an office building to return to tomorrow. They'd survived quite a few battles in their time, but no structure's luck could hold out forever.

"Get to it!" With that customary benediction, Mr. Tezuka dismissed his workers, and the area became a bustle of activity. The lot shook with regular tremors as the two giant monsters- the nearby Gigan and the distant Godzilla- tromped towards each other.

Where was Yuki? Surely, she had to be joining one of the evac groups... surely, she wouldn't have tried to return to her own office on foot to oversee the evacuation of late-working stragglers in her own office, just because she felt responsible for them...?

Jin searched for her in vain through the crowd of faces, but in the end, had to settle for joining a group- composed primarily of mail room workers- and preparing for his own departure. Once organized, the group started off at a jog down the deserted roadway, a brisk pace that their daily exercise periods left them well-prepared for.

They passed storefronts with steel shutters drawn, abandoned cars, the street littered with half-abandoned articles of food, entertainment, and the pavement-clinging loose papers that seemed to spontaneously emerge in the wake of a large crowd.

Behind them was one group of workers, behind them another- they were just one of a procession of groups, like a phalanx of Roman legions, moving in silence with a calm, quiet serenity of practiced professionalism.

Glancing to his left and to his right, Jin realized that he knew almost none of these faces. He was never really one for making friends at work- few there really shared his interests, beliefs, or compatible personalities; that, combined with a slight shyness, left him fairly isolated from his coworkers in the day-to-day grind.

Though, that was the story of his life, really. He had never really fallen in line with mainstream Japanese culture; his beliefs with popular beliefs, or his interests with current popular trends- he was always a little out of step with society, and that left him poorly equipped to make easy, casual friends the way that others might.

It wasn't as if he was unfriendly... just awkward and hesitating.

Except for the one that really mattered to him.

He longed to know where Yuki was, to know if she was safe, to be sure that she was in a well-managed group- to find some quiet place with her where he could finish his proposal.

Well, start it, really.

But that could wait until they were *safe*.

As the evacuation route had called for, the jogging groups had crossed off of the street and through a public park, threading past the duck pond (which seldom had any nearby ducks associated with it). As they jogged past the pond, Jin cast a wistful glance at the small glade on the far side- where he should be laying out a picnic dinner for Yuki right now... instead, the blanket lay, still folded, in the back seat of his car, and the food in the large communal refrigerator in the employee break room... and the proposal, unspoken- for who knew *how* long.

They crossed the park and out onto a new street, merging in like a pedestrian traffic force to be reckoned with, approaching the nearby corner which, upon rounding, would put them on a steady approach to the freeway overpass that led to the city's primary evacuation staging area. Like these deserted streets, it would be free of all but abandoned cars by city mandate- vehicles only seemed to

attract the attention of the monsters.

Jin had lost track of the Kaiju; in amongst the many buildings which rose like a forest around him, they could only be glimpsed through the occasional fortuitous gap. Still, they couldn't be too close- the tremors of their constant footsteps served as a strong gage for that.

Jin was tiring- they'd been jogging for a while, and while office calisthenics kept him in good shape, he wasn't inexhaustible- even the flat grade was taking a lot out of him.

Breath shallow, Jin focused on the road ahead of him, just trying to keep moving- the man behind him bumped into him, and he realized his pace was flagging.

He was really more of a sprinter.

To be fair, he made it farther without tiring than the last evacuation, where he'd worn out by the time they'd reached the duck pond; he'd probably added a good mile and a half to his distance since then, and he was glad for that.

Why was it so noisy?

Rounding the corner, Jin had barely begun to process the low, throaty roar of machinery behind him than he was being shoved aside, forced sideways by his jogging neighbor, driven into the middle of the street- and with a roar of diesel motors, enormous armored tanks, each emblazoned with the white-and-red of the Japanese flag, rumbled past on either side, flanking the group.

They'd stumbled into the middle of a cavalry charge.

Behind him, Jin saw other groups already falling cautiously in along this main road, carefully spacing themselves between the tank formations to avoid being crushed beneath the rumbling treads. All around him, he could hear relieved exclamations, excited chatter- what better protection could the evacuating phalanxes of office workers ask for than an army escort?

Jin knew that this was disaster. Before him, in the distance, far beyond the street's end, was the retreating form of Gigan, the army's target.

And when they engaged it, as inevitably occurred, the Kaiju's wrath would fall upon the armored columns, destroying them utterly- and everything in the vicinity.

"Hey!" He found himself shouting, tentatively. "Hey, we have to get out of here!"

His running neighbors stared at him, continuing on their way- caught up in the midst of them, Jin continued on, too. From elsewhere in the group, a man whose name Jin didn't know scoffed. Fear for the danger vied with anger boiling up from some deep place- an outrage at someone's ignorance which could lead to others getting hurt.

"No, I mean it!" He insisted- now bellowing to be heard by the flanking groups. "These guys are headed for the overpass, just like we are! When they attack, Gigan's going to counter-attack; that wrath will fall on us! And we aren't in armor-plated vehicles! We need to move to the secondary route!"

His group had slowed uncertainly, and the group behind was drawing near.

"There's safety with the military-" Someone crowed from the front of the group.

"No, there isn't!" Jin interrupted, shouting at the top of his lungs. "We stay on this course, we're going to fall into the crossfire! We have to move to the other route! Fast!"

"You're paranoid-"

"He's right!" It was Shinji Tanaka, from shipping, in the group behind; his own group had slowed sufficiently now that the two groups were practically merged into one. "We can't stay here! I second the directive- backup route, quickly! Pass it on to the groups before and behind!"

As the shouts rippled out in both directions, Jin's group broke off to the left, headed for the underpass tunnel system that would take them beneath and around the danger zone.

As they did, a burst of noise and fire exploded from the barrel of the leading tank, deafening Jin, and the arcing projectile burst into smoke and flame against the distant Kaiju's back.

The cybernetic giant spun with surprising rapidity, scythed arms spreading to slash against the smokestack towers of the industrial plant that flanked it as it strode destructively through the city's coal

processing center.

Both towers, already damaged in the Kaiju's arrival, gave way in showers of metallic sparks, which lit Gigan in eerie white- before the twin towers, both taller than the monster itself, toppled forward with an eerie groan, smashing into the main plant's vaunted dome, blasting it to rubble in a grey-black cloud of smoke that obscured the Kaiju entirely.

The last thing to disappear was its single, glowing red eye.

For a moment, there was only a roiling, churning black cloud on the horizon, the tanks advancing steadily.

And then Gigan seemed to materialize out of nothingness, emerging from the inky blackness like a creature spawned of hell. Arms thrust back, it leaned forward and bellowed a screeching challenge.

The tanks opened up, roaring their fury at the Kaiju, great bursts of smoke beginning to blossom against its armored hide- and then Jin lost sight of the battle, the road sloping downward on a ramp toward the tunnel. He could see that the group was divided- those farthest in the front, running ahead of the tanks, were already up on the overpass, far above them, crossing past, while everyone from Jin's group-backward were diverting from the tunnel- now broken into ragged, disorganized clusters to escape the center of the tank's deafening, overpowering assaults.

Ahead, the tunnel mouth flickered from light to black, its overhead panels fluctuating with the city's damaged power grid. But hopefully, Jin thought, it would spell safety and some brief measure of shield against the fury to come- something that the poor souls on the overpass above wouldn't have the luxury of.

Jin prayed earnestly that Yuki wasn't among them.

And then, behind him, the earth shook and the sky roared as the fire of Gigan's wrath fell upon the tanks of the Japanese army.

The shuddering in the ground amplified into a juddering roar in the echo-chamber of the tunnel; the lights winked out, plunging the tunnel into the darkness- save for the fiery orange light from behind as enormous, multi-ton, steel-plated vehicles of war melted, shredded to ribbons, burned to cinders- sliced open by the searing red beams that Gigan had merely to gaze in order to unleash.

Only a few distributed flashlights against the street-center reflective strips lit the way ahead to keep them straight down the dark, almost-claustrophobic tunnel. It was amazing how tight and oppressive even the spacious 4-lane tunnel seemed in the pressing darkness.

Jin simply hoped that the groups that had struck to the primary route had managed to stay as safe they had.

Their footsteps echoed in the cavernous space.

Everyone was quiet, grim, doubtless replaying in their minds the carnage of the tanks that they'd narrowly escaped being in the middle of-

With a roar, the ceiling was rent asunder, and heavy chunks of masonry reinforced with steel crashed to the pavement in a devastating, shattering rain.

Suddenly, Jin was running upstream, men and women colliding all around them, as those charging ahead and those running back collapsed into a chaotic tangle of panic and impacting bodies

And deadly stone the size of city buses continued to rain down.

\*\*\*\*\*

"That's it!" Kazuhiro screamed, tears streaming down his cheeks. "How can anyone live, as long as they still do? As long as they keep coming to destroy...!"

Debrah's heart pounded in her chest like a kicking jackrabbit. Gigan had turned away from his eye-

level view, not interested in them, and moved off towards Godzilla (and now was picking off the last of the tanks that impotently hurled their fiery might against it with a deadly red beam- a buzzing, howling snarl that curled about like angry red hornets, scattering like a shotgun blast to inflict a dozen points of damage- which pulsed forth from that self-same visor-eye). But the presence of an imminent Kaiju brawl made this a dangerously volatile situation. This roof was *not* a good place to be right now.

She opened her mouth to speak, but it was dry and she was shocked and nothing came out, and then Kazuhiro was railing again.

"Everything we hold dear, everything we love- they trample and crush and destroy and... and... *trample!*"

Overhead, Debrah heard the distant roar of jet fighters, incoming, preparing to engage the Kaiju.

She turned a critical eye onto Kazuhiro. He wasn't leaving. Not until he was much calmer. The city was evacuating, but Kazuhiro would stay put to rail over his perceived tormentors until doomsday.

He wasn't going anywhere.

So neither could she.

Kazuhiro was crying now, his eyes distant- no doubt fixed on the great past loss that had traumatized him into this position. Debrah cursed, silently... she was no good at funerals, no good with condolences- it wasn't that she was unsympathetic, just awkward. She knew she couldn't really comprehend the enormity of the loss from her outsider's perspective, couldn't think of anything that could possibly cheer *her* up from the painful fugue that she imagined the bereaved to be in... and thus she never really knew what to say.

"I'm... sorry. Did you lose someone... close to you?"

His face darkened, and the tears stopped. She could see him close off from her.

"No."

Wait, that wasn't fair... she'd expected to screw up somewhere along the line, but how was *that* the wrong thing to say?

"Ummmm... I'm sorry?"

A pause.

"You already said that."

"Yeah, but, I'm sorry if I said the wrong thing, too."

Another pause.

"You didn't. You were just trying to be nice."

She felt a small smile involuntarily curl her lips.

"-Just like everyone else."

The smile vanished.

"Polite, sympathetic, soft tones, endless questions-"

Debrah felt heat rising to her cheeks instead.

"-tying to talk down the crazy man. All the same."

"Now just a second!" Debrah heard herself shout, not nearly so politely as she'd meant to. "Don't lump me in with some... some professional negotiator! I'm not here because it's my job to throw a couple of soothing words and some psychobabble at every psyc- every..." She found herself at a loss, tripping over her words, her anger suddenly deflated in her awkward search for a less insulting alternative to 'psychopath.'

"...to every... person who's feeling low!"

*Oh, yeah, that was a good save.*

Her head of steam was lost, her forward momentum gone, and so she was able to wrestle her tone back to gentle, even if she worried that it cost her some of the honest and genuine-ness that her outburst

had. At least she seemed to have regained his attention.

"This isn't my job. Or my specialty. I told you. I'm here because I want to help *you*. I'm asking questions because I want to know what happened to *you*. Not because my job is finding out what bothers people! Because I wanted to know what's hurt you, what it was that happened to Kazuhiro Suzuki. And how I can help him. You. Er..."

He studied her a moment, weighing her words, before returning his attention to the distant Kaiju before him; they'd meet in moments, now.

"They've been up here asking me questions all day. Didn't *they* tell you?"

Debrah thought.

"I think I was a last-minute, last-ditch ringer. They didn't tell me much."

"Glad to know I warranted such consideration!" He noted snippily.

"Hey! The city's best already tried, remember? And you were the one that said you didn't want to see another Japanese face—"

"I *didn't* say that! I don't know where they got that!" He sounded aggravated, but at least he was distracted from being distraught.

"Well, maybe that means that they weren't very good listeners. I can be. If nothing else, you can make sure that your reasons and feelings get heard, get spread- your message reaches people- because it's heard by someone that really cares about you, not some stuffed-shirt who only listens because it's his job, and doesn't really hear you."

"My *message*?"

He seemed confused. Debrah hesitated.

"Yeah. You know, why you're doing this, what you want people to know..."

He still looked bewildered. With a sinking feeling and a warm blush rising to her cheeks, she tried again.

"Don't all jumpers have, like, a message that they want the world to hear? Why they're doing this, what drove them to...? You don't have a message?"

He shook his head slowly, looking at her as if, perhaps, *she* were the unstable one here, the one *he'd* need to talk out of doing something crazy.

"I didn't realize I was supposed to."

Debrah was actively blushing now, feeling the unwelcome warmth in her cheeks as if she'd been crying for an hour herself.

"Well, I... just thought..."

"I've decided to stop living because... it's gotten too hard to do. To keep on living. Each day is too hard to keep going on, because living has become too... hard."

He frowned, clearly dissatisfied with his answer, no doubt picking it apart and rephrasing it a dozen different ways in his head, looking for where it had gone wrong. Inside her own head, Debrah thrilled. That definitely wasn't rehearsed- he was being genuine with her. If she could capitalize on this...

"I know what you're saying, Kazuhiro. I get it. But, please... can't I get a little more infor- can't I... get to know you a little better first? It's not like I'm going to have the chance afterward, and I really do want to know a bit more about you. Seems like this is going to be my only chance."

A thought occurred to her. It would be a gamble- a *big* one- but her instincts said...

She stood up.

"Look... uh, I have to... go inside for a minute. I'm really sorry. But, can I trust you to stay here- not to do anything before I get back?"

Kazuhiro stared at her incredulously.

"You're... *leaving*?!"

Debrah bit the inside of her cheek, hoped this wasn't the biggest mistake she'd ever made.

"Just stepping inside for a minute. Real quick. I'll be right back."

He continued to stare.

"Will you promise me that if I do- less than five minutes, I swear- you'll still be here when I get back?"

He nodded numbly, almost habitually. She took a firm tone with him.

"I mean it, Kazuhiro. Will you *promise*?"

He still didn't seem to know what to make of this.

"I... yeah."

She backed a step away.

"You promise?"

"I promise."

She nodded, took another step back.

"I'm sorry. I'll be *right* back."

Turning, she dashed across the roof towards the door, as the jets roared overhead, bright plumes of fire creating long lances of smoke in the air, rushing to detonate against the Kaiju's scaly hide.

When would the military, in its eternal, futile optimism, realize that such assaults were useless? Their greatest hardware could never hope to scratch the titanic beasts, yet they wasted millions of dollars and hundreds of lives every year, pouring their impotent might against the monsters in endless, nihilistic waves. And in the inevitable aftermath, Japan's mighty military would lay so decimated that the remainder of the world continued to believe that Japan *had* no active military... and the monsters marched on. When would they realize the necessity, the cosmic *rightness*, the inevitability of things? The two monsters would march inexorably toward each other, laying waste to all that stood in their path (and leaving little of it standing), until they finally came into contact with each other. What would follow would be brutal, fierce, and protracted... but in the end, the two monstrosities would deal with each other, and then depart. It was the way of things- nature's way of offsetting these aberrations of physics and biology, these abominations that, by all rights, should never have existed. It was a cycle that the world had ordained- since nothing else in nature could possibly deal with the horrific juggernauts, they became a closed system in and of themselves- dealing with each other in a closed loop completely separate, extraneous to, and self-contained apart from, Earth's natural cycles and rhythms.

Debrah threw open the large door leading down into the building's interior, nearly tripped running down the stairs, and flung open the door to the abandoned hallway of the office complex. Inside, she rushed down the hallway in search of an office cooler, desperately hoping that her gamble would pay off. It took her far longer than she would have preferred to find it, and she had to return far more slowly than she would have preferred to avoid spilling it.

When she returned to the roof, paper cup in hand, Kazuhiro was close to the edge, standing and looking down.

"Hey!" She called. "You made a promise, right?"

He turned, startled to glance at her... and then nodded, once.

"Good." She said. "Now, I brought you something. I'm going to take it over there-" She indicated a point about ten paces from him, "-and then I'm going to step over there-" She indicated another spot on the opposite side of the roof, "-so that you can come and get it without worrying about me trying anything. Okay?"

He looked suspicious.

"What is it?"

"Water. I figured that, if you'd been talking to negotiators all day, your throat would have to be pretty parched."

"It's not... drugged?"

She rolled her eyes.

“Even if I had any drugs- and where would I get them? -do you think I would risk making you woozy while you were perched on the edge of a rooftop in a constantly shaking city?”

Kazuhiro nodded, and as Debrah came forward to set the cup down on the roof’s rough surface, she thought that she might even have seen a hint of gratitude in his expression.

Spears of Godzilla’s blue nuclear fire lanced out in angry bursts, annihilating the last of the attacking jets- no doubt little more than mosquito-like pests to him.

Setting the cup down, Debrah retreated to her designated spot- Kazuhiro’s approach was hesitant at first, as he came away from the ‘safety’ of his ledge- but he soon crossed briskly to it and snapped it up. As he downed the contents, Debrah swiftly strode back to her previous position on the ledge, a dozen paces down from his chosen spot; he didn’t object as he returned to it, sat down again.

After a moment, he spoke, his voice still hoarse from the day’s use, but sounding stronger.

“Thank you.”

She smiled at him.

“You’re welcome.”

For a moment, silence reigned. And then, quietly, she tried again.

“What do you do for a living, Kazuhiro?”

His face screwed up with that, tears threatening to break out once more, and again she wondered what she’d said wrong.

His words were both a rallying cry and a piteous admission, a soul-bearing release that provided no catharsis, only a fresh wave of pain.

“I’m in construction!” He shouted, as if that explained everything.

She blinked a few times, then nodded. Okay, that would explain a few things. But...

“That’s a... bad thing?”

“That’s why I’m here!” He wailed.

Debrah pondered for a moment.

“Well, I get how that would be frustrating. The rampages make a *lot* of work for you. But, uhhh... forgive me for being obtuse, but... wouldn’t that be a good thing? Haven’t these... monsters... made you rich? Construction has been Japan’s second-largest growing and prospering field since 1956...”

Kazuhiro’s eyes were wide, manic.

“Yes, people *would* think that, wouldn’t they?! What a wonderful *racket!* You set it up, they knock it down, you get paid handsomely to set it up again! Start from scratch, rebuild from the ashes.”

Debrah winced at his rising tone. Another miscalculation, and now he was working his way up into an agonized fervor. She was going to drive him to his death faster than neglect and abandonment would have!

“Well, that’s probably a great setup for unfeeling worker drones, for ants or bees that can’t take professional pride in their work! If we were the Baining, living for work, with no color or joy in life! But for those of us that care, that pour their heart and soul into the work they do-!”

And now he was scrambling to his feet, hastily, carelessly, and Debrah shut her eyes, sure that he was a dead man, as another gigantic footstep shook the building...

“-That design the city and care about it and love it, only to see all of their hard work and dedication knocked into matchsticks and rubble, again and again and again...!”

Debrah opened her eyes. Kazuhiro was standing, miraculously still balanced on the edge of the roof, arms spread wide to encompass the cityscape. Beyond him, Godzilla had smashed his way into the city limits, and was looking around with uncertainty, searching for his foe... but Debrah saw now that the crafty cyborg had been busy- while Godzilla was engaged with the jets, his nemesis had used his enormous shredding saw-chest to slice a deep hole straight into the middle of the city commerce tower, yanking

away loose debris around the edges with its razor-sharp scythe-hands. Now, it sheltered inside the hollowed-out building, hiding inside the very hole in the building's center that it had created. Debrah was surprised that the three remaining walls kept standing with as much of the interior had been hollowed out. But from Godzilla's angle, the hole would not be visible- instead, Gigan would seem to have simply disappeared.

He was clever, this one.

But Kazuhiro, looking at the devastated building, its guts scraped out and lying as a pile of debris on the street below, saw only the devastation to his precious structures; having seen the rumble of Kyoto firsthand the summer before, Debrah knew that it was likely to grow far worse than this.

And Kazuhiro was starting to hyperventilate.

"They eviscerate and crush, smash and beat, tear structures apart- they don't even *care* about them! Buildings are just... obstacles, tactical sandbags to hide behind, or... or the ropes around the wrestling ring to throw your opponent into! They're just... consequences of the terrain! With no appreciation, no care- not even thought- they simply swat them aside, destroy the legacies and beauty and majesty of any construction- just because it's in their way!"

He was shaking now, and his shoes were halfway over the edge of the roof, his toes hanging over open air.

"I still see a city!" Debrah shouted, desperate. "Look in front of you! Yes, there's devastation- but look at how much is still standing!"

*That was stupid. He's gonna jump for sure, and it'll be your fault.*

She needed to break his concentration. Get his mind out of this self destructive loop.

His back was to her.

Maybe she could walk up and touch him... or... slap him- that was supposed to stop hysteria in its tracks...

*Yeah, that'll end well.*

Maybe she should... act like she was attracted to him, flash him a little skin...

Debrah shuddered. She wasn't sure she could do that even to save a man's life.

*No, that one's out, too.*

She needed something, no matter how crazy...

Shout at him that buildings didn't matter?

*Too extreme. Could provoke a volatile reaction.*

Tell him that they couldn't rebuild themselves, that he needed to live, to go fix the damage?

*It would overwhelm him, the enormity of the task... play right into his downward spiral.*

She had to break him away from the futility, the repetition, the overwhelming that he was drowning in.

Kazuhiro took a step closer to the edge.

"They're *destroyers!* Of all that's good!" He shouted, as if he hadn't even heard her.

Tell him he could go build somewhere else, another nation less plagued by Kaiju?

Appeal to all the good things that remained?

Remind him that Kaiju could be destroyed, that someday they would?

*What can I say?!*

"What's your favorite building?" She blurted, feeling foolish.

He didn't pause, didn't turn, didn't answer.

"Tell me about it!" She shouted. "*What's your favorite building?!*"

She held her breath, awaiting his response.

\*\*\*\*\*

*“Attention!”*

*The call was given before General Haruo Shimura could stop it, and he watched with mild annoyance as every duty officer sprang to his feet, leaping away from chairs and duty stations that Haruo would much rather have constantly manned and attended than see a pointless protocol honored to everyone’s detriment.*

*Those that knew him best would find that thought ironic, as the graying general tended to be one of the most formal, ceremonial men in the military. Fancying himself a great soldier of the old world from days even before the color around his temples had begun to lighten, Haruo considered himself more akin to the samurai of old than to the modern military men- hard-bitten, rough types that tried to emulate America’s Patton and ended up at a half-way ‘cranky’ instead.*

*No, Haruo was one for formal bows and poetic speech- which others considered florid and archaic, he knew; he stood for a code of honor and a near-adherence to bushido; as closely as Army protocols would actually allow.*

*Still, that didn’t mean that he was a fool- a waste of time and attention didn’t serve (metaphorical) king or country; didn’t benefit anyone. Besides, he sought not his own glory- these vain and pompous displays embarrassed him.*

*“At ease!”*

*Striding into the room with a scowl on his leathery, weathered face, arms behind his back, Haruo prowled like a panther, looking for a target for his foul mood. Of course, he had one- two, even- outside... but his foul mood, like the rest of the arsenal he had to throw at them, didn’t seem to be able to make a dent.*

*He wondered why the army hadn’t yet abandoned standard tanks, large trucks with SAM missile batteries on the back, and Maser-weapon carriers with their energy-beam-firing radar dishes mounted on the back; a secret weapon akin to the classic science-fiction ray guns that, even though they had been in use in Japan since the 60s, the Americans had yet to crack the secrets of.*

*And yet, for all that, those three backbones of the Japanese army had never shown even a hint of effectiveness against Kaiju. (Well, that ‘Frankenstein’ creature that had nothing to do with the actual Mary Shelly creation, perhaps... but that had been more of a nonsense human mutation than a true Kaiju. And perhaps Mothra, but she would die practically at the strike of a match, only to be reborn again a few weeks later- hardly a stunning endorsement for the weapons’ effectiveness.) And despite their might, trumping any military in the world, even the United States, for over five decades, these three weapons of warfare had yet to be deployed against any nation or state, no bipedal target human or domestic that hadn’t been over 50 feet high.*

*The Japanese military had out-built the Americans 3-to-1, even in their short post-WWII career manufacturing nearly quadruple the arms and armaments and tools that ‘Uncle Sam’ had ever managed- only patents and research from various Kaiju biology and mutation-based discoveries had kept Japan’s economy afloat, prevented them from the same military overspending collapse that the American President Reagan had maneuvered the Russians into.*

*And yet, their standing army was smaller than that of Antigua, Barbuda, and even Vatican City in annual average- they cumulatively out-built the Americans like ‘no one’s business’ as they would say- but never managed to maintain or preserve their military assets like the Americans did, immediately throwing their rebuilt army in futile, useless waves against the ankles of whatever giant monster came stomping toward Tokyo- and in the aftermath, were whittled right back down to where they were before the beginning of the manufacturing boom. The Americans, by contrast, had lost fewer military vehicles to terrorist IEDs in their entire tenures in Iraq and Afghanistan than an average Kaiju engagement cost the Japanese army in a single day.*

*And don't even get him started on those supreme wastes of time and money, the Super X fighter series! At least screwball ideas like the Dimension Tide Canon, Absolute Zero, Hyper-Maser, and yet another disastrous Mechagodzilla project (they wanted to use the original Godzilla's bones?!) were insane enough for no one to approve them (though Haruo did sometimes idly muse about the road not taken, how the world might have been, had they been approved)... the Super-Xs, all resounding failures against the Kaiju, remained just plausible enough, theoretical victory dangling tantalizingly just beyond reach, that the military was always willing to approve one more Super-X, improving on its predecessor's flaws, confident that this one would finally be the Kaiju-killer they sought.*

*The launch of the Super-X XIII was next week, and Haruo was not confident.*

*Still, impotent as the military continued to be against the Kaiju, it was their duty to keep on trying, to oppose the beasts at every attempt, to at least try to fight them off. This was why Haruo embraced Bushido, the warrior code of old- only in the strict tenets of honor and duty that they bound him to could he find any justification for the repeated, futile efforts to halt the rampaging monsters beyond their control, far beyond their level... only if duty compelled him to could he allow himself to contemplate sending brave young men to their deaths against the monsters when he knew that it would do no good.*

*"Report!" He barked.*

*"Both combatants are positively identified, sir!" Barked one of the junior officers, manning the Master Systems Display. "Both Godzilla and Gigan have engaged our forces- and each other."*

*"Gigan? That thrice-cursed cyborg?" The Haruo scowled irately at the display. "As if we didn't have enough problems of our own without inheriting more from outer space..."*

*"We've got an ID on the RSP, sir- live footage streaming to you now!"*

*One of the technicians pointed at a small monitor set into the control console at a 45-degree angle. Haruo leaned over the small, badly-interlaced, over-bright monitor to survey surveillance drone footage of the place where Godzilla made landfall (Rampage Start Point in military parlance)- in this case, a small oceanside residential community.*

*A sweep of his tail after the Kaiju had passed managed to demolish most of the homes and businesses on the shoreline- but everyone in the belowground shelters seemed to have survived- no telltale depressions on the landscape indicated a direct footstep-induced structure failure; unfortunately, under direct pressure, even a Serizawan Rampage Shelter would crush like an eggshell; fortunately, no such direct hits seemed to have occurred here. The big lizard, at least, tended not to return the way he came- that district would probably be in the clear.*

*Far too many others would no longer be.*

*Haruo straightened.*

*"And after this?"*

*Another junior officer turned to face him- the man seemed to be sweating, nervous- intimidated by the General.*

*"Uhhh... Gigan landed in the center of the town, uhhh... blasted a refinery tower, scratched deep furrows into the surrounding skyscrapers, emitted quite a number of vocalizations... Godzilla seemed to arrive in response. Uh, sir. And he, uhhh, made a straight line for Gigan. He, uh, trampled through a seafront residential district, then the shipping concerns on the waterfront... trampling single-stories like they didn't exist, weaving around the rest, conserving his strength... Meanwhile, Gigan's tactics remain, uhh... well, more grandstanding than anything with focused destructive intent."*

*A video on the monitor showcased Gigan's dramatic entrance through the dust cloud. At the edge of the screen, a small fleet of tanks appeared.*

*Haruo waived his hand before his face as if he could brush the video away.*

*"All right, yes, I saw the results of our strikes already- what is the situation now?"*

*"Well, sir, Gigan seems to be... hiding, really. Inside the hollowed-out shell of a building. Godzilla is looking for him- current trajectory suggests that he'll pass by Gigan's place of concealment in less than 30 seconds..."*

*“And then the battle will be joined. That’s when things get ugly.”*

*“Yes, sir.”*

*On the screen, Godzilla’s slow, shambling steps carried him past the cavern carved into the building’s side.*

*A blur of metal and speed, a scythe-claw of incredible density and razor-honed cutting power, swung out in a broad arc to decapitate the King of the Monsters.*

*But the wily lizard was already ducking.*

*“No, he doesn’t fall for ambushes so easily,” Haruo muttered under his breath, “Or I’d have had that scaly son of a-”*

*There was an audible gasp in the control room as the cybernetic Kaiju flew out in a blur, slamming into Godzilla with the force of two colliding tectonic plates. Arms tipped with curving scythes met in a shower of metal-on-metal sparks, wrapping around Godzilla’s neck in a death-grip. The reptilian beast flailed, cracking Gigan like a whip, but the cyborg clung on stubbornly, unwilling to be dislodged.*

*The head of the Private manning the communications terminal snapped up, his voice a rising cry in the anticipatory silence.*

*“Sir, Peregrine Base is reporting that they’re preparing to scramble the Super-X XIII!”*

*Haruo gritted his teeth.*

*Of course they were.*

# IV

A handful of plaster came off in Jin's hand, throwing off of his balance, and the cubicle desk-top on which he was standing began to slide noisily down a pile of junk like an extremely awkward snowboard, bumping and rattling and threatening to tip Jin off into its downhill path. A jolting collision with the buried remnants of a water cooler hooked the desk to the left, and Jin to the right, but he was able to brace himself on hands and knees, skidding to a stop in the crumbled, dusty pile, as the desk surface continued its skid down the entire length of the room.

Digging his rough and raw-scraped hands into the pile for purchase, Jin pushed off of the dented, drained water jug and worked to regain the ground that he'd just lost, ascending upward towards a yawning, cavernous hole in the wall through which a recalcitrant photocopier had apparently made its entrance into the sea of cubicles- its chattered remnants lay at the bottom of the lengthy room, over which the desk-board was now settling as a cover... save for the shards of copier-glass that had decided to hitch a ride in Jin's bleeding palms, instead.

After the collapse of the tunnel, the evacuees had seen no other option than to return the way that they'd come. The smoldering ruin of a graveyard that they had emerged upon told the tale- even the landscape looked different, scoured clean, shattered, pounded, reshaped by the fury of war... only shattered fragments and melting lumps remained of the battalion that had engaged Gigan. The long, main street which had led to the overpass entrance, and at the end of which Gigan had turned to face them, was now a solid wall- the enormous remains of an office complex tower fallen, lying across the road, cutting off the access to the overpass, the street outlet, and any sight of the warring behemoths beyond it- though the tremors of their battle could still be felt pounding through the ground- like walking through a constant low-grade earthquake; no one ever really got used to it, and footing was unsteady.

In the solemn aftermath, they regrouped. Mr. Tezuka was nowhere to be found (and, to Jin's distress, he had not yet been able to find Yuki either- perhaps she *had* left to seek out her own charges back at her office!), and Akira Kochi, three stragglers in tow, had arrived shortly after the group's return to that solemn place of ash and fury, finding himself appointed the de facto leader.

The group had agreed that finding out the status of the leading companies which had taken the overpass ahead of the tanks and might have outrun the destruction was a fine first priority in theory, but with access to the ramp cut off by the toppled building and the shattered overpass too high to climb to, it was up to Jin- the most desperate and motivated of the staff, quite possibly- to suggest, and attempt, the radical... to use the fallen, creaking, unstable building itself as a ramp- to enter its crumbling interior and ascend it, and climb out on top of it to reach the overpass.

Right now, it didn't seem like so good an idea as it had in the conceptual stage.

The rooms were canted at nearly a 45-degree angle (not counting the fact that they were already sideways), littered with debris, and terribly unstable- even crumbling. The ascent was treacherous, and the creaking, groaning, sagging building, whose cross-section already resembled a rhombus far more than its original square design, threatened with every groan and shift to collapse flat and destroy everything inside- which right now was mostly Jin.

Reaching the jagged hole in the wall (which was closer to a floor/ceiling now), fighting the intermittent shudders of the ground the entire way, Jin hoisted himself through to the glorious shafts of moonlight streaming through an annoyingly still-intact window.

That meant that this part of the building- the 'inner' face laid up against the overpass- was high enough to rise above the overpass, and he could egress out the side and onto the elevated surface... but he hadn't the strength or will to force his way through a window sturdy enough to survive even this fall, so

he kept climbing, scattering loose papers away with his hands to clear a path with slightly more traction, climbing in an odd half-standing, half-crawling position, scampering up the side of the angled floor/wall like a monkey... a tired, tired monkey.

Arriving at an open doorway on the upper face of the tilted room, Jin braced himself in a relatively still position, and wiped away the sweat that was starting to seep into his weary eyes.

What he saw through it made his eyes sting nonetheless... with tears of unshed joy and gratitude.

Above him were windows to a twilight sky, a windowed side wall that was now more akin to a roof with skylights. He had reached the 'top' of the fallen building; from there, he could gain a vantage point of the entire area.

Beside him, a heavy oak desk crushed all of its former contents against the floor and wall- working his way over to it, he used it as a sturdy platform from which to survey this room, which had once been a junior executive office of some sort, apparently shared by several men, judging from the number of desks.

Jin hoped they'd made it out okay. He had yet to encounter any corpses in the desiccated building, but the debris piles were quite thick- anything could lie beneath them.

He spotted a window that had shattered inwards, and made for it, the slick work-shoes that he wished he had traded in for something with more grip scrabbling to ascend the then-carpeted floor (that rough sandpaper stuff that workplaces called carpeting, half a millimeter thick and invariably dark blue or pale purple). A torn-up strip that he tried to use as a hand-hold gave way, tearing forward until it hit a seam where it held firm- holding it with both hands like a climbing rope, Jin made short work of the remaining distance, gripping the sturdy metal window frames and hauling himself up.

Outside, the cool evening air washed around him as he looked out across the ruined city. Smoke wafted here and there from destroyed edifices; to his right, the shattered wreck of the overpass, scarred and pitted. To his left, the long, broken stretch of the building's side tapered down to the roof.

He squinted at the overpass, scanning its battered length, broken and gone in several places.

There was no one there.

How could that be...?

Then he saw it.

A great, jagged hole, punched clean through the pavement and supporting struts between, straight down to the subway tunnels beneath. A large, jagged piece of shattered overpass ramp leaned down into the gaping hole, like a makeshift- if unstable- ramp.

The hole flickered and shimmered in the moonlight... something had broken underground, and the nearby river, wending its way out to the sea, was diverting into the subway tunnels instead.

And there, huddled, shivering, in the middle of it, Jin saw people.

He'd been wrong.

Down. He needed to go *down*.

He turned back, scanning the terrain behind him. He could feel the ground slamming with the fury of transmitted savagery- the Kaiju must be close, within the maze of still-standing towers at the heart of the city.

There.

Just barely, over the steep rise of the fallen building, he could see the gathered crowd of his co-workers. And from up here...

"HEY!"

He shouted, waved his arms, did his best to attract attention. He made a perfect loon of himself, jumping and shouting on what was most certainly a decidedly unsafe, unstable platform from which to do so, until he was sure someone must be watching.

"OVER THERE!" He shouted, flailing both arms, bending, contorting his whole body to point and direct. It felt as if he repeated his bizarre song and dance for ten minutes or more, before a few curious onlookers detached from the group and moved to the appointed area.

*"CLIMB IT!!!"* He screamed at the top of his lungs, hoping that they understood. The low wall at which they stood looked as solid and impenetrable as the rest from the ground, but from this high vantage point, he could see that just beyond a short climb, a terrible gash that carved the building asunder provided a sort of 'mountain pass' through to the other side... if a few brave souls would just exploit it...

Someone was shouting now, and pointing, waving others over from the top of the 'pass,' and Jin sighed gratefully, with relief. Then, he began the shuffling, sideways stepping, half-sliding, half-tumbling descent down to the gap which he had spotted before.

At the bottom, he could see the huddled, miserable-looking, bedraggled co-workers more clearly- many supported each other, and some lay sprawled out- most looked to be injured in some way or another- limbs sprained or worse. They could probably be helped out up the treacherous pavement-slab ramp, but there were far too few able climbers among them to help each other out.

Well, that would be why they were still down there.

And it looked like a far safer descent than his slide down the building.

Shuffling down the side, he was disconcerted to find the loose slab wobbling back and forth from the shift in his weight... it was less stable than he'd imagined- as few trips as he could manage would be beneficial- no telling how long it would hold.

He braced himself to a top before he slid off the end of it- which was still a good eight or nine feet above the water.

"Hello there," He called, in his best Obi-wan Kenobi- even though he suspected that the dulcet tones of Alec Guinness were probably quite different from the Naya Gorou dub that he knew.

Several people looked up; from here, Jin could better see the bottom of a ramp- it dead-ended above a crumbling, broken mess that didn't easily lend itself to climbing; the pile of rubble on which it perched both accounted for the wobbling and explained why no one had yet ascended to the convenient slab-ramp. The rippling, rising water was up to knee-level already.

"All right! I need someone who can still limp with a little bit of support- come on over to the edge, and I'll try to haul you up that mess. Then, the two of us together can maybe manage one of the unconscious between us. Okay?"

After a minute's babbling, a limping man with stringy hair clinging to his forehead came to the edge of the escarpment, and with a modicum of effort, he managed to haul the man up. Between the two of them, they found the unconscious, rail-thin fellow with a streaked, bloody, wound on his forehead a bit more challenging to haul up, but in the end they managed... and then it was a long, slow ascent up the wobbling, treacherous propped-up pavement. When the two exhausted survivors had slumped, exhausted, on the solid ground around the hole, Jin returned down the treacherous, ragged descent to claim another.

And then, without warning, there was another man behind him, reaching a hand down to the wounded. And then a woman. Returning to the top, Jin saw dozens of his underpass-group pouring over the gap in the building. The unstable pavement slab, stabilized by the distributed weight of a dozen workers, stopped shifting as greatly- and for the moment seemed to be bearing up under the strain of it.

And then, miracle of miracles, Yuki was there alongside him, her beautiful face smudged with soot, a nasty scrape on her shoulder, bared through a half-shredded sleeve. Whether she had emerged from the group he'd been with, or the rescuees below, he couldn't tell- the two of them were certainly both wet enough from the press of soggy evacuees against them that they looked as if they'd been with those below.

It didn't matter. She looked bedraggled, soaking wet, exhausted, just as he did... but she was here, now. With him. That was all that mattered.

She caught his eyes from beneath the meaty arm of a staggering man thrown over her shoulder, and smiled. He smiled back. And then it was a blur of staggering, injured people, up and down the ramp, and they were working side by side, and saving people, and then Jin ran into the man in front of him.

They weren't off of the ramp yet, and Jin shouldered his way past, delivering the woman he supported- bleeding from a seemingly-superficial wound in her side and suffering a few cracked ribs, at

least- to the safety of the ground beyond... and then he noticed that everyone above ground seemed to be standing still, ignoring the work that needed to be done, necks craned up to the sky...

And then he looked up, and froze.

Emerged from behind the Nintendo office branch tower, the Kaiju were battling less than a mile away.

Jin had never been this close; the sheer power and majesty of the spectacle, despite the danger, was overpowering.

It was like staring into the eye of the storm, like that scene at the end of *Twister*.

He stared at sheer, raw, unadulterated power- the same shear, raw fury embodied in a hurricane, a forest fire, a tidal wave... the kind of power that the ancient pagans had seen and dubbed the power of gods; even as a man of faith who knew the power of God from the power of the created, it was hard not to ascribe elements of the divine to the tableau before him. The Greeks who envisioned the epic clashes between Zeus of Olympus and the Titans, forces of fury and the wrath of nature incarnate, had not the imagination to envision the likes of the sheer power that he now beheld- even the most tempestuous clashes of their pantheons paled next to being this close to such titanic fury.

Beside them, Gigan and Godzilla struggled in a thrashing wrestle that threw about the weight of mountains and the power of tsunamis with each twitch of a muscle and flail of a limb, casting about the power of gods with the ease and abandon... and *rage*.

Gigan sliced at its reptilian foe's neck and shoulders as best it could without loosening its clawed bear-hug around the beast's neck; Godzilla flailed and shook like a bucking bronco, trying to dislodge the unwelcome piggyback rider, and slapped at his foe's back with his strong-pounding tail. Both were doing only superficial damage, inflicting small bruises and cuts- but Godzilla was getting the worst of it, tiring from his exertion.

Those from the ramp were slowly catching up to them, the small groups pooling together into one gawking crowd. Everyone was aware of the danger, but no one had yet found the will to break the mesmeric spell of the battling titans practically at their feet. Barring disaster, this was the closest that any of them would ever come- far closer than most would *want* to- to these incredible, one-of-a-kind creatures.

Godzilla was wearying from his efforts, but Gigan's grip was also loosening, proscribing wider arcs through the air in response to the reptile's bucking- and the cyborg seemed to know it.

With a sickening whine, the aberration of science, biology, and logic that was its chest-mounted, built-in buzz saw spun to life. Pushing off with its stubby tail, and awkwardly wrapping its legs around Godzilla's torso, it hugged the King of the Monster as tightly as it could.

The saw blade bit into Godzilla's flank, spraying his blood in a fine mist across Gigan's face- the sadistic cyborg seemed almost to smile. It tried to pull itself closer as Godzilla thrashed ferociously, roar of excruciating pain a full octave higher than his normal battle bellow, the whirring saw blade continuing to bisect even the reptilian Kaiju's tough hide.

Foam began to pour from the sides of Godzilla's mouth.

Jin cringed at the carnage.

That shook him out of his reverie.

They had to move.

*I'm gonna have to yell at everyone again.*

A reputation as office rabble-rouser wouldn't exactly help him in making friends.

But then, he already had a *best* friend- and once he had a chance to slip that ring on her finger, once she said yes- *if* she said yes- he wasn't really worried about how many others he had. She was the only one that mattered.

All this ran through his head in the time it took to take a breath, ready to shout a warning, to get the group moving again, to break the spell that this proximity to pure, raw power had woven over them all.

As the saw began to slice into muscle, Godzilla began to crackle with energy- the exposed nerve

fibers and bundles of muscle and sinew glowed from within, shining and translucent. His open mouth burst with spastic pulses of blue, as if he were preparing to unleash his blazing fiery breath and then holding it back, flickering and cycling like a candle flame in a strong wind.

Rapid, narrow bolts of sizzling, scuttling energy clamored across Godzilla's skin, racing over every contour like tiny purple snakes, and Jin's blood turned to ice.

The Nuclear Pulse.

The entire fury of Godzilla's radioactive heart channeled into a single, furious, radiating blast- an outward shockwave the repulsed and shattered, smashed and obliterated, trailing an EMP in its wake.

One might call it Godzilla's ultimate weapon.

This went through his mind in less than the blink of an eye, even as his vocal cords began the first, desperate syllable.

"Lis-"

Bright shafts of white and lavender light flared outwards from Godzilla, blue flashes bursting across his epidermis like wildfire- and in the next instant, a visible shockwave, an expanding sphere of orange-white light and energy, burst out of Godzilla's scales, a radiant blast of light and energy that cast off Gigan with the force of a discus-throwing Olympian, tearing outwards in a devastating shockwave the shattered every pane of glass within a mile radius. Sparks flashed against every surface that had been in contact with the King of the Monsters, a pyrotechnic display of the great beast's sudden independence that rivaled any American summer celebration.

"-ten-"

And, all of this in less time than it took to form a word. Long before he could form a second, the blast wave was upon them- a wall of energy and power that tore across them like an unforgiving wind, scattering men and women like rag-dolls and throwing them all to the ground. Somewhere between the slap of the energy, like a punch in the gut spread out along his entire body, and the second impact of his body being hurled to the ground like an American football being spiked, Jin mercifully lost consciousness.

\*\*\*\*\*

"...And the bonneted dormer; it's really just the crowning touch." Kazuhiro finished, concluding a mesmerically dull dissertation on his favorite structure. At least he was sitting down again, animatedly warmed to his subject after a few minutes' discourse.

"Destroyed in 1972... but it lives on-" He tapped his forehead with an index finger, "-In here."

"Wow." Said Debrah, and she meant it. "You really *did* love that building!"

He nodded.

"It's the standard I've measured all of my designs against. Someday, I hope to design something as-uh, *hoped*. Something as flawless. Yeah... I, uh..."

Debrah did her best to be supportive despite her racing heart, hoping that she could keep him away from another self-pity close call.

"You're not a construction worker, are you? You're an architect."

He nodded, sniffing.

"A designer, a supervisor- I started as a foreman, and I'm working my way towards an architect certification. And everything that I make... everything that I see and love and take inspiration from-"

He stabbed an accusing finger at the dark forms on the horizon.

"- *They* destroy!"

Gigan was lying in the rubble of the city utilities building, its mechanical beak flapping up and down,

wordlessly, spastically- exactly where Godzilla's repelling Nuclear Pulse had thrown it violently a second before.

The King of the Monsters was standing at the end of the long street, breathing heavily. Debrah knew that the Nuclear Pulse, a burst of pure energy radiating outwards in all directions, took a lot of the massive Kaiju; his nuclear heart raged like a furnace of unimaginable power, a foundry of the gods equivalent to the sun itself... but even it would take a while to replenish the beast's drained power. It was a powerful attack that threw anything nearby away, buying Godzilla precious space and time to regroup... but it exacted a great cost, and left him vulnerable, capable of physical brawling only.

A basic understanding of Godzilla and Behavior Kaiju Psychology was part of basic training before being issued a passport, these days.

The sudden silence was absolute and oppressive; it was all that Debrah could do to keep from filling it with idle chatter.

When Kazuhiro spoke again, it was barely above a whisper, and Debrah had to strain to hear it over the noise of the chaos in the streets beyond.

"I love buildings. Like some people love sunsets, or kittens, or other people, I love buildings. They're... art to me, monuments to human achievement, symbols of life and creativity and... and... things!"

His voice began to rise as he continued, almost entranced.

"Do you know what the average age of a building is in a major Japanese city these days? Three and a half *years!* That's all! Think of all of the history that's been lost, all of the beauty and legacy that have been lost, through these pointless... squabbles! There are almost no old buildings left in Japan! Oh, sure, there are old *houses* in the small residential districts, little towns not large or important enough to attract their attention... but there's no true art, no real beauty in those little hamlets to begin with!"

Debrah cursed inside. His tone had been gradually growing louder, stronger- he was working himself up again.

"*And*, as the generations of buildings keep getting shorter, as people see how little they last, how short-lived they are, the designs are getting more Spartan, more simplistic! It's all basic and prefab and simple- quick to put up, and quick to get put *back* up after they're destroyed!"

He threw up his hands, despairing.

"We're losing the art of architecture! Japan used to make beautiful, wonderful works of art- but now, we're forgetting how to build truly beautiful buildings any more, truly worthy structures- construction are basic blocks, squares and rectangles and nothing more! We have such a unique, rich culture, full of art and creativity and innovation, not just in architecture, but beyond- *now*, our creativity is being beaten out of us as we're worn down by the vain repetition, the daily grind of the endless cycle, as we're ground down, inured- is that the right twenty-dollar word?- to lifeless, colorless, bland and sterile designs because they're *easy*. These Kaiju... these *monsters*... aren't just killing our people, they're killing our art, stealing our *souls* away- even if we survive them, we'll have become soulless, efficiency obsessed *drones* with no eye for beauty! We'll still have changed so much that there will be nothing worth living *for!*"

Revealing, moving- but she had to cut this off *now*; it was drawing him deeper into his self-pity and despair. Again. She had to herd him away from these tracks, these cycles.

"But there *is* still so much worth living for! People- friendships, relationships- the beauty that's in life and love, that possessions or constructions- no matter how wonderful- can never add to or detract from-"

"You hear those people?" He interrupted heatedly. In the distance, the screaming, fleeing throngs could still be faintly heard. "Do you think their lives are *beautiful*? Do you think this... existence, is worth living for?"

Debrah didn't have a great answer for that one at the moment.

"They *terrified!*" Kazuhiro continued, "And not just now- even when the monsters are gone, they're still terrified! Who can stand never knowing when they'll show up to kill and destroy next? Who can stand living with the fear of imminent death constantly hanging over them, like a Sword of Androcles?"

Debrah bit back her automatic corrective response, and instead offered softly, "People have survived it before. Life goes on, finding the good amongst the bad- after all, people lived through the Cold War and the threat of Mutually Assu-"

"The Cold War was fought by reasoning men! Even in the face of the unknown, the prospect of annihilation, there was hope that rational heads would prevail! This... malevolence... is at the unpredictable whims of animal beasts!"

This wasn't good... when he got florid and overwrought, he was getting worked up- he considered himself a wordsmith, this one... but he was fueled by his own fervor, wrapped up in his own jingoism and lingo... ism... He was working himself up again.

Behind him, Gigan scabbled to its feet, its arm twitching irregularly. The EMP of Godzilla's blast had to have hit his cyborg nemesis far harder than any of his other foes; the whine of servos accompanied twitching, irregular movements all across the Kaiju's mottled skin, its buzz saw starting and stopping with stuttering, jerky steps.

Gigan was *messed up*.

Godzilla, winded but on the move, stepped forward to capitalize on the short-circuited cyborg's paralysis.

And above that clamor, the air was filled with a strange whine- not exactly like a jet, but similar to it; offhand, Debrah couldn't place it, nor did she have the time or concentration to try.

"They called each other the same things in those days. Chaos and unpredictability still ruled the day; one mishap with a Korean airliner almost brought the world to its knees. But they endured, and things got better-"

"Just so that terrorist Jihad could replace Soviet Pride, American bluster to American invasions, political tensions to religious war? One war always gives way to another, each conflict seeding that next... it's all so *cyclical!* Never-ending! And I'm sick of it!"

Her voice was not sympathetic now, but hard, steely, trying to batter the truth through the haze of despair with an urgent earnestness.

"And even in the middle of that cycle, people led good lives! Found ways to be happy! Lived and loved and enjoyed life and each other! They didn't stop living- they *found* hope, and happiness!"

Kazuhiro looked at her, sorrow and longing creeping in around the edges empty eyes, the wet streaks of countless shed tears glistening on his cheeks.

"How?"

That brought her up short, let all the air out of the head of steam she was building up. *Ouch- lingo and jingo, air and steam... were her metaphors growing more tortured to match his overwrought and florid pronouncements?*

"Well... I suppose... that they found *faith*. That a higher power was in charge, that it wouldn't allow the world to end so lightly. Or... or, they realized that the situation was so big, that nothing they could do would change it, that worrying wouldn't do anything to help it, or them... so they just gave it up. Let what would be, uh... be. Que Sera Sera. That's Spanish, by the way, not English. Not that it would make much difference to you. Uhhh..."

Debra thought furiously, trying to find a solid conclusion to her wheedling rambling that could tie it all together and make it sound intentional, like it all had a point.

Overhead, a strange, tube-like aircraft sighed past, its engines sounding like nothing she'd heard before. The strange, tapered body looked like an SR-71 Blackbird, if some sort of magical bicycle pump had been plugged into the side to inflate its flat body into a vertical oval profile; with its tapered-out bottom and rounded top, a cross section must resemble the shape of a large bell. Dual-segmented wings, swept down-and-back from the center of the craft, completed the strange vessel; a glowing rocket assembly on the back hinted at a motive power understood only by those above a certain security clearance level, and the whole vessel shimmered, a warped version of the cityscape about it, as if it were made of chrome or polished glass.

Briefly diverted, Godzilla followed the flight path of the incoming vessel with a canted head, as if unsure what to make of this new interloper.

This must be the new Super-X. Number eleven, unless she missed her guess. The sight of it thrilled her- nothing could halt Godzilla in his tracks like a Super-X fighter... even if they did tend to be one-trick ponies.

She gestured up towards the aircraft, a self-evident beacon of hope, as if it somehow bolstered her arguments.

"They didn't worry about what they couldn't change- they just focused on what they could. Found the things that fear *couldn't* take away from them, unless they let it, and hung on to them. Focused on the good instead of dwelling on the uncontrollable."

Which didn't help him at all, just addressed the current aspect of the situation they were discussing- and he seemed to know it. He dropped the subject, falling silent... but seemed to take no comfort in it.

"Maybe they did. But they never had to deal with this. At least, those conflicts made sense. They came from despicable human traits- but we're all despicable deep down, aren't we? So we could understand those. These things... come from nowhere. No warning. Unfathomable reasons all their own-"

The Super-X bobbed in the air, suddenly dipping like a drunken bird. Every running light about winked out, then returned.

*Uh-oh. That doesn't look good.*

As Debrah watched, the ship dipped again, lights flickering... and then dropped like a stone, falling out of the sky. She saw two bursts of grey smoke as something flew away from the skyship at terrific speed- a moment later, two white blooms filled the darkening sky- parachutes opening in the night. Super-X's pilots.

Debrah pasted on a fake smile that she knew wouldn't convince anyone, and tried to distract Kazuhiro's attention, keep him from seeing hope perish once again.

"Well, I'm sure they-"

It was too late. He'd already seen.

"We're helpless to stop them!" He cried in anguish. "Nothing we do even slows them down! We can't stop or control them! All we can do is sit back and watch, and pick up the pieces. Do you know what it's like to feel so helpless?"

Looking into his despairing eyes, Debrah was beginning to.

"Like the earthquake?" She asked, softly.

He nodded bitterly.

"Like the earthquake. As if we didn't have enough problems already..."

Silence descended for a long moment... and Debrah became aware of a low thrumming noise that pervaded the air. Even among its epileptic spasms, Gigan's ruby visor had begun to slowly throb, dimming and shining in a low regular pulse.

She heard a jet wash, and turned. From behind the row of buildings that represented the city's shopping district, a dark shape rose.

Like a malevolent hunter, a predator glaring with narrowed eyes from the shadowed recess of the deepest jungle, the Super-X rose up into view, open cockpit and every running light a deep crimson.

The light pulsed in time with Gigan's eye.

The space-plane rotated slowly in place, hover just over the rooftops, and oriented itself towards Godzilla. Like a crouched panther, or a hawk preparing to swoop in with raking talons, it sat, waiting.

Then, Gigan opened its beak in a malevolent cackle, and at the same time, twin maser canons flashed from the vessel's wingtips, catching a surprised Godzilla square in the flank. Twin bursts of smoke curled upward from the strike as the Kaiju roared in surprise and pain.

From where it stood, Gigan was suddenly shrouded in a sickly emerald light, waves of green energy

sweeping, pulsing from its core to the top of its limbs, dancing between its clawed hands like a Jacob's Ladder, leaping off of the blade-tips to dissipate in the air in a shower of green sparkles.

The waves pulsed. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

And with the fifth, no more came- it spread outwards along the Kaiju's frame, to its edges, bursting off of the cyborg's extremities in a shower of sparkles like the rest...

And Gigan stood, strong and defiant, twitches and spasms gone.

Strong.

It puffed out its chest, arms thrust back, and bellowed with screeching pride.

Beyond it, the Super-X glided to an opposing position, both lining up a crossfire with Godzilla in the middle.

Debrah shrugged, viewing the scene with a sinking heart.

"Well, there's nothing I can do to help you with that one."

Kazuhiro glanced at her askance, almost annoyed.

"What?"

"Helplessness is just something we all have to live with. Every human being on Earth has to grapple with it. Want to hear about real helplessness, the terror of not knowing how things will turn out, with nothing to do but do your best every day and hope it'll turn out well? Go talk to a parent. They'll probably tell you that the teenage years are even scarier than the Godz-"

The elicited a stony glare. *Sensitive topic. Okay, no jokes, then.*

Another burst of the Super-X's arsenal- a Gatling gun that fired such overwhelming, rapid bursts that it sounded almost like a single, steady hum, pumping hundreds of bullets into Godzilla's hide every second. Sickly aquamarine-colored energy pulses that had to be reverse-engineered alien technology. Deep-freeze cadmium missiles that left large patches of frost clinging to the great lizard, slowing his movements and reaction times.

"Look, no one likes feeling out of control," Debrah continued over the background of the one-plane-army's strike. "Striving to be in control, to rule our own lives, master our circumstances- that's human nature 101."

Kazuhiro looked confused.

*Right... don't know the Japanese school system.*

"Remedial. Basic. Foundational. But... we can't. We can't control Godzilla or Gigan. But we can't control earthquakes, floods, droughts... accepting that life is beyond our control is... well, just part of life!"

Wow, that was harsh. There had to be a way to... *Aha!*

"And I'm guessing you know that... because it's not just parents. It's children. That's why they rush to grow up- because they know what it's like not to be in control. And when they become adults, they find that they still can't control everything. They live with it their whole lives- I'll bet you have, too. It's frustrating. We don't like it; our basic natures chafe. But, you learn to live with it. It's certainly not overwhelming enough to give up on living because of, right?"

Kazuhiro stuck out his lower lip and nodded, reluctantly, like a small child made to apologize for something that they don't feel bad about.

"Plus," She noted sardonically, "That's what the rat race is all about in the end, right? There's always the hope of earning a little more, acquiring a little more, getting a little more control. Who knows- maybe this will be the fight where one of them dies... one less Kaiju, one step closer to control."

It was folly, of course, but it was what the average human ear wanted to hear. A little honey to sweeten the vinegar.

Irritation suddenly flooded Debrah, and she blew a sharp breath upwards, ruffling her bangs off of her forehead for a brief second.

This wasn't working. She was just picking at the symptoms! She wasn't going to debate him into

peace... there *had* to be a better way! But, if it kept him talking...

"That doesn't change the fact that people are *dying!* Dying over these pointless, meaningless, random... tiffs!"

Kazuhiro sounded as if he was trying to muster up indignation, but was too emotionally drained for it.

Debrah nodded, as behind the wavering architect, the Super-X continued to chew away at Godzilla with every weapon at its disposal.

"That's true. That's life, and that's tragic. So many people without the gift of a long life. So... why are you trying to throw such a precious gift away? Isn't that cruel to their memory?"

That was pushing farther than she'd dared to thus far. Fingers crossed behind her back, Debrah studied Kazuhiro's face to see once again if she'd hit a nerve... or pushed him over the edge.

\*\*\*\*\*

The lights had just stabilized from a violent flickering (which had elicited a rather undignified and girlish scream from the male orderly, whom Katagiri was beginning to think of as 'Bumbles' in lieu of a name) that seemed to be induced by some sort of low-level EMP- fortunately, the generators were still functioning, and so were the lights; the last of the large chunk Katagiri had been working at fell away, and the orderly with the almond eyes (taking the primary assisting role, with Bumbles handling the sweat-mopping; Katagiri would certainly trust *her* around an opened cranium far more than the large twit), poised and ready with a pair of tweezers, deftly plucked it out of the cavity before it could tumble in among the various inner workings of the Superior Orbital Fissure.

The sound of a roaring wind, like a sudden hurricane that ended with just as great a suddenness as it had begun, sounded outside, for the second or third time. Fortunately, it was all noise and no force, and for a few brief moments, he had been spared any jarring. Not that it helped him to boldly capitalize on the sudden absence, since he remained slow, deliberate, tensed up, anticipating another jar at any moment. At least when the footsteps had been regular and deliberate, they were predictable and easily compensated for. Now, these unpredictable, staccato tremors...

The orderly's tweezers hovered in his line of sight, now cleaned and poised over the site of the extraction. An unexpected tremor on a less steady hand could send the tweezers plunging into the middle of the fissure, severing who-knew-what... carefully, he slid his scalpel under her tweezers like a parrying blade, slowly lifting it up and away. When they were far enough clear, he put a hand on her wrist, and directed the tweezers back towards the tray.

She looked down, abashed.

"Sorry, sensei."

Katagiri blinked. It was the first time she had spoken during the whole operation. He had imagined a smooth, silky voice- a honey-sweet bastion of perfection... he had not imagined a voice so ordinary.

Had he been fantasizing about some sort of bizarre in-OR romance? Now that would be silly.

Still, he felt a sort of affection for her- she was clearly a caring soul, and it pained him to have embarrassed her.

"Not at all, miss...?"

"Masami. Masami Imamura."

"I appreciate your diligence, Miss Imamura. But rest for a moment- I'll let you know when I need the tweezers ready again."

She nodded, and while she still looked embarrassed, she at least met his eyes again.

Good. Her kindred eyes provided him with a little taste of human companionship that he'd clung to like a lifeline; he found that he felt unready, now of all times, to really be alone. Maybe he never was- but

this contact spurred him into a desperation not to lose that which, in absence and apathy, he had never possessed. One person, not yet alienated (sad, wasn't it, that a stranger was about the only person outside of his own family with whom that was a possibility at present?) or off-put by his introversion... was the exact anchor that he needed now- one that he was grateful for.

He returned his attention towards the patient; now he was ready to begin the second phase- the Cavernous Sinus. His angle was now unobstructed- but the window of access was still interminably narrow. He selected a narrower blade from the tray and began to probe carefully inside, slicing away at the membrane that the Carotid ran through- a careful peeling back of the layers, and he could begin slicing carefully away at the endangering tendrils and the pressing trunk, both.

Then, cleanup of the Oculomotor nerve where it had all started, and he could easily unthread the middle section running along the Superior ophthalmic vein. Home free. But first, the life-threatening work on the life-giving Carotid.

The gentle rise and fall of the man's chest was a gentle counterpoint to the eerie stillness that had settled outside- could it be over? Katagiri squinted at the television in the distant gallery, trying to make out what was going on outside-

The TV went out. So did the lights, without warning, as a sound like the breaking of the world roared through the building.

*I swear, if Bumbles screams like a girl again-*

With a thundering cacophony, a single, powerful slam threw Katagiri from his feet, slamming him to the floor like a slap from the planet itself. He dimly heard a pair of accompanying thumps in the darkness, and hoped that it was both of the orderlies and not the unconscious patient. A tinkling of clattering metal accompanied a scattering of metal instruments across the tile floor, which was cool and smooth against Katagiri's now-aching brow.

He heard something massive shift behind him, and turned in the pitch blackness, trying to get his bearings as he struggled to rise to his feet.

The vista that greeted him once again defied his brain to interpret the images that it was receiving.

The lights of the city-line spread out before him, a panoramic vista of the heart of the downtown area, framed by the dim, struggling twinkle of the twilight's first stars.

The far wall was gone. And beyond it, so was half the building.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Ripping through the last support cords for his now-useless parachute with an irate yank of his serrated knife, Lieutenant Momoko Hirata stared with disgust at the ongoing battle. Beside him, his copilot, Akihiko Nakajima, looked equally disgusted; what a disaster this was! The plan had been simple- take the new Super-X out despite the objections of the technicians that she wasn't ready yet, and fire up the ship's new primary weapon, the Matter Compression Canon.*

*In theory, the energy vibrations of the strange new microwave beam would compress Godzilla's massive cellular structure into something more human-sized. Some hoped this would actually shrink the Kaiju down to human size, not unlike the more easily contained infant version of the beast that Japan had once captured and held, in the days of the Second Mechagodzilla debacle (before the infant had been mutated by the radiation released in its parent's death into the new Godzilla). Still, Dr. Shinoda's research into the Regenerator G-1 cells (or was it 'Organizer G-1?' Momoko could never remember the outcome of those silly scientific squabbles- he'd stopped accepting their final decisions as anything to abide by the day that Pluto lost planet status) possessed by the monster (just months ago, following the newly-minted Kaiju's first real test after its sudden jolt into adulthood, an alien organism whose own spacecraft armor had been combined with the Super X II's synthetic diamond to create XIII's own theoretically nuclear-ray-impervious reflective coating) suggested that it would more likely cause a cellular collapse, compressing*

*the beast's unnaturally dense cellular structure into an analogue of human scale, where the square-cube law would take over and do its grim and bloody work; no creature that size without the mutant Kaiju metabolism would be able to survive under its own crushing weight- the beast's heart would give way and end this threat to Japan once and for all.*

*Only that was all academic; the MCC had failed to initialize (it seems the techs weren't being alarmist- it really wasn't ready), and as soon as they'd entered weapons range and initiated an establishing target lock on both Kaiju, Gigan had seized control- apparently using the passive laser targeting beam as a guide along which to piggyback his own signals. The Super-X had lost all power, and both men had ejected... only to watch their plummeting craft regain power, every control surface now glowing a deadly blood-red, the still-cracked canopy looking like slitted angry eyes... and Japan's finest weapon was now under the control of a giant alien cyborg monster.*

*Juuuuuust perfect.*

*And the cyborg itself, seemingly on the ropes, wrecked by an electro-magnetic pulse, had deployed something that looked to Momoko like a de-gauss, some sort of pulse that cleared and rebooted its systems, restored it to full strength- waking from death and returning to life in a most literal embodiment of kishi kaisei! Tactically, it was brilliant- Godzilla had been forced to unleash his ace-in-the-hole at the outset of the battle, at great cost to himself, and with countermeasures deployed by Gigan rendering most of the respective gains moot, it had benefitted him little; Gigan had the distinct tactical high ground.*

*In terms of Japan's bottom line, however, things were not so grim. Even if the combined forces of Gigan and the Super-X finished off Godzilla (and why shouldn't they? That's what the Super-X was made for!), the one weak spot- disruption of its electronic elements- that Japanese strategists had been counting on exploiting for the preceding decade since the Kaiju's last appearance had just been proven to be a temporary hindrance at best, easily overcome. Which left them back at the drawing board when it came to defeating the cyborg.*

*In that way, Godzilla might be their best weapon of war. In a perfect world, he'd finish Gigan, and then the Super-X would finish him. But their second-best weapon against Gigan had been co-opted, and now neither of those crucial tools, the lizard or the space-plane, were under their control. As it was far too often in these Kaiju affairs, the people of Japan were simply sideline spectators, unable to influence the outcome, forced to simply sit back and watch and hope for the best.*

*Still, Gigan was using the space-plane against Godzilla, its intended purpose, at the moment. That was good. But the lack of control rankled Momoko, and he could only guess what the creature would do with it once Godzilla was finished off.*

*Even then, buried beneath his resentment, Momoko still felt a surge of professional pride. The Super-X XIII, even without its primary weapon, was performing admirably against Godzilla. The big lizard could take a lot of punishment- more than any other Kaiju that Momoko knew of; that's why he was the King- but even he had his limits. Under a withering full arsenal barrage, the mighty Kaiju had fallen.*

*Of course, then the sadistic cyborg had cast it aside entirely, ceasing commands for bombardment and physically moving to savor the kill for itself, leaving the Super-X to hang in the air, discarded like a new toy that had lost its luster, hanging like a gaudy pulsing red Christmas ornament, crowning the momentous defeat of the crowned King of the Monsters.*

*He couldn't understand why HQ hadn't sent the destruct signal already; this was the very definition of 'falling into enemy hands.'*

*Of course, then it had all gone straight to Yomi-no-Kuni; Gigan had started slowly, softening his victim with stinging ruby cluster beams from its versatile visor... and as it approached, burning its target again and again, Godzilla had lashed out unexpectedly, whipping his near-prehensile tail around in a sweeping strike that toppled his unsuspecting tormentor like a freshly-felled evergreen.*

*Hmmm. Momoko realized that he must really be looking forward to Christmas this year.*

*Several things had happened at once. Gigan's blood-red cluster beam had gone wide, sweeping a great swath of scattered-shot destruction against building-fronts that spilled debris to the streets in a dusty shower. The Kaiju had hit the ground with the force a tactical nuclear device going off, practically hurling everyone still in the city off of their feet as if the toppling cyborg were a bat, and they the piñata. Worse*

*still, the falling monster had collapsed right into the city hospital, crushing half of it to powder under the bulk of the cyborg's 25,000 ton weight, ripping open the other half of the hospital like the wrapping paper being torn away to expose the gift inside, before rolling forward and away from the hospital (mercifully sparing the other half of the structure), and coming to rest lying prone, just like his opponent.*

*But worst of all, Gigan's concentration and control broken, the mighty Super-X XIII, its military grade turbo-fans cutting out as if a switch had been flipped, had plummeted to the ground with a dull crunch.*

*Now, Godzilla was rising to his feet... and smoke was rising from Momoko's mighty air-vessel. Well... once-mighty, now-grounded hunk of scrap metal, more likely.*

*As Godzilla staggered to his feet, last shattered fragments of cadmium-induced permafrost falling away and ugly frostbite already visibly beginning to heal as steam poured from a dozen fresh wounds, Gigan unleashed auburn fury from its visor, stinging at the struggling Kaiju. Godzilla roared again, that iconic, ear-splitting screech that every Japanese school-child learned to know and fear from before they could compete in their first Pi Day recitation. The Kaiju slowly tromped, shaking the ground with every step, down the path of least resistance- the main street, whose well-trampled surface was now a cracked, decimated surface of upturned chunks of concrete, every parked or abandoned car long-since crushed into a metal-and-plastic pancake.*

*Momoko glanced at his partner; Akihiko just shook his head in dismay.*

*What a debacle.*

*The King of the Monsters, in an out-of-character retreat, slipped behind a building- the same structure that his adversary had already hollowed out and hidden in like a metal-and-concrete cocoon, safely tucked away from Gigan's stinging blasts. Now, he would get away- and Gigan, who was already struggling to rise, would resume his rampage- and with no Super-X XIII to stop them.*

*And they hadn't even gotten a chance to test out the new armor, to see if it would spray Godzilla's nuclear fury back at him like an in-store credit gift return-*

*The sound of a loud crack, like the breaking of a Tyrannosaur's spine, drew both men's attention. Their heads whipped toward the source of the commotion as a second loud crack- almost more of a snap- accompanied a small plume of dust from the flank of the strained building behind which Godzilla had sheltered, now visibly trembling under some great strain.*

*There was a final, terrific crunch, and the sound of crumbling, grinding debris as the backbone of the weakened, hollowed-out building gave way. With its interior shredded and excavated, even the massive building (for if the Japanese people could not defeat the Kaiju any more than they had in the 1960s, they could now at least build towering skyscrapers that rose above even the heads of the tallest monster- some small psychological victory of man against beast, at least) was now weak enough for the immense physical strength of a Kaiju to overcome... as the two men watched in shock, the still-very-heavy, still-very-massive building gave way and plunged forward under Godzilla's exerted effort- tumbling straight onto the rising form of Gigan, burying the Cyborg under a mountain of collapsed skyscraper. A plume of dust, smoke, and particulate matter that had once been solid walls and support rose from the impact site like a volcanic eruption, and Godzilla's howl of triumph split the sky.*

*Momoko looked at the dust-shrouded city, covered in a titanic cloud of ash and smoke, like photos he'd seen of the American's World Trade Centers on that dark day which seemed so long ago.*

*I sure wish it was Christmas.*

# V

"Maybe," Kazuhiro had admitted to Debrah's pointed jibe, "But I never claimed that I wasn't a coward."

That was neither progress, nor failure, and they'd lapsed into silence for a time, watching both Godzilla and Gigan fall in turn, the collapse of the Super-X, and the fall of the massive commerce building, which had provoked a whimpering sob from Kazuhiro.

Both had raised a hand to shield their eyes against the onrushing cloud of particulate debris that choked the sky, hacking and coughing as it rushed back, breathing through their shirts... now, Debrah simply had to trust that Kazuhiro was still there, that he hadn't decided to jump- she could no longer see him.

She longed to use the silence that had fallen between them to run downstairs, fetch more water- her lungs itched and tickled with the dust, her throat was dry- but even if she dared leave Kazuhiro again, she could hardly see three feet in front of her- she could just as soon plunge off of the side as find the door to the roof.

It was Kazuhiro that broke the silence.

"You might be right. Maybe I oughta toughen up, just get a thicker skin."

Before Debrah could protest that this was not what she meant, he continued, a pained, weary tone in his voice, as if he were infinitely tired.

"But it's so *hard*. It just keeps coming, keeps wearing at you, eroding your will. It's... repetitive, endless. They just keep coming back. *And*, it's constant. They just keep on coming- there's never a chance to rest, to catch your breath- they just keep pounding and pounding and pounding. I- we- the whole country is like a man in a life-or-death situation; he can only run on adrenaline for so long before he just... collapses, before he's got nothing left! We can't keep living under constant fear, never knowing what the next day will bring- no one can! No one's meant to survive that kind of constant duress!"

"Well, the... British did... in World War II. Stiff upper lip, they cal-"

"Look," Kazuhiro snapped sharply. "Not to be rude, but if all you've got is old war metaphors, then I think we're done here. No one should have to live like they're at war for sixty years, just because nature and radioactivity decided to flip-flop a few genes around."

Through the slowly clearing dust, Debrah could now see the form of Kazuhiro, hunkered down on his haunches on the roof's edge, perched on the rooftop like an overweight Batman. Debrah hung her head, abashed.

"No, you're right. I'm sorry. This isn't about 'other people have done it,' it's about what you're going through. I'm sorry. That was... insensitive."

His silhouette nodded curtly, tacitly accepting the apology. After a moment, he continued.

"I think..." His voice was hoarse and raw, tortured, "...I think I'm just... tired of being afraid of what I'll lose next, you know? That's no way to live."

Fresh sobs wracked him silently.

"I do know."

Debrah's voice was soft, and her words surprised even herself.

Kazuhiro looked at her through the clearing dust, as if trying to decide whether to be annoyed.

"I'm not saying," She continued, words spilling out in a rush, "That I know what it's like to live that way. But I *do* know what it's like to be afraid, to be helpless, to just sit there and wait for whatever's coming next and be powerless to stop it. I do know how that feels, how awful it is."

"You mean now. Me."

"Yeah. And... other times, too. I'm..."

She couldn't look at him, even though she knew that she couldn't meet his eyes through the haze in the air; instead, she hung her head, embarrassed.

"...Afraid all the time."

Kazuhiro sounded interested.

"Yeah? What of?"

She blew out a long breath.

"I dunno. Screwing up, mostly. Ever since-" She swallowed a lump in her throat- great, that was all she needed right now; the big, tall, tough American policewoman *crying*. "-Ever since I came to Japan, I've been... anxious... I... guess I haven't really immersed myself in the culture... and..."

She swallowed again, hard, felt silent tears wash down her cheeks.

"...I've been worried that, come crunch time, I'd be... missing some crucial insight because I don't understand the Japanese, the way they think, that I'd just assume that everyone thinks like me, and... say or do something wrong, push someone over the edge..."

She looked up at him with a half-smile, and was surprised to see that she could make out Kazuhiro's features. She sniffed- immediately regretting the snout-full of caked-together dust and mucus that it delivered her- and hastily reached up to wipe away her cheeks before the air cleared enough for him to see her weakness.

"You haven't exactly done anything to make *that* less of a worry... just... a more literal one."

He surprised her by laughing softly at that. She looked down again.

"I guess I was never very good at 'rapports,' you know? And especially here, in another country... being a cop isn't like the TV shows. It's not all running and gunning. You don't go into a domestic disturbance and start shooting up the place, right? No, a lot of it's talking to people. Connecting with them. Establishing trust. Defusing situations before they *get* to a gunfight. You have to know people, be good with them, know how to calm them down, what to say- most of the time, you need a lot more 'mommy' in you than 'Rambo.' And I've never been good at that kind of stuff. I don't forge connections, I do 'distance.' And everything about me enhances that... I mean, look at me!"

She demonstrated with a flourish of her hands, sighed, pursed her lips. This wasn't exactly the first time that her thoughts had run this way...

"You're worried about your *looks*?"

The way Kazuhiro phrased the question, she couldn't tell if he was mocking the absurdity of the concept, or expressing genuine surprise that she actually cared about that through a perceived thick skin.

Certainly, her grime-smeared looks must be pretty hard on the eyes at the moment.

"Kazuhiro, look at me! I'm an ogre! Only basketball players are supposed to be this tall! I'm not exactly the cuddly teddy bear type- who's ever going to trust a freakishly tall, blond, white woman? Every time that I have to talk to someone in this job, I'm worried that things are going to get off on the wrong foot just because I'm so flipping *different* that it's gonna set things on edge."

"People are more tolerant than you think-"

"Racism is inbuilt into the Human race, Kazuhiro. People are born with it- that instinct to group into 'like me' and 'not like me.' And usually, that's looks. It's why there's never gonna be a Gene Roddenberry future where we just 'get over' racism and prejudice- its born fresh with each new generation, not a part of the culture."

"So you think there's no hope of defeating racism?"

"No, I just think that it's going to be an individual struggle. Society will never eliminate it because it's not a problem with society. Each person's gonna have to struggle with and defeat that personal demon in their own life."

*Wait... was he trying to distract her from a spiraling self-pity topic?*

"Point is- whether we mean to or not, we notice. Instinctively distrust, even if just on a subconscious level, those we perceive not to be, or especially *look*, like us. And that scares me- because whenever I'm not in a car chase, pulling a gun on a suspect, issuing a ticket- any time that doing my job means talking to people, talking them down, negotiating, ascertaining the truth... I'm half-terrified that I'm gonna screw it up somehow, just by being me. By being so *different*, so unusual, that it's gonna throw distance between me and the other guy, or just ignorant because I'm ignorant, don't know what I'm doing, and you'll die because of it!"

He stared, and she backpedaled, tripping over her words; she hadn't meant to be that direct!

"Or, or- things are gonna go sour because of that. And someone's gonna get hurt. Besides you. ...But also you. *Gah!*"

She sighed, threw up her hands.

"I just don't connect with people! And not only in Japan! It's not like a whole bunch of guys are looking for ridiculously tall women in America. It's not like, just because I'm white, being tall doesn't still set me apart, make me stand out in a crowd- not like it doesn't make me feel self-conscious the whole time..."

"I don't think your height is 'ridiculous.' It's becoming. You shouldn't have such a low opinion of yourself."

Debrah felt herself blushing.

"Yeah, well... that's... beside the point. We... were talking about being afraid."

Kazuhiro nodded reluctantly.

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess we were. But that's no excuse, Debrah Lynd- I don't think people judge you the way you judge yourself- and I think you're estimating what kind of a person you are, how much your personality compensates for any perceived shortcoming you might have. I don't think people see you in the bad way that you think they do."

Again, Debrah couldn't meet his eyes- and the dust in the air had nothing to do with it.

Instead, she looked down. There, beneath them, lay the Super-X, bent and dented as if it had been through a fender-bender, but still largely intact. The cockpit, still open from the ejection, was filled with debris and settled dust, like a giant scoop, and it was inert, powerless. A mess.

Everything was still, quiet, as the wreckage settled over Gigan, creaking. The moment was tranquil, and they both sat, watching the cityscape and the stars slowly reappear, doing their best to ignore the hulking, limping giants that largely obscured the view. At least that left more of their attention to wander to the twinkling stars above...

*Stars! Bloody Hell!*

Okay, it was time to start pushing again. She had to reel him in *fast*- while it was calm, and before he noticed that he didn't have any reason to wait any more.

As carefully as she could, she spoke.

"I have to ask, Kazuhiro... what brought this on? These things you struggle with- they seem like the kind of things a person fights throughout their lifetime. So why today? What made things worse?"

She could see the internal debate playing out in Kazuhiro's eyes, the struggle of whether or not to confide in her as she had in him.

Finally, he took a deep, shuddering breath.

"There was a battle in Osaka last week- you heard?"

She had. The rumble between a pair of Kamakuras and an unexpectedly-alive Maguma had caused quite a stir... and the pair of giant mantises had managed to cause quite a bit of damage before the great, emerald-eyed Walrus-beast had managed to annihilate them... somehow.

“One of the casualties was... was...”

He stopped, overcome, and she had to resist the urge to move closer, to go and put an arm around him, console him in his loss.

After a moment, he choked back a sob, and continued, his voice wavering.

“...The Shinju Heights apartment complex. It... it was my baby for the last five years. Just opened. And then... gone. Just like that. And afterwards, I heard back from the zoning commission. They told me... told me they were no longer accepting design submissions, blueprint bids. Told me they were going to go with a *standardized*, prefabricated design. For *everything*. The entire neighborhood, a soulless, blocky, prefab nightmare. I... it was the last straw. I couldn't take it anymore. It all seemed so... *hopeless*.”

Debrah stared, dumbfounded.

After all of this existential stuff... they were back to *this*?

“Buildings... really *do* mean everything to you, don't they?”

Kazuhiro nodded, smiling gratefully at the understanding dawning in her eyes.

“Yeah, they really do.”

He laughed, self-deprecatingly, and Debrah joined in the chuckle, shaking her head ruefully at how dense she'd been. Sometimes it really *was* that simple.

A glimmer of russet caught her vision. Down on the street, the lights of the Super-X slowly rose, as if emerging from a deep sleep.

Incredible. Military engineering never ceased to amaze her; that the thing could still be operational...

Beside her, a ways down the roof, Kazuhiro looked down for a moment, abashed, then looked up and met her eyes.

“I know that makes me sound like an emotional wre-”

A crack like thunder and a burst of motion heralded an eruption of concrete from the street below, exploding outward with titanic force as Gigan burst from beneath the building that entombed him, spraying debris up in his wake like a geyser.

Debrah and Kazuhiro were both rocked back, flattened spread eagle against the roof as small chunks of debris pelted down around them.

Gigan's meteoric ascent leveled out, and it whipped around, its body rigid and straight as an arrow, serving as its own self-contained aircraft. The flying Kaiju circled around, lining up a pass at Godzilla with its outstretched razor-claws.

“Wha...?”

Debrah rose, legs still dangling over the side, bracing herself on both flat-out palms, half-turning to follow the cyborg's path. Beside her, Kazuhiro, stunned, still lay on his back, blinking at the sky.

Watching the stars, just like he wanted to.

Gigan accelerated through the sky, hurling itself like a javelin at its landlocked foe.

It rushed overhead, a jet stream of hurricane force blasting past in its wake.

The wind caught Debrah's upraised back like a sail, flinging her forward with the ease of the wind scattering leaves.

She screamed- not a girly shriek of fright, but a full-throated wail of abject terror brought about by the thrill in the pit of her stomach- as she tumbled off the edge of the roof and into free-fall.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the semi-conscious haze of half-wakefulness, as dreams fall in thrall to the physical sensation of a waking body, and the struggling brain, processing stimuli at the same level as an inebriated man's, seriously entertains notions of flavoring a dish just a little more *blue*, or finding someone lonely and making them cry tears of joy as you did because they too can find the meaning of life in having a little birdy to love; where the mind shifts to a completely alien frame of reference, where such thoughts seem to make perfect sense... in that twilight between waking or sleeping where profound truths and utter absurdities mingle and the most brilliant of ideas seem to slip maddeningly away *just* before they can be committed to memory, Jin found himself wondering if he had so few friends because he was too American to fit in.

Jin supposed that he had been greatly affected by western culture- though he rejected modern western culture as thoroughly as he rejected his own, which sometimes seemed like it had evolved into a strange, twisted alter-ego to the west's- a Bizarro to America's Superman.

One of his guilty pleasures- a online pop-culture reviewer and commentator who used far more profanity than Jin really approved of or was comfortable with- had described it as a fault of the American occupation of Japan following the second World War; through the soldiers patrolling and rebuilding all throughout Japan, the nation was exposed to all of the excesses and largesse of American culture, without having any of the cultural context or history necessary to truly understand or integrate it. Instead, it had just become sewn onto Japan's vastly different culture like a limb onto Frankenstein's monster, and the mutant hybrid of the two had resulted in a pop culture that produced bizarre and profane things alongside its brilliant and creative, animated pornography alongside innovative video games, technology that dazzled the rest of the world alongside numerous entertainment products that even the most twisted would label 'messed up.'

A culture made up of Japanese values filtered through American excess, followed by American standards mutating the resultant offspring further, so that the values of *neither* nation were truly represented in the final product. In the end, it had become a grotesque, larger-than-life mass reminiscent of the climax of 'Akira,' and Jin was living in the middle of it. He was certainly disturbed by some of the bizarre excesses he saw around him... but even moreso, he found the general trends of moral relativity, promiscuity, hedonism, and selfishness that he saw gaining prominence in both cultures repugnant; the worst of western culture infecting an already-diseased mutant. He wanted no part of the world that he lived in- and yet, it *was* the world he lived in; it wasn't as if he had much of a *choice*.

All he could do was try and live his life as best he could... inside of a monstrous madhouse of broken morality and inverted values.

There *were* still times that he could muster up a feeling of patriotism and pride. Japan still possessed a unique kind of brilliance and technological savvy unmatched in the world. But he feared that its culture was rotting out from beneath it... and America was only a few decades behind- or *maybe ahead*. Sometimes, it was hard to tell. Either way, the west was hardly any shelter of morality to which he could flee- even if he *were* the type to run away from a problem.

If anything, Jin's faith- a stereotypically western affair, despite the fact that its own tenets invited and accepted adherents from every tribe, tongue, and nation, and its origins lay in the middle east instead- led him to gravitate toward the past, not a point on the compass. His ideal was a model closest to the west in the 1950s; God and country, a loving family and good neighbors, patriotism and faith as strong, vibrant parts of daily living and not separate compartments of your life that you pulled out on Sunday or a holiday... unreal, idealized stereotype though it might be, that was the culture that absorbed him, that called out to him.

Yes, it still had its flaws- balanced in the ugly confluence of the fading misogyny of western culture's intervening decades, and the not-yet-risen integration and end of racism that was, even now, a work in progress, the culture was not perfect; he firmly believed that no culture on Earth ever could be, so long as humans were involved.

But, it was closer than any other era he'd found- from the politicking, holy wars, pious works and need to buy forgiveness of the west's first century (cultural 'add-ons' to and corruptions of the faith that were so widely disseminated and grievously abused that even now, their role as a true part of the religion was a wide-spread misperception, with the centuries-past crusades and papal abuses still cited as marks against the faith itself), to the increasingly 'me-focused,' principle-abandoning, nothing-is-wrong cultural

anarchy of modern 'tolerant' culture which seemed poised to tolerate anything and everything, most especially sloth, gluttony, and self-centered, self-seeking arrogance, while criticizing nothing... no culture or time that Jin had reviewed had seemed to come *quite* as close to aligning with the principles he believed in and the tenets of his faith.

Of course, the west of the 1950 held one large flaw that all of the other eras shared... it was in the past, impossible to recapture; it wasn't the reality in which he lived.

And really, no culture ever fully would align with all that he believed; leaving it to him, Yuki, and others like them- in this and every nation- to simply live in defiance of their own cultures... to live their own principles in their own lives, fight for their return in the hostile cultures they found themselves amongst, and count on no support from the outside.

It was wearying, demoralizing- sometimes hopeless-seeming. One could never go with the cultural flow and trust that it would end up taking them anywhere close to where their principles dictated they ought to be. It wasn't easy- it was a constant uphill battle. And the scorning voices of a world that found Jin's beliefs as 'restrictive and intolerant' as he found theirs 'self-indulgent and corrupt' didn't make it any easier. But, he did believe it was worth it. And he supposed, in his pursuit of it, he had become more western. Not because the west had a corner on righteous living... simply because in studies and resources and texts related to his faith, they were far more prolific.

And, Jin firmly believed, you didn't become what you ate, you became what you *read*.

So, while he'd prefer to become more like his savior than anything else, his many readings had really probably allowed more western influence to seep into his way of thinking than it had influence of the divine.

Which was alright, he supposed; a more western influence on his thinking had no effect on his loyalty to his nation, nor his love for his family, nor his allegiance to his God; in the end, it was just another one of man's various different flavors of culture- each with their own benefits and drawbacks, none getting everything right, nor everything wrong (even if some seemed to come close to it). So long as he followed a faith that transcended and superseded any of them, his general cultural method of thought didn't really matter that much.

He did envy Yuki, though- she'd seemed to manage to pursue her faith while maintaining her ties to her own culture, without any western 'indoctrination'- which made it far easier to function socially and reach out to family and friends that didn't really understand their choice of beliefs. He learned so much from her every day about the balance she'd managed to achieve; after all, it was far easier to reach the world when one was not alienated from it. It was one of the many things he admired about her.

Jin only had one such link, one way of truly relating to others around him, no matter how different his thinking... his sense of humor remained staunchly Japanese.

Which wasn't really enough to make fast friends at work.

He was aware enough of the concept called 'temperature' now to realize that his body was very cold. Something wet lapped at his shoulders... but his head was above water.

That warranted a shift in his attention. He was lying on something rough, but his limbs had that weightless, slow-moving feel of being underwater- all but his left arm, which was wet, but not floating. It was chilly, instead, and some part of him wanted to pull it under the surface- like that moment before getting out of a swimming pool when only total immersion wasn't a miserable, freezing affair.

Still, if he were underwater, shouldn't he be... drowning?

No... his head was propped up. He could feel a pair of shapely legs beneath his neck... he was lying on Yuki's lap.

She was keeping his head above water.

He smiled, rolling up from somnolence like a curling, undulating bubble. He reached his arm up, felt the wonderful warmth of her neck beneath his cold, wet, pruned fingers. He touched the back of her neck in the way he knew she liked, pulled the caress down and forward, running his hand past her jaw, her collarbone, down to her-

It was the slap that brought him back to full wakefulness.

His eyes snapped open.

*Ah, okay. Not Yuki, then.*

Mrs. Takarada from receiving stared down at him, lips pursed with an equal combination of concern and indignance.

“Y-Yuki?” He heard himself ask weakly.

Mrs. Takarada’s expression softened.

“The girl? The one that was so concerned about you?”

Jin nodded weakly; that would be her, all right.

“W-where...?”

“In a moment.”

The gentle way she said it sent a warning bell ringing in the back of his head. He sat up, over the protest of his pounding, reeling head, and found that he was sitting on the floor of the subway, up to his chest in ice-cold water. Stars shone overhead through the gaping hole above them- unblocked by the rising shape of the makeshift-ramp office building; the blast wave must have collapsed it instead.

The large concrete ramp lay in shattered fragments on the floor of the exposed tunnel, creating little islands amidst the rising water. Twenty, maybe thirty coworkers huddled on them, shivering. Trapped down here.

“How...?”

Mrs. Takarada shook her head.

“Shock wave bowled you over like a 9-pin, sent you tumbling down the ramp and off the side, just as it was falling. Threw a good dozen of us down here, among the injured.”

Jin nodded, slowly understanding. The shockwave would’ve taken the path of least resistance, blasting along the flat ground, picking up anything it encountered and hurling it back- people up on top were probably flattened, dazed, but unhurt... those too close to the edge would’ve been hurled down here. At least the blast would’ve skipped right over the open gap- the only damage down here was from the falling ramp, which no one would’ve been under.

Still, it left them in a fine pickle.

“And Yuki...?”

Mrs. Takarada looked down at her lap.

“The girl... took charge. She has a commanding presence, you know.”

He did. Ordinarily polite and deferential, whenever she did decide to take the lead, Yuki was a force to be reckoned with.

“She asked me to look after you. Led a group of the least injured through the tunnels to look for another way out. They... haven’t come back yet.”

“How long?”

“Hard to tell. Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes? Then again, could be five. Down here, with all our watches fried by the EMP...”

Yes, time would run together. Jin glanced around. The islands of rubble should provide enough shelter from the rising water for an hour or so at least- by then, the Kaiju battle would doubtlessly be over- and he could already see figures milling around the edges of the gap above. They could doubtless direct rescue services down to rescue them. It wasn’t ideal... but their chances were good.

But Yuki...

He stood up, over Mrs. Takarada’s objections, splashing around in the chill water, swaying on his feet.

“Which way did they go?”

“Mr. Kirishima-san-”

*"Which way?"*

She sighed, pointed at a side tunnel.

*"Through there."*

Jin nodded, grateful, and slogged his way forward, soaked clothes clinging to every part of his body, hampering his movements.

Something flashed by in the sky, and several of the refugees cried out as loose debris was swept over the edge of the hole by strong winds. Jin's eyes scanned the sky- from this steep angle, nearly to the tunnel, he could see Godzilla, closer even than before- from the shoulders up. And there in the sky, that streaking blur- could that be Gigan?

A swift flyby was accompanied by a spray of blood, Godzilla's shoulder opened up by a flying razor, the nasty fly-by knifing eliciting a screech of pain from the King of the Monsters.

Jin shuddered at the brutality of the wound- even as it began to close, visibly, Jin thought that he could see muscle.

With a roar, the shape flashed by again, a deep slice and spray of blood erupting from the back of Godzilla's head, perilously close to his dorsal spines, nearly administering a nasty slice of their own on the flying invader.

With a scream, one of the workers on the surface plummeted into the hole, landing with a splash. Several of the men and women, including Mrs. Takarada, splashed forward to fish the unfortunate man out, and the others above cleared quickly away from the edge, no doubt battening down against further high-speed jet-washes to avoid being swept in like their unfortunate colleague.

Jin started forward, concerned, until he saw the spluttering, flailing man being fished out by a well-muscled trucker from the freight section- she waved reassuringly to the rest of the approaching workers- it seemed that her charge wasn't too badly harmed from the fall.

Good.

He heard the roar of hurricane winds, and prepared for another shower of debris, prepared to go his way-

And then he was underwater, bubbles rushing past his face in all directions, tumbling, the back of his head striking stone.

Spots swam before his vision, and he pushed, backwards, driving himself towards the surface-

He broke through the water, gasping for breath, trying to process how he'd ended up on his back... it had all happened so fast.

He'd seen Gigan's dark blur overhead. The sudden, unexpected whip of Godzilla's tail as the beast swung around with amazing rapidity, its whole body a fulcrum, to drive the tail like a club into the flying shape. A sudden change in direction... Gigan slapped to the ground? A magnificently powerful shock that had thrown him- and now he could see, sputtering, many others as well- off of their feet?

He squinted up through the hole- was it wider now? -and saw that the cyborg was rising into view, blocking his view of the slow-moving Godzilla... without his nuclear breath, still recharging, and after taking a nasty beating... well, he was just slowing down. Unable to capitalize on his stunned foe before his foe could get back into the fight.

From this angle, he could only see the back of Gigan's head- but then, a wicked, curved blade rose into view and thrust forward in a downward arc- Godzilla roared, and then Gigan jolted backwards, struck...

They were brawling. Fighting paw-to-claw. This was when Kaiju battles were always the ugliest.

Turning, shaking his head, Jin set off down the tunnel.

Paused.

Called out.

*"Anyone have a flashlight?"*

As it turned out, someone did- Jin thanked him profusely, then set off through the dank, dark tunnel- a maintenance access shaft, presumably- for golf carts and other similar semi-vehicles- *I mean, do any powered, wheeled transport that a man could outrun really count?*- since it was too small for a subway train to fit through, and Jin couldn't feel any kind of rails beneath his feet.

As he traversed on, the water grew colder. The presence of so many warm bodies must have had some effect on the main chamber- but this was truly as cold as ice... and flowing more swiftly.

This was where the water was coming from. That's why they'd looked this way.

Jin's progress was slow, exhausting. Each step felt as if it was pushing against a quagmire, as if he was trudging through quicksand... the current pushing back against his ankles with every stride.

A dark, endless passage. If the underpass tunnel had seemed claustrophobic, oppressive, closing in on every side...

Jin was tired. So tired... his little nap hadn't exactly given him the strength that he'd lost in the jog, in the climb... this was no recuperating rest. And even now, he could feel his strength fading, leeches away by the freezing water. His ankles ached with the cold, his legs burned with the effort as if he'd been doing stair-climbing for an hour.

He almost stopped to lean against the wall, rest... but he wasn't sure that he could start moving again after.

Instead, he thought of Yuki. Of how desperate he was to find her. To touch her, as he'd imagined that he was-

Cheeks reddening with the embarrassment that only a memory recalled could repeatedly dredge up, he shuddered and continued on.

"Hello?"

A voice ahead raced out of the gloom, making him jump. Heart pounding, he rounded the bend, and his flashlight beam fell on a small group of workers, wet clothing and hair clinging to bedraggled frames, shivering in the swift water, heading his way.

"Yuki?!" He shouted.

The two in the front, a man and a woman, exchanged glances.

"The woman who was leading?" The woman asked.

*Was?*

"Yes!" He shouted, his heart hammering in fear at the evasive answer. "Where is she?"

Another glance.

*What have you done with her, you nitwits? Stop looking deep into each other's blasted eyes and answer me!*

"She's... gone. I'm sorry."

Jin blinked.

Well, that wasn't even an *answer*.

"Where *is* she?"

Another glance.

"All right, you!" He shouted, pointing at the man- mostly because he wasn't comfortable shouting at a woman- and glaring fiercely, "Answer my questions, and don't look at anyone else before you do it! *What happened?*"

He hesitated.

*"WHERE IS SHE?!"*

"There was a... an impact..."

When Gigan was knocked out of the air, perhaps? Slamming into the ground like a piledriver?

"...And the ceiling collapsed. Blocked the way, but not the water. We were... all knocked down..."

*Yes, yes, get to the point...*

"...And she was hit. In the head. We lost her in the water."

Jin was confused, angry.

"You didn't *look for her?*"

The man swallowed, hesitated again.

"It wasn't like that... the water is a lot faster up there. There's a tunnel branch. It splits off. This is just one branch. Past it, the current is... it's nearly impossible. And deep. It... it carried her away. We thought maybe we'd find her if we doubled back, but we haven't, so she must have been swept down..."

The other branch.

Jin felt anger rising, burying the confusion.

"You didn't split up?"

"The other branch is treacherous, dangerous- if she went that way..."

Cowards. They'd abandoned her.

"One more question," He growled, trying to intimidate and probably sounding more like a poor Batman impersonator than anyone truly threatening. "Why her? Why was she the only one that was hit?"

They all looked uncomfortable, and despite Jin's prohibition, the man glanced back, searching the faces of his cohorts as if he could divine the correct answer there.

Finally, the man assumed the responsibility, turned back to Jin, answered.

"She said that... we were her responsibility. She took the lead. When we were falling back, slowing down... she was scouting for danger. Testing the way."

Jin closed his eyes, felt a sob escape his lips involuntarily.

That was Yuki.

Never following in safety, never leading from the rear- always taking the brunt upon herself.

How dearly he loved her.

He opened his eyes, and little but a blur reached his tear-streaked eyes.

"Take me there."

He could see heads bobbing- they were probably glancing at each other again.

The cringing man spoke.

"By now, she's drow-"

**"TAKE ME THERE!"**

Jin imagined that they could hear his hoarse, ragged scream back in the main chamber.

He didn't care.

She couldn't be dead.

Life wasn't worth living without her.

He would either find her, or...

No, no 'or.'

He *would* find her.

Any other possibility just bounced off the surface of his mind. He rejected any reality in which he couldn't hear her voice again, see her smile.

It might be reality- but it was one in which he couldn't live.

The woman stepped forward as he wiped a wet hand across his face, doing little to clear his eyes.

“Come on. I’ll take you.”

He nodded, stepped forward, shouldering past the cowards- he vaguely imagined that if anything had happened to her, he’d track them down and kill them one by one... but that was just his dramatic side that had watched too many movies. More than likely, he’d withdraw into a catatonic depression, whither, and die- maybe after leaving some nasty letters that would make them feel *really* guilty about what they’d done after he was gone.

Actually, he didn’t even know who they were, really. He’d only gotten a good look at the man.

Maybe there was an in-office directory with pictures...

Why was he thinking *this*?

Jin shook his head. His mind was busying itself with irrelevancy, with absurd imaginings, to avoid facing the crushing uncertainty and fear of speculation and wondering.

He was sloshing his way through an ever-increasing current, flashlight on the back of the woman in front of him. She walked silently, occasionally glancing back with concern in her eyes, quietly leading him forward. He could feel the shudders of the ongoing brawl of the titans above, even down here.

Only the sound of rushing water and sloshing footsteps filled the tunnel... that, and Jin’s increasingly dark thoughts.

She was still alive.

She *had* to be.

He couldn’t be part of a world where she wasn’t

He heard a deeper, throatier rushing, growing steadily louder.

Up ahead, the woman stopped.

“Here,” She said.

Jin fought his way through the current- now that he was thinking about it, it was far harder than the numb trance had been- and turned to look where she was pointing.

Ahead of him, the pouring water was a rushing river, cresting in an undulating hump nearly as high as his shoulders.

The majority was rushing down the tunnel to his left, an ugly, rushing tunnel sloping downwards. Through the flashlight, he thought that he could make out stairs and railings- the uneven geometry churning the gushing water, throwing it up along the walls, frothing it like a raging whitewater- at the bottom, it funneled onward in a roiling curve, a half-vortex that spilled up along the walls, spinning whatever debris might pass its way like a washing machine.

It looked like a drain into Hell.

Well, without the fire.

But otherwise, pretty hellish.

Jin took a deep, calming breath. He was strangely numb... he should have been terrified, but until he knew if Yuki was still alive... he felt far less than he imagined he should.

He turned to face the woman, who gazed into his eyes with a deep sympathy.

“I’m sor-”

“Thank you.” He cut her off, speaking over her.

Then, he jumped.

He had no illusions about crossing the frothing white-water barrier, or traversing the stairs past the roiling current- he doubted he could even hold on to the railings on his way down. Those would be the methodical, prudent courses of action.

But he was fairly sure that he’d just end up on his back, swept down painful, bumpy stairs, smashing repeatedly into the back of his head as he was tumbled and churned along with the racing waters.

This way was quicker.

And, it avoided bumping along as many of the stairs as he could avoid in a single bound- a few less knocks to the head.

But there were still plenty of them. He wasn't sure if the compassionate woman was screaming in horror for him as he disappeared down the sluice gate to Hades, or if it was just the ringing in his ears.

And then, he was tumbling around, losing his bearings completely in the icy water, unable to tell which way was up, slamming his body against walls on all sides, his flashlight lost, tumbling through whatever lay at the bottom of the stairs.

\*\*\*\*\*

Even a cell-phone would have been helpful... but Katagiri's was dead as a doornail (he always forgot to put it on a charger when it was down to one bar, and it invariably died over the course of the next day), Masami left hers in her purse on the other side of the room (which was now a pile of shattered debris at ground level, far below), and Bumbles hadn't bothered to bring his in to work today.

The pale illumination of an iPad screen would be paltry light, but it would be some- much less a flashlight, or, if one was already wishing for the impossible- the miraculous restoration of the overhead lights.

But Katagiri had none of these, and so, with a bracing wind at his back, he operated by the glow of the streetlights, neon signs, and lit windows of the downtown plaza, shining in through the absent wall as a diffuse wave of pale orange that even his fully-dilated eyes struggled to make use of. And with the massive dust cloud that the sheltering lee of the hospital's interposed bulk thankfully shielded them from the worst of (still, he cringed to think how much dust might have already entered his patient's exposed interior before the hastily-assembled surgical tent that he now worked in had been erected), even that pale light had diffused to all-but-nothing, only now slowly returning as the air thinned out.

The occasional flash of a searchlight beyond, tracking one of the massive combatants, would entirely destroy his night vision, leaving him reeling for precious moments as his eyes struggled to adjust again. Still, he believed that, by a combination of close-squinting and the occasional, hesitant tactile probing, he had nearly severed the pressing trunk of the neurofibroma, freeing the Carotid from imminent danger of the crushing pressure- at this juncture, he would take that; getting the patient out of immediate danger, closing him up, and performing a follow-up operation when time permitted- a half-done job that could be salvaged later would be preferable to any further amount of time spent bungling around in these near-darkness conditions.

Masami remained a solid presence beside him, murmuring occasional low words of encouragement, having painstakingly- and at great risk to her gloved hands- retrieved and re-sterilized, as best she could, his entire collection of operating utensils.

Bumbles fidgeted in the background, his job of gathering the towels long-since completed. He kept fretting aloud at structural collapse, but Katagiri continued to wave him off or shout him down- if the building was going to collapse imminently, it would've done so by now- or at least be going through a lot more settling. As it was, it was stable enough to satisfy him- and *if* he could do his job without distractions, then they could all get out of the mortally wounded hospital building.

Through the transparent plastic of the tent, beyond the gap, he could see the two titans responsible for all of this through the now-clear air, still battling back and forth- punching and grappling and biting and body-slammng; with its built-in scythe-claws, killer beak, and... bizarre as it was to say it... buzz-saw in the upper abdominal region, Gigan seemed to have a natural advantage.

Sometimes, the devious creature would even violate the purity of unarmed combat with a pulsing red beam of superconducting electromagnetism (of the sort, Katagiri assumed, that levitated bullet trains from Tokyo to Osaka)- an intertwining trunk of red energy that split off into a dozen probing tendrils to attack from every direction. It reminded Katagiri of nothing more than the accurate arteries branching off of the interlobar- a single, great arterial branch- and it was even the color of blood. Where it hit, it sprayed

sparks and smoke, chewing away at the armored epidermis of the massive reptile it opposed. It seemed to supplement that hand-to-hand combat quite effectively, staggering and weakening Godzilla in a way that his antagonist didn't seem to be feeling.

The King of the Monsters would get an occasional clawed slap in to his opponent's head, but it was nothing compared to the lethal fusillade of slicing blows that the cyborg from space (truly, it was a strange world) was raining down. As Katagiri watched, a hammer blow to the lizard's shoulder sliced deep into flesh and muscle- a spray of blood fountained out, and Godzilla roared in agony. Even as the wound began to visibly close up (if only some of Katagiri's patients had that kind of recuperative power), far more slowly than his wounds had at the beginning of the fight, another fierce slash came in at the side of the reptile's angular head, only barely deflected by a forearm block. And although the nuclear behemoth capitalized upon the opening to deliver a raking slash against the cyborg's own extended arm, the marks were shallow, the follow-up slash swift and biting, slicing another great furrow in the wrinkled reptilian flesh.

Hobbled and handicapped by the draining of his nuclear fires, the King of the Monsters was getting his Gluteus maximus handed to him.

Carefully severing yet another strand of the neurofibroma, Katagiri was thankful for his position, facing the gap (by necessity, so as not to interpose his own body with his light source)- it forced him to see the struggle of the behemoths beyond, and through every movement, every stomp, every smash, he was able to anticipate the coming tremors, and work more surely and strongly in their absence.

Beyond, Godzilla lurched unexpectedly forward (he had been keeping back, trying to avoid any point-blank combat that could put him in range of the buzz saw), swinging his entire body forward, his spine flexing like a cracking whip as he used momentum built from the tip of his tail-onwards to throw his head on into a vicious head-butt. Though the collision with the cyborg's armored beak would undoubtedly have done more harm to the attacking lizard than the stalwart cyborg, Gigan was, at heart, a coward, and it flinched backward, arms flailing, to avoid the collision.

Godzilla pressed his advantage, driving a stubby hand forward to rake at the coward's scaled chest, shredding scales and flesh, and even as he danced backward from the deadly blades in its center, bit down deeply into Gigan's flailing arm, oozing blood out of deep bite-marks. He flailed the cyborg like a rag-doll, cracking him around like a whip, and delivered a savage strike at the cyborg's back, tearing partially through the soft, fleshy sail that served as Gigan's crest.

Using the momentum- and sacrificing more than few chunks of flesh in the process- Gigan spun free of the teeth, his right shoulder ragged and heavily bleeding. Godzilla, thrown off-balance by the sudden yank forward, led with his chin into a vicious clawed uppercut that- Katagiri couldn't be certain, but it certainly appeared from this angle- punctured up into Godzilla's mouth cavity.

The King of the Monsters threw back his head, tearing the claw free, and loosed a chilling howl of utter agony. The claw hadn't punctured all the way up into his skull, Katagiri noted absently, as he was still standing- a pity; it would've been interesting to see the lizard's skull splayed open, to view Godzilla's Cavernous Sinus or Superior Orbital Fissure, if indeed he had the equivalent of such things.

Maneuvering delicately in for another slice, Katagiri estimated that he had, perhaps, another two millimeters at most. A single deft stroke could sever it all- but easily the Carotid as well... like that old physics chestnut about an infinitely halved distance never reaching its target, the closer he got to the end, the slower his progress became... the more necessarily delicate, in order to avoid utter disaster.

Slice.

Withdraw.

A millimeter and a half. At most.

Blast, did he wish he had a better light.

He waved a hand behind him, and Bumbles stepped in with a towel; Katagiri hoped he hadn't been dripping sweat into his patient's open skull cavity already.

The hand, groping in the dark, clocked him in the forehead far too hard, shoving a damp towel into his nose and sending him stumbling back. His scalpel was well clear of the wound, thank God! He waived off the offending towel, wiped his forehead on his shoulder-sleeve, and returned to his concentration.

He shouldn't complain- the shot that Godzilla'd just taken to the face looked far more painful- the great lizard was reeling back.

In fact, Gigan's entire onslaught was vicious and unrelenting, his vengeance for his still-wounded arm (at least he didn't recover as quickly as his foe, making Godzilla's rare successful shot count in a way that Gigan's blows needed to accumulate in force and number to accomplish) savage and deadly. Like a mad surgeon, he cut again and again, his blades as sharp as scalpels, his aim as deadly and precise as a sharpshooter, flaying great furrows of flesh and cleaving deep into muscle and tendon, disabling his foe for crucial seconds, rendering a limb useless and striking to the side of advantage even as his nemesis' rapid healing repaired the damage. Only Godzilla's tale, brought in to deflect and divert the strikes, kept the King of the Monsters from being overwhelmed by the onslaught of tactical strikes; and even the few crucial seconds that each deflection bought him was insufficient time for the deep slashes to heal entirely, leaving his arms and legs perpetually moving as if in slow motion, in a constant, draining effort to knit their crucial ligaments back together.

Godzilla was driven back, wearying under a myriad of blows- facing strike after strike, getting precious few in return, numerous wounds beginning to appear- and if they healed, it wasn't at a visible rate. The legendary lizard was falling back, parted from blood and body mass at an alarming rate that even his impossible regenerative rates were failing to keep up with, slowly losing a war of attrition. Against his bladed foe, with his nuclear fires quenched, and hard-pressed to renew them with every scrap of his strength diverted to restoring hideous rents and gashes in his person, Godzilla was at an incredible disadvantage. The occasional stinging blast of optical fire from Gigan only served to taunt, mock, and reinforce Godzilla's failures, driving him back and out of his own striking range; he could absorb a great deal of punishment, but without the ability to deal out any significant blows of his own, he was faltering.

And, sparingly dishing out his ruby fury in lieu of keeping the King of the Monsters close (and likely hope that the titanic lizard would make a mistake, feint too close, and fall into the vicious buzz saw), Gigan was almost toying with his archenemy, absorbing the significant-but-comparatively-feeble physical damage that Godzilla was able to deal out in return for delivering devastating body blows and horrific, tearing slices of his own.

It was turning into a very one-sided battle... and turning Katagiri's stomach.

Slowly, regretfully sticking the very tip of a finger in towards the severed bundles to find his place, he prepared to make another foray. Moving his fingers along to curl around the loosened tip of the neurofibroma, stabilizing it, pulling it taut for another cut, he shut out the horrific abuse being levied against the unique biologies on a macro scale beyond, focused all of his attention onto the table containing his very human patient. Holding the tumor with pinched fingers while cutting with the other digits- this would be tricky. Operating in close proximity to his other hand, he would have to be bloody careful not to slice open his own fingers; that could be-

Halting his advance, Katagiri could have laughed aloud.

With all of the delicate, precision cutting, an operation in the dark in half a hospital with a 50 foot drop looming a handful of meters away and two giant mutant monsters battling in the street before him, and it was his fingers he was worried about cutting into by mistake?

The human capacity for selfish thought is unrivaled.

He took a few steps to the side, standing at his patient's head, and hefted his scalpel, rotating his shoulder in its socket to limber it up. His fingers ached- they threatened to lock into rock solid instruments of their own volition, cramping and aching. He had to end this soon, for all their sakes.

Arms batted away, the King of the Monsters was being forced back and back, taking slashes that cleaved flesh from bone, slicing deeply into the saurian's body; Godzilla's resistance was growing weaker as he slumped backwards, almost stumbling, only the bracing of his distributed girth and tail keeping him from toppling back. It seemed to Katagiri, as the duo pushed back toward the edge of his field of vision through the sundered wall, that the King was about to be dethroned.

His scalpel made contact, and he began to deftly slice.

Masami shouted, suddenly, and it was all that he could do to steady his hand. Irritation roiled inside him like a thing alive, and he barely resisted the urge to snap back an angry shout of his own- he'd

thought her better than bumbles, calmer, cooler under pressure-

And his mind belatedly processed the fact that her shout was not an inarticulate cry of panic, but contained words.

“Hang on!”

She was farther over than he was- her field of view extended further than his vantage point-

The ground pitched precipitously, sending him tottering to the side, far enough to see that the King of the Monsters had run out of ground to give- he had slammed his back into a bracing skyscraper- the jolt that sent him staggering, desperately trying to pivot at a point in space around his hand, instead of allowing it to pivot with him. For a moment, he hoped it might be possible... to defy physics and gravity and momentum and keep his hand steady as his body pivoted around it, independent of his own center of gravity-

And as he watched, clinically detached, in that frozen moment of time, Gigan, good arm already drawn back for a vicious follow-through, thrust a scything claw forward, through flesh and muscle and whatever lay beneath, penetrating Godzilla's shoulder, sinking up to the hilt, pinning him to the skyscraper behind him. The beast gave a high-pitched screech that almost sounded child-like, raw and vulnerable and anguished, and began to thrash about, flailing in a futile attempt to break free-

And the world pitched and rumbled and heaved like the Earth had become a tumble dryer, and every hope of maintaining steadiness was lost. Katagiri was on his head, and then his side, and then his stomach, the remains of the plastic tent wrapped around him, choking, smothering, constricting- and then he couldn't feel the floor, and he was tumbling through the air, arms pinned to his sides like some sort of skydiving mummy-

And then he jerked, hard, and began swinging back and forth. Dizzy, reeling, his head throbbing, Katagiri began to panic in his confinement, search for a gap, any gap- and after a moment's struggle, his questing hand found one, forcing through and into the open air.

For a third time, what he saw made no sense to his mind. He saw the girl- the orderly with the almond eyes- lying splayed out, her leg twisted at an unnatural angle that his analytical mind instantly diagnosed as broken even as he tried to process the rest of what he was seeing. Why was she lying flat against the wall, and what was the tangle of ruin and debris behind her, and why was his view swinging...?

Down.

He was facing down.

His head reeled as he did his best to look around.

He realized that he was wrapped up in the tattered remains of the surgical tent like an American Indian baby in a papoose, his entire plastic cocoon haphazardly snagged on a protruding girder, itself exposed and twisted by the force that had sheared away half of the building. Something warm and squishy was wrapped in along with his still-trapped arm.

And then, with a sickening tearing sound, the tent came apart, dropping him into the thin air. His free arm swung out, desperately seeking-

-and found something, and closed-

Pain shot through his arm, threatening to tear it from his socket, but his hand of stone clenched- even as he felt his surgical glove shred and his palm begin to bleed profusely.

Yet, he stopped.

The world stabilized.

His hand held a flexible pipe, containing a bundle of trailing fiber-optic cable... like a rope, he held it, in a rappelling position, hanging over a precipitous drop. He clung to trailing debris on the ruined side of the sheared-away building. Shaking loose the fragments of the plastic wrapping, he brought up his other arm to take the pressure off of his straining shoulder, which felt as if it could give Atlas himself a run for his money in terms of calamitous, weight-of-the-world-bearing strain.

It really was bearing his whole world, wasn't it? After all, he was the center and sole occupant of his own lonely existence; he was his own world. “No man is an island...”, but some could dig a moat. And so,

all that was precious to him really did hang off of this flimsy cable, half-repelled off the side of a torn-open, split-asunder hospital building.

Or was it?

Beneath him, Masami, pitched out of the hole, lay on a piece of tiled flooring two stories down- a fragment holding on by a thread, shifting and pitching under the sudden weight- threatening to tear free of the side of the building and plummet, with her as an unwilling, semi-conscious passenger.

And right now, the thought of her demise troubled him far more than his own.

He raised his eyes upwards, over the lip of the shattered wall and up into the remains of the operating room-

And his face went ashen.

A spray of blood fountained into the air, nearly touching the darkened ceiling.

That explained the wet, soft something that was wrapped in the plastic cocoon with him, still gripped in his hand, now crushed against the side of the cable where he held on with a vice-grip... it was a prodigious chunk of the neurofibroma.

He'd severed it completely.

And he'd cut the Carotid Artery.

He couldn't tell how badly from here- it could be nicked, or sliced cleanly in two. But either way, without immediate direct pressure and a quick repair, the patient would be dead in seconds- even with those things, he might yet be.

Katagiri thrashed and twisted in the breeze as he struggled for a second handhold to alleviate the stress on his shoulder- and behind him, the mighty titan of the nuclear age thrashed in kind.

He could struggle, haul himself up, try to reach the man and staunch the bleeding in time to repair the damage, save his life... but, he saw, as he spared a glance down to the unconscious orderly beneath him, he would probably sacrifice the helpless woman to her doom. But if he climbed down to save her- and he might just have enough cable to do that, if it held- then he would most certainly be abandoning his helpless charge, the patient trusting him with his life, to a similar fate.

There was no time for vacillation; every second could bring death- every fraction of a second. There could be no hesitation, no agonizing- only the kind of instant snap-decision that Katagiri hated to make; no time to deliberate and weigh the options- he simply had to choose, immediately- if he took another two seconds to decide, it could be the difference between life and death for the bleeding man.

And so, with no time and no options, he chose.

\*\*\*\*\*

*From the small outpost of tents on the ridgeline, Mayor Junichi Yazaki could have beheld a magnificent view of the distant mount Fuji, resplendent in the moonlight... but instead, he was facing the other way, eyes fixed on the city in the valley below, watching it burn and smolder.*

His city.

*A tear rolled down his cheek as another mighty tower- somewhere in the shopping district, maybe the Kurosawa Mall itself, collapsed to the ground in what looked, from this distance, like a tiny puff of vapor- a dust cloud of pulverized rubble that represented another slice of the city's fledgling economy, up in smoke.*

*"This city has been without a Kaiju attack..." He intoned gravely to his trusted aid, Ichiro Miki, "Since Angirus trundled his way through in 1993, on his way to Himeji, and even that caused minimal damage. I was proud of that record, Ichiro. The jewel of the Yamanshi Prefecture. What has happened to my marvelous city?"*

*"I think... it may be my fault," Ichiro muttered nervously. "Maybe he finally decided to get his revenge, send Gigan after me."*

*The mayor glanced at him askance, bemused.*

*"He who?"*

*"Well, boss, I think this might be the brainchild of-"*

*"Oh, no- don't say 'Gabara'!"*

*"-Gabara."*

*Junichi sighed.*

*"Ichiro, Gabara is fictitious. He doesn't exist."*

*Ichiro's face hardened into a stubborn line.*

*"I told you, boss!"*

*"Yeah, I know, you saw him as a kid. You boarded a plane to monster island, talked to Godzilla's son, fought Gabara. Ichiro, think about that... doesn't that sound to you a little more like a daydream that got etched in your mind than an actual memory...?"*

*Ichiro's bottom lip protruded in a pout.*

*"If it was, then how did I defeat those bank robbers?"*

*Junichi sighed, rolling his eyes. Ah, yes. Ichiro Miki, the boy hero. And Ichiro would never let anyone forget it.*

*"I don't know, Ichiro-kun. The same way that the kid from Home Alone always does. The natural pain-loving cruelty and inventive malice of childhood channeled into productive form. I wasn't there; I can't say. But the fact remains that no one else, ever, in all of history, has seen this 'Gabara.' And frankly, every time you describe him, it sounds more like Sancho, that fellow that collects our garbage on Wednesdays, except with scales..."*

*For some reason, that made Ichiro smile.*

*"Mayor-san, we've got it!"*

*The shout from inside the tent drew both men over, silencing the debate; the military was using satellite cameras to view the battle from an extreme distance, and had agreed to splice them into the feed.*

*The screen, an old TV monitor from the analogue days, strictly coaxial all the way and probably nearing the end of its life, flashed incomprehensible garbage for a second, and then flashed into a pixelated image which drifted and shook; the focus was being maintained manually, without any kind of infrared or laser-guidance to lock on and stabilize it... after the Super-X disaster, they daren't not give the Gigan-cyborg any kind of beam to latch onto.*

*The image that appeared made Ichiro gasp in dismay.*

*With the King of the Monsters pinned near-helplessly against a building- the Grand Shobijin Hotel, it looked like- Gigan could carve him up like a turkey at his leisure.*

*"You can beat him, Godzilla!" Ichiro shouted, as if the Kaiju could hear him. "Grab his shoulders and push him down to his knees, like we did with Gabara! You can beat him!"*

*Several of the tent staff turned to stare at him; Junichi's cheeks reddened with embarrassment, even as his oblivious aid continued to shout encouragement to his thrashing champion... he had to remind himself that Ichiro was a dependable aid and talented administrator, likely going places in this world; and how many great men were without quirks, truly?*

*"It never happened; he's fictitious..." He sing-songed, making sure he was audible to all in the tent.*

*Just to be sure.*

*On the screen, Gigan's first incision into its thrashing, struggling victim was a long, cruel slash straight down the middle, as if mimicking Gigan's own saw-trench. Blood and ichor bubbled out of the deep wound as flailing arms battered ineffectually at the cyborg.*

*Gigan paused. And then, as if inspired by the slash, the buzz-saw on its chest whirred to life, and it began to advance with slow, shuffling steps towards its victim, ruby-eye glittering.*

*"NO!" Shouted Ichiro, horrified.*

*Even Godzilla's sturdy hide couldn't avoid being bisected from groin to sternum if he was held immobile in the blade's path.*

*The camera view, nearly from the side now, shifted suddenly, far-away and overhead, zooming in with a wobbly shudder- the first satellite had drifted out of range, and the feed had switched to another.*

*Ichiro turned to his boss, eyes wide, horrified.*

*"It can't end like this, boss! Godzilla doesn't fall to bullies! This sadist is even more of a monster than Gabara!"*

*"There is no Gabara," Junichi murmured by habit, his eyes fixed on the screen as the whirring saw drew ever closer to the King of the Monsters' heaving chest. The lizard thrashed and struggled against the blade hooked through his collarbone, straining to get away from the inexorable approach of the bisecting blade. Blood leaked from the corner of his jaw.*

*But he was held fast.*

*The blades were mere meters away from the Kaiju's chest now, the scale-equivalent of inches.*

*Junichi realized that even he was holding his breath.*

*The saw made contact, bit into tender flesh.*

*Gigan screeched a piercing note of triumph that they could hear even here on the hillside, miles from the city.*

*A bright azure light erupted from behind the King of the Monsters.*

*Every windowpane on the face of the skyscraper blew out in an instant, rushing past Godzilla like an icy mist.*

*His mouth opened wide...*

*And unleashed cobalt fury onto his foe from the depths of his blazing heart.*

*Godzilla's nuclear power had recharged.*

*Gigan hurtled backwards like a missile of meat and metal, thrown away from his foe across the plaza- the shoulder that had borne the brunt of the blast a smoldering ruin, trailing tendrils of melting sinew; the claw with which he had savagely pinned Godzilla still embedded in the reptile's shoulder, severed as the elbow.*

*The intervening portion, from shoulder to forearm, was now vapor in the air.*

*Ichiro leapt into the air, cheering, and knocked over one of the tent's generator powered lights with a crash.*

*"Yeah!"*

*Godzilla tore away from the ruined building at his back with a lurch, taking the claw, a large clot of debris still pinned to its end, with him. He didn't even seem to realize that it was there. Or didn't care.*

*"Go get 'im, Godzilla!" Ichiro crowed.*

*Several of the men shushed him.*

*He smiled almost apologetically, and squealed with childlike glee.*

*"This is even more exciting than fighting Gabara!"*

*"There is no Gabara!"*

# VI

Debrah Lynd's forearms, hurt, a lot. She would open her eyes to find out why, but like every child knew lifting the bedcovers from over your head guaranteed that the monsters would get them (and even years of police training never fully erased the instinct that the same applied to imagined burglars, in adulthood), she knew that as soon as she opened them, her death would become a reality.

Still, the thrill in the pit of her stomach was gone, and that made her curious.

Cautiously prying open one eyelid, she tried to assess the situation.

All she saw was her own gangly body, legs swaying beneath her, and beneath them, the same vertigo-inducing prodigious drop that she'd stared at every time she looked down from the edge of the roof- except without that little grey ledge in the way. On the ground, some distance away, a furrow in the debris marking his sliding path, lay Gigan, its shoulder a tattered ruin.

She looked up.

Her arms stretched out in front of her, a white-knuckled grip on the decorative cornice a few feet below the roof.

Oh, that explained it.

She was hanging on for dear life.

She didn't remember grabbing onto the ledge, but she knew concretely- no pun intended, for that was what her fingers dug desperately into- that she owed Kazuhiro and designers like him an irony-tinged debt of gratitude for the decorative protrusion.

She also knew that the Mythbusters had covered this scenario in detail, hanging on to a ledge by one's fingers- that they'd concluded it was a matter of seconds at best before one lost their grip, plunging to their demise. She remembered being skeptical, privately feeling that an individual in the throes of adrenaline-induced panic, someone with the desperate strength of knowing that their life depended on it, would be capable of greater feats than safety-harnessed thrill junkies.

It seemed that her contention was about to be put to the test.

She wanted to scream for help, but her panic-stricken lungs refused to supply her the breath.

"Hold on!"

She looked up again. There was Kazuhiro, leaning over the edge, face ashen.

"I'll come down to you!"

There was probably irony here, but she was too scared to process it.

He swung one leg over the edge of the roof.

She should probably be protesting this- after all, it was the whole reason she was up here. To *keep* him from going over the edge of the roof.

"If you can swing yourself inward, there's a projecting pseudo-raking *geison*... uh, another, tinier ledge underneath! You can stand on it- maybe!"

She looked down. Sure enough, where the ledge that her white, straining fingers scratched and scraped their way towards the edge projected nearly three feet out from the building, there was another one, about ten feet below, that only projected out a few inches. There were even projecting supports for *this* ledge- cornice- underneath that she could grab on to.

Well, she did have tennis shoes for traction...

A stinging beam, stuttering and weak, lanced from the fallen Gigan's visor to slam futilely at Godzilla's thick hide, its branching, buzzing tendrils flitting about more like a swarm of drying fireflies than angry hornets.

Both of Kazuhiro's legs were dangling over the edge of the roof as he lay on his stomach.

"I, uh..."

He seemed to be at an impasse, unsure of how to move next.

"I'll be right down...!"

A furious lance of cerulean fire blazed from the back of Godzilla's throat, tearing into the cyborg's chest, burning and melting away the reflective scales, which withered like dry grass in a fire.

The heat of the beam blistered at Debrah's back, scalding her flesh, washing across her. Her fingers were on the verge of giving way. Swinging herself back and forth like a pendulum, Debrah found herself dropping as her first thrust jarred her fingers loose. Her hands slapped together, clamping like a vice onto the support, as her legs slammed into the wall, found the half-foot ledge, fought and scabbled for purchase.

For a second, she hung suspended between life and death.

And then, the death-grip loosened into a bracing press as she found her balance; somehow- she didn't know how- standing safely on the ledge underneath.

Behind her, the sound of a hissing rush accompanied the launch of air-to-air missiles; Super-X had returned to the fight.

Debrah heard a thump and the sound of scritchng footsteps, shoes on concrete, above her- Kazuhiro had dropped to the ledge above her.

"Okay!" She heard his voice, muffled through the concrete ledge between them. "Let's see how we can get to you..."

"Take your time!" She called back, almost giddy. This was maintainable, she could sustain this- with something to stand on and the pressure off of her fingers, the angled support- a corbel, from Kazuhiro's earlier description of his favorite structures; like a buttress, but with a load-bearing purpose, stretching from the wall up to the underside of the wide ledge a perfect balance- she could wait here for as long as it took.

She looked beside her, and almost laughed out loud. There were windows on this level- she could just work her way over to one-

Godzilla slammed into the building behind him, his own overpowering blue fire reflecting off of the Super-X at which he cast it, catching him full in the face.

The impact of his dorsal scales against the skyscraper, digging out the building's innards as Gigan had its own earlier hiding place, thrummed through the ground like a thunderclap, shaking Debrah as if she were a mouse in the mouth of a hungry cat. She heard Kazuhiro cry out, above her.

Debrah flailed, and for an awful moment, she was hanging out, over the street again, falling- but a steel grip on the support she was using to brace herself allowed her to haul herself back onto the ledge, restore her fragile balance. She looked back at the titanic battle.

Godzilla had moved to the side, but his every lance of nuclear breath was intercepted and redirected by the agile, reflective Super-X, vectored into the city at a random angle, tearing great, terrible furrows into the land and cityscape. The entire mall district disappeared in a wash of nuclear flame.

From behind the protective screen of the darting, intercepting aircraft, Gigan continued to strike out with sickly, stinging lasers from its prone position on the ground, its front blackened, its ruby visor flickering. It pushed itself slowly up on one arm, gaining confidence, as Godzilla sidestepped, his spines intertwined with the rubble of the building behind him, his movements slowed by the claw and forearm still embedded cleanly through his shoulder.

Gigan even managed a croaking cackle, its eye-beam's twisting tendrils punching through Godzilla's

flesh at last, sending the great Kaiju staggering from a scattering of steaming holes in his leg.

Then, Godzilla bent low. His scales flashed, melting the debris intertwined between them. His nuclear breath burst out towards the hovering Super-X, hit it, casting it awash in an azure glow, and glanced off- to bury itself in the pavement not thirty feet from Gigan's head.

The cyborg screeched in surprise, the Super-X reacting with it, veering away- Godzilla moved with it, pacing it, readjusting his angle, and fired again.

This time, the reflected beam struck Gigan's good shoulder, throwing the Kaiju flat to the ground again.

Debrah braced herself this time- and the impact, the shudder than ran through the entire building, *still* nearly shook her off into the streets below.

This was no good. She couldn't work her way over to the window- it was too far between supports, and if one of those impacts hit when she was between them, without a handhold to anchor to, she was dead.

*Lousy Kaiju!*

Above her, she couldn't hear the sound of footsteps anymore.

"Kazuhiro?"

There was no answer.

*"Kazuhiro?!"*

Nothing.

She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling the sting of hot tears and an unbearable lump in the back of her throat, an ache that not even a sob or a cathartic scream could fully satisfy.

No hand-holds up there.

Because he wasn't sitting safely up on the roof, he'd been standing down on the ledge, looking over the edge.

Because of her.

She really *had* killed him.

And now she was going to die here, alone- fulfilling *his* dream, ironically.

Just another victim of a giant monster rampage.

She glanced at the window beside her. A good ten feet away.

Maybe she deserved to die here.

She'd failed. Oh, how badly she'd failed. And what a price she faced paying.

Another reflected nuclear blast speared the ground just beside the prone Gigan; Godzilla was, perhaps, more intelligent than he looked; he used a constantly adjusted angle of reflection to strike at his foe. The Super-X, his relay, was now a liability- and with a single ruddy laser-pulse at the beleaguered vessel, Gigan sent it straight into a kamikaze run at the King of the Monsters.

Debrah inched her way along the edge as far as she could while keeping a stabilizing hold on the support. She could tell, even through her tear-blurred vision, that it wasn't nearly far enough. The window was far, far out of her grasp, and she dared not stray from her hand-hold.

She just stood there with her hands above her head, gripping the upper ledge's support... which was also *her* only support.

The Super-X, easily sidestepped by Godzilla, punched into and through the ground, collapsing the pavement into the subway behind the monster, and crashing uselessly, sending a cloud of smoke billowing out of the subterranean chamber.

The impact shook Debrah again, reaffirming her need to remain anchored.

Godzilla, as always, remained unaffected- stepping forward and unleashing another blast against his fallen foe, blistering Gigan and eating away at the cyborg's flesh. Something slick and oily began to leak

from the wounds, and from the mechanical beak.

Debrah should've been angry. Angry at the fools that sent her here, angry at herself for failing, angry at the selfish little architect that had gotten her into this mess.

But all that she could feel was... hollow.

Blue flame speared the air behind her again and again, charging the air with the smell of burnt ozone, and causing her hair to stand on end. Savage showers of sparks erupted from Gigan as flesh and scale violently gave way to steam and burning flecks of metal.

With a terrific bang, the window to her left blasted outwards- not so much shattering as folding out like an undulating jellyfish, the contact-plastic laminating the window fulfilling its design purpose to keep the broken windowpane together in one piece. It appeared to be wrapped around a heavy lead bust of the city's founder.

The large sheet of warped glass-in-laminate tumbled sloppily down the side of the building to land with an entirely glass-inappropriate smack far below. Only small shards of glass, their allegiance lying more with the solid metal window frame than their plastic-wrapped brethren below, remained around the ragged opening- which was still far enough away to be another country for all the good that it did Debrah.

And then, to her absolute shock, out popped Kazuhiro's head, like a prairie dog emerging to study the terrain. His eyes lit up as he saw her.

"Aha! I thought this was the row of windows I remembered! Come on, work your way over, I'll pull you in!"

He reached out his hand to bridge the upper-support-less gap between them.

"I... I thought you were dead! I heard you shout, and then you weren't there anymore..."

"Back up to the roof, in the door, down the stairs, here!" He looked impatient. "Work your way over to my hand! Hurry, before something else hits!"

She couldn't disagree with that. Slowly, tentatively, oh-so-cautiously, every instinct in her body shrieking in contradiction, she hesitantly lowered her hands from the support and shuffled, slowly and awkwardly, along the narrow ledge toward his outstretched hand.

Behind her, Gigan was withering under the assault; his head lolled back, and the glow in his visor began to dim. The massive beast looked to be dying- perhaps, if Godzilla stopped advancing, the tremors would cease long enough for her to make it...

Her foot caught a loose pebble, a chunk of concrete jarred loose by the massive battle, and jerked sideways with a scratch of rock-on-rock, briefly tottering over the no-man's-land of thin air beyond before finding its place again; she closed her eyes and hugged the wall with awkward relief.

"You can do it." Kazuhiro's voice was gentle, almost soothing. "You're almost there!"

*Was he talking her down?*

Opening her eyes, she took another shuffling step. Some distant flailing shook the building, but nowhere near as badly as those flailing footsteps. Yet, after a moment, the shaking hadn't stopped. She looked down.

The shaking was from her.

With a deep breath that she couldn't quite hold long enough to calm herself, she forced herself another step forward, well aware that the only support she had now was her own balance. Kazuhiro's outstretched arm, projecting from the ragged window frame, was still at least three feet away- and so was her now-abandoned support strut.

Swallowing a wave of nausea at that thought, she slid her left foot forward, then her right, letting her nose slide painfully along the brick wall.

"Don't give up now!"

She turned to face Kazuhiro again, her cheek now resting against the cool, rough brick she was pressing herself against.

Beyond, Godzilla bellowed his triumph, standing above his fallen foe. His nuclear breath seemed to be flagging- his rebuilt energy stores now taxed past their fledgling capacity; instead, with an almost contemptuous screech, he swung back his massive foot and kicked the prone cyborg.

Debrah gritted her teeth, and with a determined burst of effort, shuffled forward, sliding one foot, then the other, in a rapid staccato pattern to close the distance in one last burst.

It probably looked ridiculous, and nearly cost Debrah her balance entirely.

Okay, bad idea. Slow and steady, then.

Kazuhiro's outstretched hand was only a foot from hers.

Gigan's screech filled the air. It raised its remaining claw futilely, as if trying to ward off Godzilla's blows.

One foot.

Another.

The gritty, pocked surface of the bricks snagged at her clothing, grabbing a thousand little threads too small for the eye to see, hanging on to them just a second too long before letting go with a light scratching sound, making her feel sticky, as if the front of her body was reluctant to leave the stretch of wall that it occupied, was trying to remain in place while the rest of her moved onwards. Her hair did the same.

Only a foot remained between outstretched hands.

Her knees ached from keeping so tightly locked, her entire body was sore and tired from being tensed up, braced against the wall.

Gigan brought its flailing claw down upon Godzilla's foot.

Her leg slid sideways, the wall's grip on her pant-leg pulling the end up and away from her bare ankle, letting the chill of the night air and abrasive scrape of the brick scratch against it, as it had for every step so far.

Her sneaker found purchase, and she shifted her weight, leaning it onto her leading foot, and slowly slid the other to catch up.

Her breath was shallow and made her chest ache, her head spin- she dared not draw in a full breath, afraid of how far an expanded diaphragm might push her back and change her center of balance- and anyway, her tensed-up body wouldn't allow it.

Six inches.

She shuffled her feet sideways again, struggling for balance, straining with her trembling hand, as Godzilla screeched in pain, his tail rising from the ground to whip around like an angry snake.

The tips of her fingers brushed against his, the welcome warmth sending a tingle through her. She leaned forward, putting all of her weight on her leading knee, desperate for a support, a lifeline, and reached.

Gigan cackled, almost sounding satisfied at its last, spiteful gesture, bringing pain to its foe one last time.

Her hand made contact with Kazuhiro's, clasped it tightly. With a greater confidence, she slid sideways again, and, with his grip to steady her, leaned back from the wall far enough to scrape her hand roughly between the wall and her stomach.

The move put her shoulder against the wall, and her gravity shifted- her broad shoulders pushing her center of mass too far out from the ledge. As her free hand thrust desperately at his, she began to fall away from the wall.

And he pulled her back. With her feet as the fulcrum, a gentle pressure on taut arms arrested her lean, pulled her back. She wobbled, unstably, but was able to take another shaky slide-step forward.

She had an anchor again.

As his roar ended, Godzilla's jittering tail whipped downwards to slam the ground in fury.

The shockwave of force slammed into her like a baseball bat, and her legs came loose from the

ledge, dropping out from under her.

She began to plunge downward, a human pendulum swinging from Kazuhiro's outstretched arms. At the apex of her swing, gravity caught her, and she dropped straight down, descending in a lethal plunge once again, her only lifeline Kazuhiro's hands clasping hers. Those hands arrested her motion with a jerk, wrenching loose- but not free- and the sudden weight yanked Kazuhiro forward, his arms downward, driving his wrists and forearms down onto the broken glass at the bottom of the window frame. Kazuhiro howled in pain. Blood streamed from his arms- though it didn't look like his wrists had been slit, thank god.

*This building was just plain built for suicides!*

Still, his face was red, a mask of pain. He grunted and strained, but his grip was loose- and she could see him struggling to maintain even that grip.

"I'm... having... trouble, here..." He rasped. "Need to climb up... get your- urph- own grip... or we're... ah! ...both gonna die..."

He was sliding forward, farther out the window. Debrah did her best to claw her way up his blood-slicked arms, trying to grab the window-frame and take her weight off of him before she pulled him out of the window.

She wasn't sure she was going to make it.

He was past his elbows now, almost bent double over the window frame. She could see the veins in his neck. He screamed involuntarily as her probing, climbing hands closed over his wounded, sliced-up forearm.

"I thought..." She grunted, working her way upwards with agonizing slowness, loathing the pain that she was causing him, "...That you didn't- umph! -care... about dying!"

Her hand slipped on his blood and she lost her grip, and with a shriek, she found herself dangling, spinning dizzily, one hand in his, which she could already feel sliding loose.

"I don't!" He shouted, pain and determination and fire filling his voice.

His free hand clasped hers, both hands holding doggedly onto her strained wrist as she struggled to heft her pinwheeling hand again.

Kazuhiro gritted his teeth, closed his eyes, his arms straining, the cords of overstressed muscles standing up like mountain ranges on the blood-slicked terrain.

"I- ah!- ...care... 'bout- arrrr!- you!"

With the last word, he threw back his head and screamed, bellowing to the sky, a cry of absolute effort that even Godzilla would be hard-pressed to match in volume and ferocity. Digging in his heels, he strained, and Debrah felt something in his left arm pop. Shouting to the heavens, roaring his defiance at the death he'd stood so ready to embrace, Kazuhiro threw himself backwards, dragging Debrah roughly up the bricked side of the building. There was a stinging, cutting gauntlet, a thousand sharp, hot slices across her face and torso and legs-

And then she was falling through the air, one hand still clasped in both of his.

She hit hard, knocking the wind from them both, cushioned only by his own form beneath her. Kazuhiro lay flat on his back, and she lay on top of him, both of them bleeding from a thousand tiny nicks and cuts and slices, breathing heavily on the floor of a municipal city boardroom whose conference table seemed to be missing its centerpiece bust.

Behind them, through the ragged open window, Godzilla, seemingly finding the effort worth the drain, unleashed another blast of nuclear fury; this time, the fire-licked Gigan did not respond; it simply slumped, and the light in its visor faded to a dim maroon glow.

They simply lay there a moment, exhausted, bleeding, every sense sharpened by the rush of adrenaline yet dulled by the relieved stupor of unexpected reprieve from death, bodies uncertain whether it was time to stand down or carry on the fight. Debrah felt vaguely sick, and like she'd be able to sleep for a month straight. Breathing was heavy, ragged-

Coming to her senses, she rolled off of Kazuhiro, letting the pudgy man draw in the deep, exhausted

breaths he needed. His arms were a bloody mess, and his face was nearly blood-red itself, drenched in sweat and a bright-pink of over-exertion. Even more scarlet was the blossoming starburst in his right eye, where a blood vessel looked to have burst from the strain.

He looked at her, and chuckled.

“If you’re... not... going to... let me kill... ‘self... oughta... make... alternative... more appealing...”

In the sudden silence of the deserted room, they both laughed.

\*\*\*\*\*

Katagiri had imagined that it was a fortunate thing that he’d done some rappelling on that tropical vacation a half-decade ago, that it’d come in handy- but as it turned out, this climb was nothing like that.

For one thing, there was no safety harness as he climbed down the outside of a devastated building on an unsteady cable with a blood-slicked hand- nothing but his own faltering grip stood between him and a fatal stories-long plunge.

Secondly, it wasn’t even a proper wall he was descending, but a grid of walls and floors between which the vast empty spaces of rooms gaped, a cutaway cross-section made real. His progression was more like the climbing rope in gym class- and this without any helpful knots (and he without being in the shape of someone who regularly attended a gym class).

Beside him, Godzilla stood, a triumphant, battered figure, weary and exhausted in appearance as Katagiri felt, standing triumphantly over his smoldering foe. The light in Gigan’s eye had narrowed to the center- suggesting the closing of an eye, but more closely resembling the last fading patch of luminance in an old TV set. It lay very still.

Still, an odd hum, a high-pitched vibration that Katagiri could feel more than hear, permeated the air- a powerful thrum that set Katagiri’s teeth on edge- he could feel the heat of it, whatever it was, radiating against him.

It wasn’t helping his grip any.

*After the rain, earth hardens... just keep breathing...*

In some ways, it should be glorious- free-climbing in the open air, an immense and grand vista spread out before him, the glittering lights of the city twinkling and shimmering.

But the overwhelming grimness of the situation overpowered it.

And that maddening thrum-

Then he saw it.

Before him, there was a dull red around the edges of the claw embedded in Godzilla’s shoulder- dimly, he could see waves of heat radiating from it. The dull glow in Gigan’s eye oscillated, seeming to pulse with the sound in the air. The King of the Beasts gave an alarmed cry, staggering back from his foe, and tried to pry at the offending limb with his large hands, but the claw was sunk in far too deep- Katagiri was amazed that it had missed the great beast’s heart- perhaps it was elsewhere in his anatomy than his human configuration suggested.

Carefully working his way down, hand over hand, Katagiri was close now to the partially-detached slab of flooring on which the girl lay. That same almond-colored hair that he’d admired was fanned out behind her, and an ugly gash ran along her upturned cheek, but beyond that, she didn’t seem nearly so bad-off as she could’ve been.

He lowered to within arm’s reach, and began to check her over. A quick assessment didn’t point to any cervical spine injury- and the touch caused her eyes to flutter open.

“Wh...? Wh’r ‘m I?”

The slurred speech made him hesitate- but at least she was aware enough to question her surroundings. He didn't want her to panic.

"It's all right, Masami-san. I want you to focus on me, okay? Look into my eyes."

She nodded, and the bright brown orbs that he'd admired fixed onto his.

"You took a bit of a fall, Masami-san. I need you to keep your focus on me, okay? I'm going to help you- get you somewhere safe."

That was the wrong thing to say- she immediately began looking around to see where she was that happened to be unsafe. Fortunately, looking ahead, she could only see the cavity of the reception room that the chunk of floor on which she was lying projected from. She'd have to turn around in order to see the true extent of her predicament.

"No, Masami-san- on me, okay?" He smiled in what he hoped was a friendly, reassuring manner. "We're close to the edge of the hole, and I need to get you away from here, okay? I don't want you to look around or look down- in your current state, it could induce vertigo."

She nodded, slightly, keeping her head movements to a minimum. At least she could remember what vertigo was.

The claw in Godzilla's shoulder was now glowing amber, with a growing blush of gold around the edges. It appeared too hot for the beast to touch anymore; instead, the titanic lizard thrashed back and forth, his tail carving a path of destruction in the base of the buildings around him. Foam and blood frothed from his mouth like a rabid animal.

"W's... y'r... n'm?"

Katagiri blinked at the unexpected question.

"Uh... Katagiri. Katagiri Tanaka."

"Th'nk y', K'ri..."

He smiled again, more certainly this time.

"Don't mention it. I'm a doctor- helping people is what I do."

He winced, both at the clumsiness of the line, and of the thoughts it brought, unbidden, of his former patient, now long-since bled out in the OR above.

But Masami didn't seem to mind his awkward speech; he could see a sparkle in her eye- though that was probably from the scythe through Godzilla's arm, which now glowed a bright golden-yellow. The trailing, ravaged chunks of flesh, the ragged end of Gigan's severed arm beneath the claw, was cooking itself like an egg frying on the pan, and the occasional flash or pop of sparks burst from the end as some internal bit of circuitry evaporated in a flash-burst of molten-metal.

Katagiri's arm ached from supporting his weight- he needed to conserve his strength. Slowly, gingerly, he lowered himself onto the slab of flooring. It creaked alarmingly, and Katagiri tensed to snatch the girl off of it- but for the moment, it seemed able to- resentfully- support both of their weight.

Masami winced.

"...D'n... f'l... g'd..."

"How *do* you feel?" Katagiri asked as gently as he could.

"...Tin... tis..."

Katagiri nodded. Tinnitus, a ringing in the ears- plus dizziness, nausea, lack of coordination, disorientation- she was probably experiencing all of these. A concussion, probably Grade II from the look of it; though it was hard to tell, as outward signs tended to be fleeting or hard to read. Regardless, no apparent amnesia thus far- and she was lucid enough to partially diagnose herself- that was good. Her pupils were the same size, she wasn't vomiting, or going into seizures- at a snap-judgment, that at least meant she wasn't severely injured beyond the concussion. That was *very* good.

But the broken leg... that was not good. It meant that getting her to safety would be all on him- he would have to carry her.

He found that the back of his hand was brushing away a lock of her hair, caressing her cheek gently- he told himself that he was cleaning and probing the edges of her wound, not using his bloody palm so as to avoid mixing their blood.

Yes, that was it.

The flooring beneath them creaked, pitched precipitously.

Okay, they were out of time.

“All right- I think it’s time to move you.”

The dangling cable beside them seemed to transfix her for a moment, and then she shook her head.

“...’M r’dy.”

He smiled at her, trying to reassure her with a confidence he didn’t feel.

With a snap, something gave way, and the flooring slab dropped a good five degrees, angling more steeply out and down, towards the lethal plunge below. Katagiri’s heart jolted like a racehorse bursting from the starting gate, and began to race a pace that could win the Yasuda Kinen well ahead of any thoroughbred in the world. His hand darted out, got a good grip on his ‘safety line.’

“Masami-san... Masami, I’m going to have to lift you out of here, okay?”

“...’K. Th’nk you... f’r... n’t leav’ng me...”

Katagiri looked for the best place to slip his arm beneath her, factoring the distribution of weight against the need not to aggravate her injuries.

“Actually, I... I wanted to thank *you* for your reassurances during the surgery.”

“...Js... bying p’lite...”

“No, your competent service, that was polite. But your smiles... your touch... those... those kindled something in me, something I hadn’t realized I’d been missing...”

“...’Lredy... haf... a’by’frnd...”

Katagiri grimaced. Why did it always come back to that? He was always standing under the proverbial plum tree...

“No, it’s not even that. It was a... a need for human contact. Affirmation from my peers. Connection to other human beings. I hadn’t realized how much of an absence it was in my life... until you provided it for me. Hey! Hey, stay with me- don’t be a 3-day monk on me, Masami...”

Her eyes were fluttering, and she was struggling. Actually, rest would be the best thing for her- a concussion wasn’t like hypothermia, where sleep was deadly- but right now, he needed her help too much to let her sleep. He couldn’t just carry her as dead weight- he didn’t have the strength.

“Look, you... reached out to me. No one’s ever really done that before. I’m not complaining- it’s not their responsibility. But still... no one has.”

“...L’k’d... l’k c’ld... use... fr’nd...”

“Yes. Yes, I could. And still can... more than I’ve cultivated. A lot more.”

A thought occurred to him. A realization.

“Or perhaps just a few friends, or one... but a *lot* more friendship. My life... has been lacking friendship. Badly.”

She smiled, faintly, through the haze of her thoughts.

“Str’ng... t’lk... t’be... hav’ng...”

Katagiri smiled. It was true. Perhaps he was stalling.

Perhaps, in case he failed, he wanted her to know before they died.

He grimaced and tried to banish *that* thought. The groan of the settling building battled with the powerful whine to see which could grate his nerves to powder first.

“Yes, it is strange. Who knows- you may well end up with temporary amnesia and have no idea we

even *had* this conversation. Still, I wanted to thank you... for reaching out like no one else did. For showing me what I missing- *no*, for showing me what it was like *not* to be missing it.”

Then, he bent to pick her up.

As he scooped her up in his arms, he was surprised to feel how light she was. Funny, he'd imagined that was always just a staple of hack writers and bad novels.

As he hefted her close, the fragment of tile floor shifted again.

She wrapped one arm around his neck, and settled her head in, nuzzling against his neck and chest like it was the most comfortable, most heavenly pillow in the whole world.

He shook her gently.

“Hey, stay with-”

With an unexpected snap, the floor fell away, and Katagiri was hanging by one arm to his only lifeline. He screamed with the sudden agonizing strain on his arm.

He swung his other arm, still awkwardly supporting her weight, up and around her head to grasp at the cable. He saw *her* other arm also grasping the cable, tugging weakly, as if her extra gestures could somehow propel them upwards. Her broken leg dangled awkwardly below her- much as her entire body hung limply, barely secured, against his.

Beneath him, the fragment of flooring tumbled and dwindled, diminishing to a tiny speck below before shattering in a plume of pebbles and concrete against the unyielding ground, adding to the mass of rubble that carpeted the former grounds of the hospital's east wing below.

Before him, Godzilla roared in agony, progressively barbecued from the inside. The organ damage must be incalculable- Katagiri wondered if even the Kaiju's renowned regeneration could cope with *that*...

Within him, the agony of burning muscles raged to rival the great leviathan's suffering.

Katagiri gritted his teeth against the agony of his arms. Masami hung limply off of him, with only his cradling arm and her loosely draped limb keeping gravity's inexorable pull on her at bay- and that, only barely.

Katagiri looked up, eyes on the four floors between them and the OR. They might as well have been four hundred.

He risked repositioning his good arm, letting go of the cable for the briefest of moments to tuck it around her, pressing her tight- nearly in a headlock with his bad arm- against his chest.

He spun, dizzily, and had to clamp down with every pound of force that his fingers of stone could exert just to hang on. That little re-adjustment had almost cost them both their lives- his bad arm and wounded hand were clearly insufficient to the task by themselves, and he still wasn't certain that he could keep his grip on her, much less the cable, even with his good.

He took a deep, ragged breath, every cell in his body strained past exhaustion.

This was it.

His gift- his curse- was made for this moment.

Every ribbing, every extra hour's work, every joking nickname and unfair recognition that his steady hands had ever earned him, it had all been leading up to this. His exceptional grip, his unwavering arms- they would save him, and the girl. He marshaled reserves of energy that were surely his quivering body's last, and heaved upward, putting one hand laboriously over another. Straining with the determination that only a man truly on the edge of death can ever marshal, he put every ounce of force that his body had- and then some- into the grueling task of hauling the both of them upwards to safety.

He would not fail. Could not. This was his moment of destiny.

The moment he had been born for.

The moment in which he would, for the first time in a hollow life, find his worth.

The moment in which he would be a hero.

He wasn't moving.

Pull as he might, strain as he did... he couldn't budge them a single inch up the cable. His arms simply didn't have it in them.

They burned like the forearm chunk lodged in Godzilla- the appendage was glowing white-hot, only a slight yellow tinge in the center serving to indicate that it wasn't a limb made of pure light. It burned and blazed like a searing, white-hot spear; Katagiri felt as if his arms were the same- sharp, fiery infernos of pain. Around Godzilla's puncture wound, the grey scales blackened and charred- beyond those, others were bubbling. Katagiri could empathize with that feeling, too.

Like the King of the Monsters, he'd been battered down, scarred and exhausted. Like the beast, he'd been drained to his last reserves, had summoned up what little he had for one last effort. Like the nuclear titan whose fires he imagined were only at a fraction of their normal strength, barely able to generate another cerulean flame, he could barely gather his strength- and at the moment of his apparent triumph, was going to fail. To die.

But at least Godzilla had gone down fighting.

Instead, he hung there, straining, hanging, swinging... useless.

And his bloodied grip was slipping.

Pushing beyond the last reserves of his exhaustion, he sought that place deep within himself where heroes were born. That adrenaline-fueled, car-lifting moment of Herculean, impossible strength that only those in true crisis could ever know.

His body screamed in agony, the ache in his arms a gnawing, tearing thing.

The doctor in him didn't even want to think about what was happening to his physiology.

He pushed past the pain, past the exhaustion.

Uttering a scream of pure defiance and rage to match the mighty bellows of Godzilla himself, Katagiri heaved.

To no avail.

That reserve beyond all reserves, that last desperate, impossible, superhuman strength in the face of certain death?

He was pretty sure he'd used it up getting down here.

"S...t's..."

His feet dangled above infinity, a lethal drop onto a pile of unforgiving stone and metal that had once been a place of healing. Against his chest, Masami, her eyes fluttering, her breath shallow, slipped down an inch.

An inch closer to oblivion.

His slick, bloodied hand was starting to give.

His body was trembling, threatening to go slack from sheer over-exertion.

In Godzilla's chest, the white-hot lance of Gigan's claw began to vibrate, building a whine in shrill counterpoint to the command signal beaming through the air. Katagiri was no demolitions expert, but he could tell... that thing was going to explode, ripping the cyborg's rival apart like a bursting balloon- shredding flesh and bone and distributing it all the way across the downtown plaza- if that, too, wasn't leveled in the blast.

Already, the light in Gigan's eyes had faded- the monstrous alien was dead or dying. But with a lodged fragment roasting Godzilla on the spit that was itself, cooking the meat of his muscles from the inside out, and soon to end his existence with a final, fiery blast... the King of the Monsters would soon join his foe in final repose.

Perhaps, Katagiri thought, this was simply a place of death. The Song of Chu on all sides. Perhaps this was where *he* was meant to die as well.

But to fail, to abandon his patient for Masami, and then to fail her as well-

Behind him, Godzilla let out a roar. Such a roar- of pain and anguish and terror and fury; such a

haunting, raging noise- the soundtrack to Ragnarök, the symphony of doomsday itself- that Katagiri imagined no one living had ever heard its like, nor ever would again.

The great beast's eyes slid closed, and Godzilla, King of the Monsters, grew very still. His jaw hung open, a mass of bloody foam that the monster could scarcely breath through.

"S'trs..."

The throb of Gigan's Vengeance, the arm and claw like a miniature sun, blazed forth a harsh, bright light- painting the gangly, distorted shadows of their weary, dangling bodies against the ruined side of the hospital- a portrait of two straggly, frazzled, wearying shapes. The pounding cacophony of the claw, like the worst bass-spillover from a hi-fi-blasting sports car stopped beside one at a red light, multiplied by a thousand, filled every crevice and cranny, driving out thought itself.

Katagiri strained to climb the cable in vain, as he wondered if this had *all* been for naught.

Had he been through all of that- accomplished so much, suffered so greatly- just to be killed in the explosion a moment later?

"K'giri, st'rs!"

Masami was pointing over his shoulder, raising her head- she seemed more clear-headed, even if her speech was slurred.

Good.

He glanced behind him to where she was pointing, across the wreckage of the shattered lobby that gaped behind them.

*Oh.*

On the far side sat a door to the stairwell, set far enough back in the building to still be intact.

*That could work.*

Thunder rumbled and lightning crackled outside. It did not come from the sky.

The room that he hung before flared blue, casting odd shadows and strange shapes across the demolished space.

Katagiri's bloodied hand slipped away, dropping to his side, leaving him once again hanging by one agonized arm. Masami dropped away, swinging downward, even as she wrapped both arms as tightly as she could muster around his neck.

He brought his dangling arm back up, around her this time, as he screamed in agony.

She slid to a stop, friction-halted against his body, her face pressed into his chest- held against him too tightly for her body to continue sliding. The sudden jolt to a stop had set them to swinging.

*"Your legs! Masami! Legs!"*

He wanted to tell her to hang on tight. To be careful. To apologize for all this. But it was all that he could do to scream out four pained words.

Beyond, Godzilla was a storm come to life. Flickering and flashing, the dorsal ridges along his back flared and shimmered, scintillating and flashing, bursting and popping with azure light, crackling and arcing as if summoned up from the nuclear heart of the beast itself.

Lightning arced across its body.

The beast's eyes were still squeezed shut, but his lip was flared back, a deep, subsonic growl loosed from the depths of his ravaged insides.

As if he were summoning himself, marshaling every erg of power for...

Godzilla's throat glowed from deep within, a gathering of fury from the very depths of the blazing, raging fires that drove him.

*Impossible.*

The exhausted beast had barely recovered enough to marshal a few blasts of nuclear fire- surely it couldn't-

Masami kicked, feebly, in the air- but it was enough. They were swinging. Katagiri awkwardly hefted her weight to the side to add to the pendulum effect. One swing, two...

And then they were over the edge of the crumbling floor.

Katagiri let go, more by accident than by design, and they landed hard on the crumbling floor, the impact rattling Katagiri's bones, shaking them with a tired, wrenching ache.

There was a tremendous cracking noise, and a deep fissure appeared in the flooring to match it.

Placing both quivering, jellied arms underneath the girl, Katagiri scooped her up, still half-stumbling, half-running forward from the momentum of his fall, and made staggering a run for the closed stairwell door.

Beneath his feet, flooring crumbled. He felt as if he were constantly tripping, stumbling, running as if through a resistant mire; the floor fell away from his feet even as he pushed off of it. He was running desperately, sloppily, full-tilt, at complete risk of a face-plant from second to second.

That last reserve he'd been looking for?

He'd found it.

And still, it wasn't enough.

The flooring gave way beneath him, and he felt himself begin to fall.

A flare of purple bolts, arcing to and fro across the monster's skin, gave way to searing shafts of brilliant light, seeming to carve the very air into slices with their brilliant presence, eclipsing the raging inferno in Godzilla's shoulder like a feeble Gameboy screen overpowered by the sun-

-And a bright golden shockwave flared from the behemoth as the King of the Monsters unleashed a Nuclear Pulse.

The force hit Katagiri like a tsunami, arresting his fall, blasting him forward, throwing everything that wasn't bolted down with the strength of a gale-force wind.

He hit a wall hard enough to throw stars into his vision, landing backwards against it with skull-cracking force- Masami landing against him, slamming the full force of her light body into his ribcage, crushing him between her and the wall, driving all of the air out of his lungs, as chunks of the floor that had been crumbling beneath him pelted the wall around him with the force of bullets. They whizzed past terrified, helpless eyes as he lay, back against the wall, stunned, watching the rushing of debris carried toward and past him, staring out at the fury of the monster that had unleashed it.

Gigan's jagged scythe-blade hand, repulsed and carried aloft by the force of the shock wave, had blasted free of Godzilla's shoulder, bursting and popping with showers of burning sparks- and a flick of that amazingly flexible tail had batted it away even as the Pulse repelled it free-

-Katagiri reached his hand up, desperately seeking the cool metal handle-

-The glowing claw spiraled through the air, wreathed in a halo of sparks and shards and crackling, popping fury, still a raging pyroclastic furnace radiating its own raging power, flying with that same lethal projectile force, end over end-

-His hand closed on it, fumbling desperately, twisting it down-

-With a sick slicing noise, like a knife driven into a watermelon, the bladed claw embedded itself, point first, in the chest of its fallen owner, returned to its master at last. Gigan's own white-hot lance sunk up to the hilt among its ruined chest-scales, charring and bubbling the flesh around it.

And with a force like an exploding star, it detonated.

Gigan's carcass shattered like a hollow eggshell as flames raced outward behind a shimmering shockwave. Chunks of meat and metal accelerated past the speed of sound as the explosion ripped the fallen Kaiju apart.

Katagiri fell backwards, heat blistering his face, tumbling into the stairwell landing as fire ripped through the entry.

Some part of him was dimly shocked, amazed, at Godzilla's sudden exertion- as seemingly impossible as if he himself, in his present state, went on to run a marathon-

And then a steaming, well-cooked chunk of Gigan's flesh smashed into the stairwell, bulging through the door frame towards the tumbling figures scattered on the stairwell landing.

It was well-done, but it didn't smell like any kind of steak that Katagiri cared to sample.

Automatically, by habit more than conscious thought, he slapped at the few flames that burned between them; their flesh and clothing smoldered from the heat- but the worst of the blast raged beyond the sheltering plug of seared muscle.

And then, it grew so quiet...

After a moment, Katagiri stood, weakly.

The stairwell was littered with debris, chunks of masonry, insulation, light covers, and dust... but Katagiri started up the stairs immediately. He was exhausted, and his body lacked the reserves to get far, but his legs were unstrained. He could make it up four flights. He had to.

With the girl in his arms, her own arms wrapped around his neck, he began to climb the stairs, one leg in front of another, wanting nothing more than to rest, just as deeply as she did.

"K'giri...?"

"Yes?"

"Lied. D'nt... rilly... haf... by'frnd..."

She settled against him like a kitten nuzzling its mother's side, safe and contented, and drifted off to sleep as Katagiri trudged ever onwards, body shaking and weak, legs burning with the exertion of the exercise, marching on until he reached the top.

\*\*\*\*\*

Again, Jin drifted in and out of the world of dreams. He dreamed of a raging tunnel, roiling with the unbound fury of racing water, as if determined to punish him for belittling the power of the elements in his earlier thought. He dreamed of his head, bursting above the surface just when he thought it was his lungs that would burst... dreamed of being carried along through a half-submerged bank of turnstiles, into a commuter train tunnel... of emerging from that dark, quick-flowing gauntlet into a vast chamber, perhaps a switching junction of some sort, open to the light of the shining moon.

Like *that* would ever happen.

No, he wouldn't be that lucky. Besides, wet and cold as he was, he wasn't in water, but on hard, rocky ground- he could feel that much, a nagging detail of his aching body that penetrated even his fevered dreams.

He opened his eyes. Looked around.

In the dim light of flickering consoles, he could plainly see that he was in some sort of cockpit. An airplane, or something.

His roving, half-lidded eyes found letters, stamped onto the console before him.

Super-X.

Ah, that made sense. He was piloting the Super-X.

He didn't really remember joining the Air Force. But that was okay. His head was pretty fuzzy right now. It would come back to him.

His eyes sighed closed again, and it felt so good, so right, that he surrendered to slumber again without complaint.

He dreamed of that chamber.

The Super-X was there in the dream, too. Embedded in the wall, crumpled and deformed, a steep

angle suggesting that its downward trajectory was responsible for the gaping ceiling gap that had turned this great cavern into a great pit.

Its impact seemed likely to be responsible for the pile of rock and masonry that lay piled over the water's exit beneath it, the dislodged remnant of the wall that it had blasted away when it hit.

And on that pile, the pool skimmer and natural strainer for this great fountain of the deep, there lay...

In his dream, she was attired like a princess, resplendent in the moonlight, pale skin and features delicate and tranquil in repose. Perhaps that was an idealization. She was likely more rumped, limbs akimbo, hair over her face, facing away from him.

But the moonlight had been beaming down upon her, every bit Jin's fairytale princess, no matter how she looked.

And there was a dragon, too- it bellowed with a howling shriek, even as it dangled over her, waiting to crush her.

The dragon shone and reflected the minimal light, like a block of solid diamond, waiting to leap.

And with a groaning creak, it had shifted again, dropping half a foot as its own weight slowly pried it loose from the wall.

And Jin, the handsome prince, had to rescue his princess from the dragon.

Rising on a stallion made of the whitewater itself, like he'd seen in the first Lord of the Rings film, he charged forward, lance in hand, roaring a battle charge.

And that was the fiction of the dream, the part in which memory was clearly and obviously embellished.

Because he was in no way handsome.

His eyes fluttered, but refused to open. He heard the dragon roar again, creaking and groaning all about him as if he were in its gullet, being swallowed alive.

Hadn't he defeated it, then?

Because he knew, from the peaceful, relaxed feeling that would allow him to drift away to oblivion, that he didn't *need* to fight any longer. Because he'd saved his princess.

Hadn't he?

As he'd entered the chamber, a flare of blue fire had lanced overhead, illuminating the sky like sustained, charged lightning.

And then the fierce battle that had seemed to rage overhead had stopped.

Only a shrill keening, a rumble that shook his bones, remained.

He'd surged forward- not a stallion, but a powerful breast-stroke... which churned a lot more water in useless splashes than it had pushed off of.

He'd never been a great swimmer.

He hated that.

And the noise had built, and built, and built, and the air was hot, humid, and there was a bright glow from above...

And a shower of rocks the size of fists had dislodged from beneath the embedded Super-X fuselage as it groaned again, slipped another few inches, and they had pelted around her head- her delicate, sleeping features...

The shining diamond, the weight of a mountain, was going to fall on her. Crush her. And he'd arrived just in time to watch.

He'd pushed himself, hard. Churned the water in a mad, desperate attempt to reach her. The chamber was enormous- she seemed impossibly far away.

The keening vibrations had built.

Through the dream- in the dream? -he heard her voice. Calling for him.

But on the rocks, she'd been unconscious. Blissfully unaware of her peril as she slumbered.

The dragon had creaked, tilted downwards, slid down.

He'd found the bottom, pushed off of it, began running along the bottom, slogging through the water in agonizing slow-motion...

Too late- it had been sliding out, tilting down, its shadow coming to rest over Yuki. To swallow her up.

His knees had broken the water. He'd run with high, splashing steps, but it was too late, far too late, it was sliding, it was falling-

It had stopped, snagged on something.

Given Jin the precious seconds he'd needed.

His ankles had broken the water, and he'd run like a madman, ignoring twisted ankle and stumbling steps.

Had seen her head move, stirring.

Had seen the shadows of the pit spin and dance and twist, changing the landscape, as something bright and glowing had arched overhead.

Head leapt a rocky obstacle, less than five feet from her.

A brilliant explosion, dazzling and terrible, had ripped through the sky overhead, lighting the chamber in brilliant, burning orange.

Had rocked the chamber.

Had dislodged the Super-X from its impediment.

And it had fallen.

Jin had been on his knees and knuckles, an arm's reach from his beloved.

He'd thrown himself forward, slammed into her, heard her yelp as she tumbled off into the water, jarred awake-

Had seen her thrash, knew she was awake, wouldn't drown, thought she might even have seen him, known he was there-

And then the light had disappeared and the world was sound and pain as the Super-X slammed down on top of him.

He'd been lucky, really... the shockwave from both the second pulse and the explosion had passed overhead, skipping the gap just like they'd done the room with the ramp and all the survivors.

That could have hurt them, otherwise.

Instead, only he'd died.

Well, in the dream.

It had all been a dream, hadn't it?

Yuki's voice again, insistent. The dragon's roar, again.

He *really* didn't want to open his eyes.

But he did.

The cockpit again.

Jin didn't remember becoming a pilot.

Also... it was upside-down.

The floor was above his head, and it lacked any seats. He should be sitting on the canopy- he was sitting up, now- mooning the world through the transparent viewport... but instead, his posterior (as his now-aching back had been) rested upon an uneven, poking rocky surface- likely the very pile of blasted masonry that he had knocked Yuki from.

He hoped she forgave him for that. It wasn't especially gentle or caring, but he hadn't seen much of

an alternative at the time.

Upside-down cockpit, rocky floor...

He was inside the Super-X.

It had fallen on him.

And the canopy and seats, torn away by an ejection, had cleared enough room for this saving hollow.

The protective cavern of the cockpit had landed over him.

And some people thought there was no God.

The Super-X creaked again, and Yuki called out, and a large rock to Jin's left shifted, tumbling away.

And after a second, through the gap, barely visible in the light of the flickering displays, was Yuki's face.

"Jin! Are you hurt?"

He shook his head, dazzled by the rush of emotions flooding through him.

She was alive. That was all he wanted. All he'd ever want.

Well, that probably wasn't true. But it sure felt like it right now.

Her face disappeared, and her hands probed the gap, tugging on another large rock, widening the gap between the cockpit wall and the floor. Another rock or two, and he might just be able to slither underneath like a dog slipping under the fence.

He hated it when they did that.

The world tilted and snapped back up, and he realized that he was still more than a little woozy.

"Be careful," He heard himself croak.

He heard her laugh.

"Like you were?"

He frowned.

"Well, you needed rescuing."

Her face reappeared in the hole, grinning mischievously.

"And you don't?"

She had a point.

But he didn't answer her.

Wasn't even looking at her beautiful face.

Instead, his eyes were on the flickering display. It kept changing. First, it said 126. Then, it winked out, flickered, reappeared... and now it read 123. Another flicker, and 121. It stayed on long enough for Jin to watch it change to 120, then it flickered out again.

*Oh, come on- that's not fair!*

"Uh, Yuki..."

He turned back toward her, digging his hands into the gap, shoving at an oblong rock.

"We need to leave. Now."

"Hold on, I'll have you out-"

"No, *now!* This thing's gonna explode!"

"What?" Her voice was high, squeaky, like it always got when she was annoyed or outraged. "Why?"

"I don't know- self-destruct! The military was probably beaming the signal the whole time, finally made it through- look, we don't really have time..."

104.

The rock gave way, and Jin threw himself into the gap, sliding and wriggling through scraping abrasion and stinging slice, even as Yuki finished rolling the rock away. It tumbled down the mound and into the water with a splash as Yuki grabbed his hands, pulled him out... he walked forward on his knees, staggering to his feet as his ankles slid free. And even then, he was running, his arm around her, stumbling over the loose rock of the debris mound, the wrecked hulk of the Super-X groaning and settling behind him. Through the gap above, Jin glimpsed the King of the Monsters, resting, leaning against a ragged, half-blasted building, spent beyond all measure.

If only Jin had that luxury.

"Jin, what-"

They circumvented the pile, reached the edge- water rushed past a gap between the debris mound and the tunnel in the wall, making a loud sucking sound like the last of the water slurping through a drain. He pulled her forward without breaking pace, threw them off of the rubble island.

*"Jin-!"*

They hit the water with a terrific crash, bobbed to the surface- and imposing rock rose on either side of them, rushing past- Jin squeezed himself close to her, narrowing their profile as they rushed through the gap.

As they re-entered the rushing torrent, they left the light behind them.

"Fastest way to travel!" He shouted, above the raging torrent. "We've got to get away-"

Then, they were both screaming, whipped around a bend with no warning, bounced to and fro- but they clung to each other with a death grip.

Neither willing to lose the other.

Not now.

Not ever.

"What if we end up somewhere completely submerged? No exit?"

"We're in the subway- why would they build something without an exit?"

"It doesn't work that way, Jin-" She sounded indignant- "We could end up at the bottom of a well, the only way out under... 50 feet of water, or something!"

They rushed along in silence for a moment.

"Well... we'll have a better chance than... being exploded?"

He could almost feel her glare in the darkness, burning into the side of his face.

"...It seemed like a good idea at the time..."

And then, unexpectedly, there in the dark rushing water, she kissed him. Just a quick peck on the cheek, but it sent warmth flooding through his frozen body.

"I know. You did your best, and I appre-"

She screamed. Jin joined her, screeching right into her face.

They were plummeting, riding a waterfall.

He'd been to Tokyo Disneyland, taken a darkened plunge into haunted waters where dead men told no tales on the Pirates of the Caribbean ride (he'd heard that the Americans got *two*). Dropped without warning into a darkened unknown through the avarice of an idolatrous businessman on the Tower of Terror. But even as sudden and shocking as those drops had been, at least he had been strapped into a ride, had known that something was going to happen- here, their waterfall plunge was so sudden and shocking that his scream trailed off in a heartbeat- there wasn't even enough forewarning to suck in a breath to enforce it.

They were falling in the dark, plunging into a terrifying, unknown abyss-

Then they hit the water, shockingly, without warning, and Jin's mouth flooded with water, and he lost his grip on Yuki's body, spinning away into the icy maelstrom that churned beneath the waterfall in the pitch black-

And then something tugged him, hard, yanking him violently through the water-

And he broke the surface, spitting and coughing and choking, the pulling force reeling him in-

It was Yuki. She hadn't lost her grip on *him*.

"I love you!" She shouted over the din.

And then the air roared and crackled, and the entire chamber lit up with the glow of an inferno, as flames shot out of the tunnel mouth from which they'd fallen, the detonation of the Super-X giving bright, momentary daylight to this dark, wet wasteland.

In the light, he saw her face, staring desperately, longingly at his.

She wasn't choking or coughing. She'd probably thought to close her mouth as she fell.

And beyond her, the tunnel.

And a wall, blocking it off.

The end of the line.

And the light faded, and he couldn't see her face anymore.

He grabbed her in a tight embrace, rasping out "I love you... too!" between choking gasps.

And then, as the force of the rushing water drove them forward to dash against the wall, the water threw them one last curve.

Literally.

Whipping sideways, Jin felt the current change, just before his back slammed painfully into a corner made of stone.

He shrieked.

At least he'd been able to shield his love from that.

Spinning off, they tumbled into a narrow tunnel- Jin couldn't see it, but he could hear it, hear how the echoes changed- his bounced off of the ceiling, driving them both briefly under the water. They bobbed back up with a gasp, Jin spitting water, Yuki just gasping for breath, still having avoided swallowing water-

*Oh, she's good-*

-and then they were falling again.

The plunge was brief, shocking, not enough time to scream; then, they were floating, bobbing, gently.

The current was gone.

They'd reached the bottom.

And from the short duration of the plunge, whatever chamber it was had nearly filled up.

Jin really wished that he still had his flashlight.

They clung to each other, breathing and shivering, giddy with relief.

Time seemed to have no meaning down there- only the sound of pouring water broke the silence.

And then the ground shook.

And after a second, it shook again.

Jin laughed, softly.

Godzilla was moving. Probably leaving.

It was over.

It was *over*.

They'd die down here, drown when they couldn't tread water anymore.

Their love unconsummated, their scintillatingly bright future extinguished in the darkness.

But he could at least do one thing.

He reached down to his pocket. Felt the reassuring bulge of the ring-box. Reached in to fish it out.

“Jin, here.”

Yuki grabbed his arm, pulled it away from his pocket before he could protest.

Set it on something.

A metal bar.

“Hold on to this. I’ll be right back.”

With a soft splash, she pushed away from him, dove under the surface.

“Yuki, wait-”

Jin felt panic well in him.

She’d gone.

Where?

*Why?*

Light flooded the chamber, blinding him.

He heard her break the water with a splash, give a delighted laugh, a squeal of triumph.

He tried to pry open his eyes.

Tears flooded them, and his eyes slammed shut.

He raised a forearm to shield his eyes, keeping the other hand on the bobbing bar.

He slowly opened squinting eyes.

Saw Yuki, bobbing beside him, laughing giddily, her arm over her own eyes.

Felt the vibrations of Godzilla’s footsteps, growing further away.

It took what felt like hours for his eyes to adjust.

The light was coming from beneath his feet.

He cast his glance up, where it was dimmer.

He saw a high, vaulted ceiling. A doorway which led out onto a ledge, inches above the waterline, from which the inrush of water poured.

He dared a look down, away from the light.

He saw Yuki’s legs, floating beneath the water, lit brilliantly from beneath. Beyond them, a vast chamber, at least 50 feet down to the bottom, covered in strange, shifting shadows and littered with floating shapes.

Those stupid little golf carts. The kind that a man could outrun.

And so lightweight that they floated.

He clung to one, Yuki beside him. And under the water, where the upside-down cart floated, she’d found the switch to activate its headlights.

And now, looking past him, she whooped, a crow of pure, unadulterated joy.

And he turned. Saw that the ledge (from which submerged stairs led down) and door from which the water poured had a twin on the other side. And leading up beyond it, dimly visible in the light...

He was reminded of the ending to National Treasure. The single rapturous word of delight.

*Stairs.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*And there, in the throes of exhaustion, they rested.*

# VIII

*A fusillade of missiles slammed into the reptilian titan, fighter jets screaming overhead, their pilots emboldened in the hope of eliminating two perennial Kaiju foes this day. Exhausted beyond measure, Godzilla does not strike back. Turning, slowly, ponderously, deliberately, he faces the way he came as another rush of stinging needles blooms fire against his thick hide. With slow, shuffling footsteps, each shaking the surrounding structures to their foundations, he began a long, slow trudge back towards the waterfront and the sheltering sea, there to hibernate and regenerate, knowing that the fighter jets would harry him every step of the way. Behind them, a virtual flotilla of Maser tanks advanced through every street and avenue, throwing up a wall of blue lightning to cut off any other avenue.*

\*\*\*\*\*

It was ironic. Despite all of her arguments, tactics, persuasion, an endless barrage of debate and discussion... in the end, it was vulnerability, letting him get to know her, that had persuaded Kazuhiro to find something worth living for. She'd been unable to convince him to care about his own life, but in revealing more about her own- its myriad complexities and flaws and quirks- he'd found something worthwhile.

Perhaps it was that way with all great causes- you could talk until you were blue in the face, counter each point, argue each minutia- but in the end, it would only be a personal connection- actually caring about someone, not about convincing or winning or cajoling- that would actually bring success.

Either way, Debrah had always heard the old adage about 'more blessed to give than to receive.' Maybe that was true. As much of life as was spent on 'me, me, ME,' perhaps nothing could really motivate, really fulfill, really satisfy the human soul in a profound way the way that caring about another did. How strange.

Beside her, Kazuhiro strode exhaustedly, but on his own two feet, as they reached the lobby of the building. Beyond the blown-out glass doors, they could see the smoldering crater- the only bit of the street that wasn't filled with sizzling alien meat- where Gigan once lay. The police and support personnel that had been gathered around the bottom of the building having long since fled, abandoning her- and the anonymous 'jumper' that none of them knew as a person- to their fates.

She heard Kazuhiro murmuring to himself under his breath, reprising her words from the rooftop.

"One less Kaiju... one step closer..."

She and Kazuhiro made an odd pair; he short and slightly flabby, out of shape, her tall and athletic- side by side, his head only came up to her- well, she was glad she'd worn a top with a modest neckline to the party. His dark skin contrasted with her pale face, her sharp features with his rounder face. Both were covered in cuts and scratches, though her sliced-up face and badly scratched torso were no match for his tattered forearms. Both were exhausted, hair matted and clinging to their foreheads, plastered by dried sweat. Both dressed casually in clothes that were a bit the worse for wear, torn and punctured, and would probably be retired after tonight, permanently.

And both were ready to go out and live their lives, having survived another day.

She glanced over at Kazuhiro. He'd need help, physically and mentally. First, treatment for his body,

and then counseling; he'd chosen to live today, but that was just the first step- he needed rest, healing, a change in his thinking, so that none of life's trials could bring him to the brink again. It could be a long process.

He'd agreed to both.

However, it looked as if they'd have to wait a little while for either- Debrah noted with dismay that the local hospital had been torn asunder, half of it crushed and pulverized as the other half stood, walls torn away, rooms exposed to the open air- like a raw wound to the place of healing itself.

Instead, the two of them would have to find an outbound military convoy, or an inbound relief team, and get to one of the triage and staging centers no doubt set up all through the surrounding countryside. There, amidst the evacuated populace of the city, Kazuhiro could get some help, and she, some rest.

But there might be a long walk ahead of them before that point.

Debrah glanced up at the building as they stepped onto the deserted, ruined street, squinting to see the ledge where she'd nearly lost her life, and the larger ledge running above it. It was just one detail of a thousand, a single facet of the largely uninteresting building that she'd have taken no notice of ordinarily. She broke the silence.

"How did you know there was a ledge underneath when you couldn't see it?"

"I noticed it as I was arriving."

Debrah stared at him, dumbfounded.

"Ten hours ago, in the middle of a suicidal depression?"

Kazuhiro shrugged.

"I love buildings."

As they picked their way over upturned chunks of concrete, making their way to the nearest spot where the ground was unchurned, in an opposing direction to Godzilla's ongoing retreat (accompanied by distant booms and flashes in the distance as the military set upon Godzilla afresh, no doubt to harry him all the way back to the sea), a slow smile spread across his face.

"In fact, I've been thinking about what you said. 'They didn't worry about what they couldn't change- they just focused on what they could.' You're right. I can't get rid of the Kaiju. I can't change the culture that they're bringing to us."

His eyes took on a hard, determined light, as his smile grew into that of a predator's.

"But I can design a new building. Reinforced. Flexible. Durable. Multiple points of support. Seismic performance and seismic loading capacity like no one's ever seen. Hysterical dampers that haven't even been *dreamed* of yet. Plus, reinforced facing to sustain direct kinetic attacks and remain intact. A monument to man's defiance!"

His hoarse voice had built up to a rising, croaking crescendo.

"That's my new life's work, Debrah- I will create the world's *Kaiju-proof building!*"

Debrah studied his face- the manic glee, excitement, intimidation, determination, the light dancing in his eyes. He meant every word... this was the purpose he'd found for his continuing life, and it didn't look like he was leaving much room in his imagined future for anything else.

*Play it again, Sam, she thought. This could be the beginning of a beautiful obsession...*

\*\*\*\*\*

Katagiri stumbled back into the operating theater, feeling as if every ounce of potential energy in him was gone- as if he'd borrowed against the future itself, as if his exhausted body would never be capable of generating another erg of energy. The whine of energy and blue lightning of Maser beams arced across

the darkness, following Godzilla into the distance, the distant flashes of a receding storm. The remnants of the city were certainly quiet, still, much as the world tended to lay after a fierce storm.

Beyond exhausted, Katagiri staggered forward, letting Masami slide to the floor, to rest there. He stumbled toward the center of the room. The OR had clearly survived the blast, sheltered in the lee of the hospital yet again; so had he. The fight's fiery climax hadn't killed him.

Would that have been a mercy? Not to have to live with himself?

He could tell himself that he'd simply performed triage- saved the patient with the best chances of survival. He could tell others that he did what a doctor always did- saved lives.

But the truth was, he wasn't sure how he could live with himself now. He'd left a still living patient to bleed out and die. Abandoned a man who'd put his life in Katagiri's hands, trusting Katagiri (well, another surgeon- technically, the man was unconscious during the changeover and never knew that Katagiri had been involved) to save his life, to guide him safely through to awakening, healed... instead, he'd betrayed that trust and left the patient to die while he went after someone else.

With shaky, wobbling footsteps, he strode toward the corpse on the OR table. He could give the man a respectful, sheet-covered repose, at least.

Blood was everywhere- the floor, the table, the man- his own blood had sprayed out in great bursts, raining down in a fine mist back over its source. The man was a grotesque, red figure, no longer human but a red-dyed demon, his natural color obscured by a fine mist of his own vital fluids.

Katagiri's eyelids were heavy with exhausted fatigue, but not nearly so heavy as his heart, as he stood over his former patient. The man he'd failed.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and turned, surprised. Masami favored him with a groggy smile, a large piece of debris propped under her arm as a makeshift crutch. Katagiri realized that he must have been standing there, staring, for longer than he'd thought. He turned back to regard the material evidence of his choice; it would haunt him for the rest of his life, he knew... but at least, at this moment, he didn't regret it.

Something moved.

Katagiri blinked, half-delirious with strain and exhaustion. Must be the room starting to spin, or his badly-disrupted equilibrium...

No, there it was again.

A slow, steady rise and fall amidst the field of red.

Almost like breathing.

Instinctively, he reached down to check the corpse's pulse.

It beat, slowly but steadily.

And closer in, Katagiri could see a thin, dark line snaking across the man's upper bicep- an intravenous line, delivering a transfusion of much-needed blood.

But that wouldn't be nearly enough to keep up with the loss from...

Peering more closely into the still open Cavernous Sinus, Katagiri saw small, dark lines running across the Carotid Artery. Dark lines criss-crossing in an ordered row, with a small suture clip resting at the end of it.

His head snapped up in shock, and his eyes caught site of what- he belatedly realized- Masami was already staring at.

Dimly visible in the low light, the portly male orderly stood there, trembling, beside a slowly churning emergency transfusion machine. A length of surgical thread with a still-bloody needle hung loosely from shaking palms.

Katagiri's jaw dropped open, and, like Masami, he stared, dumbfounded.

Catching sight of their shocked expressions- his mask had been lost at some point, Katagiri noted distantly- the orderly offered a scowl and an indignant shrug.

“What? I *did* attend med school, you know!”

\*\*\*\*\*

Godzilla’s footsteps could barely be felt any longer; the great beast was spent beyond exhaustion, retreating to the sea. The military were ‘herding’ him there- with Maser tanks, it sounded like- driving him back to the sea, but Jin knew that the King of the Monsters, exhausted and tired of the fight, was headed there of his own accord, and nothing that the army could do, even in this weakened state, could affect or persuade him beyond what he had decided.

Beyond the stairs had been a door, not locked from the inside, and then a platform. They’d hit turnstiles, doubled back, and found a great, wide stairway on the same wall that they’d emerged from, leading still further up.

And now, they emerged into the cool night air, and starlight.

They were a shivering mess, straggly, gangly, and wretched in the moon’s pale glow, clinging to each other for warmth and comfort... and a pressing desire to never be parted from each other again, a covetous, ravenous need that somehow had nothing to do with selfishness.

In that moment, they lived for each-other, and each-other alone.

They sank to the ground in front of the uptown above-ground entrance to the subway terminal, and simply held each other in the ruined street.

Through her wet clothes, Jin could feel even the light, subtle ridge of her spine; he ran his hand up and down her back, gazed into her eyes- and then, overcome by a sudden, fierce surge of need, pulled her tight, hugging her to himself.

She tucked her head in to his chest, sighed happily.

He ran his fingers through her wet hair, across her cheek, down onto the back of her neck, touching her just the way that she liked, assuring himself that this *was* real, not a dream. Then, he simply held her; held her as he wanted to hold her always.

It didn’t matter that he was always out of place in his culture.

It didn’t matter that he was always out of place among his coworkers.

Because *this* was his place. This was where he belonged, with *her*. And knowing that... he didn’t really feel like he *needed* any of the rest.

After a moment, simply reveling in the comfort of her presence, her warm body against his, he gently lifted an arm free, lowered it to his pocket, and wrenched free the ring box. Wrapping his arm back around her, he held the box in front of her face.

“This isn’t the day I would have picked, or the place, or the time- but now, I’m more certain than ever that I don’t want to live a moment apart from you again, don’t want to face any kind of future where we’re separated. You’re perfect to me, my every dream come true, and I know with a certainty that God himself has guided us to each other. I don’t want to live another day without being promised to you, my dearest beloved... and my best friend.”

He opened the box. Heard her gasp, even though she had surely guessed what was in it.

“Life here is unpredictable. Disaster can come and go at a moment’s notice, life isn’t normal, isn’t safe. But in all that, I want there to be one constant- that I am always here for you, that I will always love you, that I will never leave you... not until the marriage gets rough, or we just don’t *feel* it anymore, but forever- past hard times and times of joy. Through every up and down and Kaiju that life can throw at us, I want to be yours, and you mine- ‘till death do us part. And maybe beyond.”

Reaching his other hand around her, holding her tight, he plucked free the ring with trembling fingers, held it before her.

“Yuki Odaka, will you marry me?”

She pulled away from him then, leaning back, forcing him to break the embrace. Far enough back to really look at him, she searched his face, expression unreadable.

And then, she favored him with a smile so bright, so joyous, so exuberant that it seemed to dispel the very darkness of the night itself. In that moment, the world contained only the two of them, and her smile was the sun. Jin’s heart felt as if it would burst from the rapturous thrill that set every fiber of his being alight.

“Yes!”