



Cradle the Sky

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Foreword

With some rhythm,
The color of blue continues forever.
Behold, this is our place.
Thin smoke is twisting like snakes.
Yes, those are our graves.
The edges are colored by the sun,
The wings are cutting in.
The restless air is jitterbugging.
It shines, quivers, shakes, howls, and screams.
Everything is twining around,
Everything is being peeled off.
Beauty and ugliness lose their colors in brightness.
No one can distinguish them.
Even so,
Do not close your eyes.
In the white light,
There exists the one you should shoot at.
Definitely, the one is there.
At any time.
Somewhere.
Do not close your eyes.
You should not sleep.
The beautiful wings you have never seen before would appear,
Probably only for a moment.

It would describe a beautiful loop,
Which you have never imagined until now.
The most beautiful one.
It is your enemy.

Cradle the Sky

Dolly's soft face hollowed; an urge to go to Verena was rising, at the same moment some sense of self, a deeper will, held her. Regretfully she gazed at me. 'It's better you know it now, Collin; you shouldn't have to wait until you're as old as I am: the world is a bad place.'

This excerpt is from *The Grass Harp* by Truman Capote

Prologue

In front of me, there always is a ceiling. It never falls to me and prevents me from seeing the sky beyond it. It has wholly enveloped the tiny space on my side, where I am now as if it owns this place. Yeah, the thing obstructing my view does not move. It looks as if it insists on its strength by not moving. However, for some reason, I occasionally hear repetitive whispers softly and quietly.

Who is it?

Good boy. Good boy. Yes, what a nice boy you are. Pretty one, you are mine. Smile. Please. How lovely. Beautiful pupils. Nice lips. Smooth cheeks. Please. Smile. Adorable boy. You are mine forever ...

Endlessly, forever, the voice repeats.

Who is whispering in my ear?

Then, the voice is gradually getting huskier, blurs into two layers, and has become just breathing. Before long, the slight quiver of air and only the rhythm are left. Similar to waves lapping against a beach, it has become fine white foam and is sinking into the sand. It vanishes and has been lost. It forgets and has been forgotten. Only the terribly beautiful flatness remains.

It's sand.

The flatness accumulating around me is sand, isn't it?

Probably, it is fine sand.

Moreover, it is fine sand.

Words are also sand. They sink and disappear in a moment. It accumulates countlessly and becomes flat. Right. Whatever words they may be, they will vanish more quickly than smoke. A sand hill, which pretends to know nothing, is left. Still, even so, words are a bit kinder. It is much gentler than the cold sensation that the body feels when being touched by a stranger. While hearing words, until they vanish from your ears, even machine gun can keep silent, I guess.

“Bratatat.”

My right thumb touches it gently. The next moment, all my hand muscles, except for the thumb, become tense and put the control stick down as if I tear it apart.

Doing a barrel roll toward left, I have my aircraft inverted.

Have it upward, and bring it back downward immediately.

Keeping it inverted, I start ascending.

As if I were drawn into the outer space.

I am climbing upward endlessly.

Until my thoughts are torn apart.

My body is fastened tightly with the belt like a turkey. My blood has stopped; my breath is skipping. The sky is gradually dyed red and, at the same time, enveloped in the cotton-like darkness.

“Don’t worry. That’s okay.”

A woman’s voice. Who is this?

A warm voice.

But it sounds far away.

Everything about humans is distant.

It is too far to reach me.

The chill that I feel when I touch the canopy is probably the proof.

From everyone else, yes, from the place that is named city and where everyone else lives, I am leaving. From the moment at which I take off from the base, everything becomes a distant place and far distant past. I have come up here alone.

Just alone.

Except me.

There is the sky.

Every existing warmth has already come off me.

In other words, it is the same as the condition in which I no longer live.

Even so, it is laughable.

Do I no longer live?

If I no longer live, why am I thinking about such a silly thing?

Maybe, am I thinking about it even after I die?

Wait a minute ...

To begin with, what am I?

Yes, that's the question.

Where is this place?

Am I a human?

Is this the planet Earth?

Who am I, by the way?

I do not remember my past. I do not know my future, either. This moment is undoubtedly here. I can touch myself. I believe I can do it. Even an aircraft can move like my body.

But ...

Who am I?

If I open my eyes, I might be able to recall it. I somehow feel so. Like electrons flying in a vacuum, I feel it just for a moment. Probably, I am closing my eyes now. All I can see is just white light. But I do not like the situation if I open my eyes and see the dark ceiling. Compared to it, this pure white brightness is better. This spaciousness is more splendid. I should not care about who I am. Am I wrong? Yes, either way, I am who I am. The problem of who I am is as ridiculous as the matter about the presence of anyone other than me in this world. When no one is around me, it is meaningless to argue about who I am.

Only if I close my eyes, I can think about such a funny thing.

For example, I might be a fetus and not be born yet. Maybe because of the condition, I sense a woman near me. I recognize this pure white world as my mother.

“Oh, now, I understand. It is the reason why the ceiling was dark by that much.”

It is natural for me not to recall who I am. I have yet to become anyone. In other words, whom I will become has not been decided yet.

Interesting.

Where will I be born?

Whom will I become?

By the way, how comfortable this floating feeling is.

Why am I feeling comfortable by this much?

How strange. Why has everyone gotten out of such a comfortable place? I am certain that they are forced to have bitter experiences, just because they are born. I have such a foreboding. Lots of ordeals and cruelly ugly things are waiting for us. We can do nothing but be pushed, beaten, and tainted like oil. Such a life.

It is the act of living, and of surviving.

If so, why do they try to manage to live?

Why do they want to survive?

It is meaningless. Since I am not born yet, it may sound strange, though. Am I wrong? Because I am not born yet, I can understand it calmly. Once I am born, it will probably be too late. I am left with no choice but to live.

Anyway, I have to embrace myself in both hands with the most extreme care, and run this way and that while crying and pleading, “Destroy anything but this,” “Overlook this.” Doing such shameful acts is, in short, the act of living. By observing the world from this location, I can comprehend it well. Probably, the ones who live do not have time to think about such a thing. By the time they notice the fact, they have already been dead a long time ago.

Ah, for some reason, I am beginning to feel sleepy.

Just by thinking, I become sleepy. Thinking must be the same as living half the life and be the act against the nature. I guess, just at the very moment. I live. I am thinking at the moment. In the next moment, my consciousness disappears, and nothing remains. It exists nowhere. When it is born again anywhere else like a bubble, I have already forgotten what I once thought previously. Our lives are such a thing, I suppose.

That's funny. I mean, we have the word like "life."

Who came up with the concept?

How incoherent it is.

How unexpected it is.

"I love you."

It is mysterious. When I hear the phrase, I feel a sense of nostalgia. Maybe, it is the same as a crimson sky. The sky I saw at the lower altitude. I looked down at it.

It was deadly beautiful.

It looked as if they were numerous islands floating on the ocean.

If not, it looked like a mountain range towering above clouds.

It is crimson enough to dye duralumin.

Just by looking at it, I feel the pain in my eyes.

This is the reason why I love something, I think at the moment.

Do I love something because it is beautiful?

Or ...

Does it look beautiful because I love it?

I am not sure. But anyway, I feel the urge to lunge at it. I know it will disappear eventually. That is why I want to touch it just for a moment before the time, before it vanishes. I want to reach for it softly and grab it with my hand. I guess it is the meaning of love. I just imagine so vaguely.

"Hey, wake up. We should be leaving by now."

The woman's lukewarm hand touched my face. I was feeling her face approaching me. The smell like that of insecticide. *Has she been chewing gum or something?* Her lips caressed me. They were lips like creatures in the sea.

As if I were falling, I opened my eyes.

"If you keep on sleeping like that, you will end up waking up at night."

I raised my head, and looked at a window. It was not so blinding. *Is it before dawn?*

Or, the weather might be bad. If not, does it mean that the concept of weather has disappeared from the world?

“What time is it?” I asked. There was a clock on the wall, but I could not read the time because of the reflection. *That is such an ill-natured clock.*

“That doesn’t matter. You are waking up.”

“I have yet to decide whether I should wake up.”

“You are waking up, without a doubt.” The woman looked delighted. “You should not go back to sleep again. You are awake.”

Surely, she was right. I got up without words. In short, I raised my body, like pulling the control stick toward me.

“Oh, you are angry, aren’t you?”

“No.”

“Really?” She sat on the bed, and bounced her body closer toward me. “Hey, shouldn’t you go back to the hospital? Won’t they be angry at you?”

“I think they will reprimand me.”

“How are you going to deal with it?”

“Well, I still have not decided what to do about it, though.”

“They will be angry at me, too.”

“Who do you mean by ‘they’?”

“Who will reprimand you?”

“Well, I wonder who.”

“The staff in the hospital?”

“No.” I shook my head.

Those in the hospital are the same as mechanics to fix malfunctioned machines. In the case of machines, they have two options: they fix and return them, or dump them. In the case of humans, they cannot restore them to the original conditions in many cases, or they cannot just trash them immediately just because they are deemed irreparable. Those are the only differences.

If someone got angry, they would be those who call for the repair. At least, I did not remember my asking them to fix me.

In the first place, I have been out of order from the beginning. I could never get back to the original form. I was the one who knew the fact most. But, for some reason, just by remembering the bed in the hospital, I felt the tickling sensation. *Why?* I guessed there were many insects, which were too small to be seen, and they were eating patients' bodies that were unrecoverable, little by little. They had got to be the ones that were making me ticklish.

It was the reason why I ran away. I secretly got out through the window. I was still in a condition that was decent enough for me to execute such an act.

With no jacket, I felt cold.

Still, the moon was beautiful.

I realized for the first time that I could view such a bright moon from the ground. After walking for a while, I used a telephone. It was a collect call because I had no money. Before she was on the phone, I had to explain to a man about the charge. I told a lie that I dropped my wallet. Of course, my excuses were generally lies.

"Yoo-hoo. No, wait ... Who is this?"

"Ah, it's me."

"You just said it's 'mee'?! Really? Are you sure?"

"You know, I have a favor to ask you."

"I heard you dropped your wallet. Did you? Where? Like, on the cloud?"

"No. I just escaped from the hospital. I left my wallet there."

"The hospital on the cloud?"

"Typical hospital."

"Hmm. Hospital ... Are you serious? I thought you had died."

"Yeah. Well, I might have died once."

She laughed.

"Funny. It's you, and it's true. You are indeed alive! Oh, am I glad to know that?"

I'm not telling you a lie. I'm thrilled. Do you want to know how happy I am?"

"Yeah ... Can we meet now?"

"Of course, we can. I'm bored tonight. Ah, I'm lucky. You know, according to the horoscope, today would be a lucky day for me. I thought it was strange because nothing had happened to me until a moment ago. But it was right. It has just become a very, very lucky night for me."

"I have neither money nor a car. I cannot come to your place."

"Okay. I will pick you up."

I gave her the information about where I was. I expected that she could come get me by car in merely half an hour.

Then, I waited in the phone booth without doing anything. I felt it was like a cockpit. Thanks to that, it was not cold and I started feeling better gradually. If someone came to the booth, then I would pretend to call someone. But no one would bother to use such a phone to make a call that late at night.

There were few cars coming and going. Most of them were big, rectangular trailers. They were so huge that they could possibly be driven only on such roads at night. I started to wonder if they were conveying whales. The whales were assuming the form of rectangular slabs.

As the lights of her car were approaching me, I got out of the booth. She turned on all four of the headlights. It was a sedan, whose pathetic-looking face looked like that of a trampled catfish. It made a U-turn, could not quite draw a compact arc, ended up running onto the pavement, and stopped after scratching the curb with its chassis.

I got into the car, and sat on the seat next to the driver.

"Wow, you're real. True. Not a ghost!" She shouted in a husky voice. She threw herself from the driver's seat into my arms to hug me.

"How can you tell that I am not a ghost?"

After a long kiss, she pecked me once quickly, and got her face off mine.

"Sorry? What?" She opened her eyes and looked at me from a close distance.

“Well ...”

“A ghost will vanish if it is kissed twice.”

“Oh, really.” I nodded. “I did not know that. Well, what if the ghost does not know the rule?”

“That can’t be helped. I think that’s okay as long as I can kiss the ghost.”

“I agree with you.”

“For how long have we not met each other? I feel that it has been for quite a long time.”

“Right.”

“How have you been?”

“As I said, I have been in the hospital.”

“Oh, I see. Were you wounded badly? Did your airplane crash?”

“If I crashed, I would not be alive. Just a little bit. I just landed roughly.”

“Roughly?”

“Onto the place, which was not a runway.”

“I know. I know. Umm, you mean soft landing, right?”

“Isn’t it for a rocket?”

“Rocket? You mean, the rocket for the outer space?”

“Yeah ...”

“Can an aircraft fly to the outer space?”

“It cannot. An aircraft cannot fly to the place with no air.”

“Really ... Hey, what is up with that? Where to go?”

“You mean, the rocket?”

“No, about us.”

“Well, first, I wanna eat something warm.”

“Ah, that sounds nice.” She let her body bounce. “And then? To my place? Or go

somewhere else?”

“Where?”

“Anywhere will do fine.”

I brought my face close to the windshield and looked up at the sky. When I was on the ground, the sky was always above me. I saw the round moon appearing to be floating at the high place in the air. It had been white a moment ago, but was painted in pink now. It could be due to the color of the windshield.

“We cannot go there.” She said.

“Oh, where?”

“It’s the sky, isn’t it?”

“Ah.”

“Wanna go there?”

“Yeah.”

She chuckled while shaking her body. It might have shaken even the vehicle. Then, the starter agitated the engine as if it was gargling, and we drove onto the straight highway under the moonlight.

I was feeling a slight dilemma about asking her to come. I thought I made use of her, even though I did not want to see her that much. I did not quite like either night or moon too much. It was not that I was missing the highway greatly.

The crazily-designed speakers on the dashboard squeezed out the sound of tightly packed swing jazz uncomfortably. I did not like to listen to it that much.

Still, all of them were not bad.

I wondered who made use of me, to take advantage of me. The night, the moon, and the swing jazz were made use of because they were there by chance. I thought I might have been the same as they were. Probably, that is the case.

Then, I think, if they wanted to use me, they had better push me into the cockpit of a fighter aircraft and have a runway prepared for me, rather than waste my ability by having me in a bed of a hospital or getting me in a car with a woman at night. It would have been a much more skillful method.

If they give me a chance.

I will fly until I am worn out.

I will fight until I am wrenched off.

I promise.

I wanted to tell the white moon that could be seen from the side window about it, but I kept silent now, of course.

Because I made such a promise quite a long time ago.

Episode 1: Avalanche You don't have to be dead. At home, in the kitchen, there is a geranium that blooms over and over. Some plants, though, they bloom just the once, if at all, and nothing more happens to them. They live, but they've had their life.

This excerpt is from *The Grass Harp* by Truman Capote

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I slept on a soft bed after a long time. It was colder than the one in the hospital. I guessed the chill was there to make me feel the human body heat.

We drove on a highway, took a break at a drive-in restaurant, and got back to her mansion at dawn. "Her mansion" was the place where she and her colleagues worked. The estate was standing on a mountain and looked like an ancient castle. I heard that aristocrats once lived in the building a long time ago. I was sure that it had been used in the past in futile ways as it was the case currently. It was as if the structure was built with the bricks called "futility."

Honestly, I did not want to come here. Because there was a high probability that I would meet a person whom I knew. I did not understand why I disliked the notion of seeing a familiar face here. *How come?* It was neither embarrassing nor troublesome. Still, could there not be times in which I got offended just by

someone recognizing me? Those are the feelings such as, *I am hiding secretly, though. I am trying to keep quiet, for goodness sake. Although, I am about to complete a beautiful solitude* ...

But she had to come back to the mansion. It was a proof that her job was binding her more than I was bound by mine. No, it was not a job. Well, rather, it was the society. *This place is her society. It is difficult for us human beings to escape from civilization. That is especially the case, when we are on the ground.*

After I was woken up in the morning, I took a shower and smoked a cigarette by a window. It was her cigarette. And there was the stimulation for the first time after a long while. I was having a nostalgic feeling for the smell of the smoke and oil. There was none of those in the hospital. The scent of her perfume was as stimulating as the smoke. Not bad. When I sensed the scent, I was relieved to know that it was with me. It also meant that I was actually existing. Perhaps, I was just reminded of the concept of olfaction, though.

Through the window, I could look down at a rotary and a parking lot in front of a porch. I wondered if some guests were still in the mansion. Probably, those who were from the base had already left. None of them usually stayed here until this late hour. In the first place, we pilots tend to lead well-regulated lives. We can fall asleep quickly and wake up at any time. So, we could have our daily lives back to the regular cycle.

She took a shower, put on makeup, and then wore surprisingly subtle clothes. While I was looking at her, our gazes met each other.

“What’s wrong with you?” She asked.

“Nothing.” I stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray.

She looked in the mirror again.

“Won’t you go back?”

“To where?”

She looked at me again.

“For example, to the hospital.”

“No, I won’t return to the hospital.”

“They will scold you, I suppose.”

“Right. So, I won’t go back.”

“That’s not what I mean. If you do not return to the hospital, then you will be reprimanded by someone in your company, right? They may not allow you to pilot an airplane anymore.”

“Well.” I nodded.

She was putting on makeup for a moment. I said nothing. *I might not be able to get on an aircraft anymore.* The phrase had come up in my mind many times. I thought about it ten to twenty times every day. So, almost certainly, that scary thought might have already been realized. To begin with, I frequently thought I might not be able to get out of the hospital forever. I had become a heap of scrap. They would not use such a broken part for their precious aircrafts.

While I took a look outside the window again, she came beside me before I knew it. She hugged me from behind.

“That can’t be helped. If so, why don’t you come to my place?”

“Where is it?”

“Just around the corner.”

“Is it okay?”

“Is there any place that you go to?”

“I might have some.”

“For example, where?”

I thought about it. I could not come up with the answer quickly enough.

“You don’t seem to have any.”

“If you lend me some money, I will call someone ...”

“Who’s someone?”

I thought about it again. Of course, no one came up in my mind.

She crossed her arms, leaned her head while smiling, and was looking down at me. Her face was full of joy.

“Well, just between you and me, okay? I say I will drive you to the hospital.”

“You say that to whom?”

“You know, I might be asked downstairs.”

“By whom?”

“Hmm, by someone. Get it?”

Unfortunately, I could not get it well. Still, I nodded.

After getting ready, we left the room. As we climbed down the stairs, I saw a man with a bow tie standing with his hand in the pocket. One of his hands might be too long for him to handle. It was the first time for me to see him in a bright place. I had seen him at a bar counter. I did not recall seeing his both hands. I seldom saw males except for the guests in this mansion. On the other hand, when I called this place, the first person on the phone to take the call was always a male. Since the man on the phone was not the one in front of me, it meant that there were at least two males in this place.

“I will drive him to the hospital.” She told the man.

She walked toward the entrance. I was also passing by the man, who called me to stop. I halted and looked back.

“Sir, to what unit do you now belong?” The man asked.

“I’m not sure,” I answered. “Is there any problem if I’m not sure?”

“No, sir. I mean, I just want to know to which unit we should send the bill ...”

“All the units belong to the same company, you know?”

“Sure, you’re right, sir.” The man smirked wryly. “But sir, each payment is done independently.”

“Either way is fine. I don’t care about such a thing.” She came back, and said.

“Keep your mouth shut.” The man commanded in a low voice, while glaring at her.

“Well, when will you submit the document to them?” I asked.

“Oh, it is the end of each month.” The man put on a smile again quickly.

“So, I will come here once again, and ask them about it by then. While in the hospital, I have become unsure of the department I currently belong to. You know, in short, I think I have been transferred to another department during that time.”

“Understood, sir. Please take care of it.” The man lowered his head.

I walked to her, who was waiting at the entrance door. Then, I opened the door and got outside. She followed me. When I climbed down the steps and walked on a gravel road, she caught up with me and walked beside me. Her car was parked at the place that was lower by a step in the parking lot.

“He’s an unpleasant jackass, isn’t he?”

“You think so?”

“He has become like that since he lost his little finger. So, we are all guessing that the pinkie packs the humane side of the owner.”

“Why did he lose it?”

“Well ...” She looked downward. “A long time ago, there was a girl named Kahori, who was acquainted with me. The man fled with her.”

We crossed the gravel land, and descended the blackened concrete steps. The railings were rusty. Each time I saw them, I felt an urge to apply the paint to them.

“Then, they were finally caught.”

“Oh, what?”

“You know, that man and Kahori.”

“Ah ...”

“It was the reason why he lost his finger.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hmm.”

“Kahori disappeared. What a pity. She might be dead.”

“No way.”

“I think he is back because she died.”

“That man?”

“Right. It is scary, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“I’m not sure.” When we finished climbing down the stairs, she stopped and gazed at me. “Are you okay? You won’t go back to the hospital, will you? Your having promised to come back here again is a lie, isn’t it? Which means, your company no longer ...”

“I don’t care because I won’t come back here again.”

“Umm, you’re right. Maybe. But ...”

Anyway, I got into her car. The air outside was still chilly, and the body of the car had become cold entirely. It was to the level that the seat was pricking me. The glass was frozen.

She warmed the engine by running it for a while. I said nothing. She said nothing, either. The two of us might have been thinking about what would happen in the future. But it was about the rest of today or tomorrow at most. It was not the real future in the grander scale. No matter how much the wipers moved, I could not discern such a distant future.

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The apartment in which she lived was a building that faced the main street. A drugstore was on the first floor. A parking lot was located behind the structure. The stairway leading to the second floor was located right beside the store. People inside the store would be able to see anyone using the stairway. She told me not to walk through it.

So, I climbed up an emergency staircase at a corner of the parking lot, and waited for a while on the landing above the second floor. According to the plan, she was supposed to enter first and unlock the door from inside for me.

This city area was relatively lively. A restaurant with a spacious parking lot was located right next to the estate. A five-story building was standing right behind the apartment, and many small windows were lined up on it. Chimney stacks ran

upward from each floor and converged near the rooftop. It was the same as the inlet manifold of an engine.

The door did not open soon enough. I probably waited for about 10 minutes. Finally, her face appeared through the door, and beckoned me in. I climbed up the stairs and got on the third floor through the door. The door seemed to be designed to be locked automatically, as soon as it was closed. She slowly closed the door, so as not to make a sound. Still, I heard the faint clicking noise of the locking mechanism.

Her room was just beside the emergency stairs. She unlocked, pushed the door with her body, and then allowed me to get inside first. After the door was closed, she whispered to me.

“The man downstairs spoke to me. Sorry. Have I kept you waiting too long?”

“Not that long.”

The room smelled a bit musty. But it might be the case because I had been in the hospital. It was probably the smell of a typical room, and I might have just forgotten it. At least I did not sense the biting odor of perfume, such as that in her workplace.

She first turned on the gas stove and asked me if I wanted something to drink. I replied that anything would be okay. She activated the cooking range and walked to the inner room. I guessed it was her bedroom. I stood by a window and looked outside. Only a potted plant with dead leaves was on a veranda. The edges of the windowpane were foggy in brown.

There was a huge signboard outside, and it obstructed the view to the direction of the main street. Other than that, I saw a market-like building across the street. An iron bridge was beyond the structure. *Is there a railroad?* I remember that, on the sidewalks on both sides of the main street, many people were walking. *I cannot see them from here now, though.* I was not familiar with such a bustling place. So, I viewed the buildings for a while. There were probably various kinds of people among them. Some of them were likely to be elderly. Men and women. One was walking fast, and another was moving just slowly. I was impressed by how many people there were in the world.

She came back. She had changed clothes and was now in a brown skirt. I did not

understand why she had to switch the wear so frequently. She might be in love with the very act of changing into the different dress itself. Or, she might have had an obsession with not wanting to wear the same garment for long hours.

“What do you think?” She asked.

“About what?” I asked her in return.

“Here.” She looked back and opened her palm upward. “About this room.”

“About what in this room?”

“Umm, how do you feel?”

“Nothing in particular ...”

“Isn’t it strange?”

“No, not strange at all.”

“Really. But, it isn’t all so nice, is it?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Not sure?”

“I’m not a room expert.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Sorry.” I smiled.

“It’s been three months, or four, I think, since I came here. Anyway, this is the first time for me to live alone.”

“Where did you live before that?”

“In the same place with others.”

“Others? Who?”

“You know, those working in the mansion. There is an ancient, prison-like building behind the mansion. Don’t you know it? It was aged and might have been a real prison in the past. I mean, it might have been the place where aristocrats tortured people. Don’t you know it?”

“I know the concept of torture.”

“You must have seen the building. Haven’t you seen it?”

“I don’t know.”

“They all live in the building.”

“Really ...”

“You know, it’s an economical way of living.”

“If so, why did you get out of the place and move into this room?”

“Umm, let’s see ... how can I say? I’m not young anymore. I thought it was about time for me to become independent.”

“Oh, you did.”

“Of course, I cannot live in a place like this unless I earn money to a certain extent. And I have to be trusted by them.”

“They trust you, right?”

“Yeah, they do ... I am the type that does not often resist. You know, going against the flow tires me.”

“I agree.”

“The more obedient I am, the cuter I become, right?”

“Right.” I nodded obediently for her.

After the water boiled, she poured the hot water from the pot to the cups, with soluble coffee in it. She brought them in both hands to a table nearby. She put aside a big cushion on a low-slung sofa, and sat on it.

“You may sit on it.” She showed the cushion with her hand.

Since it was the only cushion, I refrained from sitting on it and had a seat on the sofa.

“Why do you not sit on this? You are now farther away from me.”

I said nothing. I did not like so much to sit on a fluffy, unstable platform.

“Do you prefer alcohol?”

“No ...” I reached for the cup on the table.

“I know. You don’t drink alcohol.”

“I haven’t even drunk coffee, for I was in the hospital.”

“Oh, really. If so, what have you drunk? Just water?”

“Goosey soup, or something.”

“Ah, I know what you are talking about. That looks gross.” She frowned. “I hate that thing. I cannot drink it. I can accept nothing but clear soup.”

I nodded without words. *Why are we talking about soup?* I thought so, but did not feel bad about it. When I drank instant coffee, I felt the nostalgic taste. *Yeah, it tasted like this.* Her empty talk was also as I remembered. Yeah, she was like this. We did not talk much the previous night. When she worked in the mansion, I thought she was not being the real her probably due to alcohol. She was more natural here in her room. She sometimes talked about herself, although I did not ask about it. Out of the blue, she suddenly would bring up unrelated topics, which I could not respond to. I understood it was her normal, usual tendency. Perhaps, it might be the case because she was always looking at distant places from this room. If she looked outside through the misty window glass, she would discern something that was different from the scenery.

“Aren’t you hungry?”

I shook my head.

“I want to eat something.”

In such a situation like this. I’m not sure how to reply.

“If I cook something, will you eat it?” She asked again.

“Are you gonna cook?”

“Yeah, I will. It’s frozen food, though.”

“Oh, really ...”

“If I cook, will you eat it?”

“If it is edible.”

“What is that?” She pouted. “You mean, will I cook something inedible?”

“No, that’s not what I mean.”

She put on a smile again.

“I might have kept lasagna.” She stood up.

I stayed put there and looked up at the window while holding the cup. From the angle, I could see nothing but the sky. It was the sky, which was as if it had turned into whitish frosted glass. The weather was bad, and it seemed to be about to rain before long. It was the dimness of the ground below clouds.

If I ascended to the space above those clouds, it would be far brighter. Despite the brightness, it was not white for some reason, but transparently blue. All the white things would sink. They were sediments like sludge. In short, this place was in the sludge.

Still, many people led muddy lives in this sludge. She was even making lasagna slushily in the sludge. One man killed a person to seize money slimily, and one kid was walking across the crosswalk while raising his hand sludgily. Strangely, no one would even try to look up at the sky. *They do not know anything about the sky.*

If they lived in such high places, they were not higher than the top of a tall building or a decent mountain plateau. They kept their lives like pets on leashes that were anchored to such places. It was too misty for them to wish to be released, and nothing could be seen through it. Since they could not look through the mistiness, they would forget the things that existed in a distance.

The lasagna was like sludge but was not so bad. Still, I was sure that it was not so delicious as to make me crave for another. Of course, there could not possibly be anything that I wanted to eat several pieces of.

Since I had not slept for long hours, I was becoming sleepy. She seemed to sleep at this hour usually. So, we got into the bed. I knew it was a cold bed, as expected. Her body was warm but not as warm as that last night. It might be the case because I just ate lasagna.

“Won’t you return to the hospital?” She asked.

“No.”

“So, what’s next?”

“I have no idea.”

“Will you go back to the base?”

“Probably, I cannot.”

“You cannot?”

“No.”

“If that’s the case, what will happen to you?”

“What happens to me will be decided by someone, I believe.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know ...”

Who is it? Someone that is not me.

However, I was not feeling pessimistic. I recognized I had climbed up one step from the worst situation. Probably, they would understand that I had fully recovered to the extent that I had succeeded in escaping from the hospital. They would then give me the directions about what I should do and to what base I should head for. I could do nothing but wait for it. *There is no way that I ask them to give me instructions.* In the first place, the most important issue was whom I should ask about such things.

-3-

I woke up in the early evening and made small talks with her again in the bed. She asked me many things, none of which I thought was related to me and her life. For example, although red flowers were decorated in the store below, what did red flowers mean for their business? As for a topic that was more or less related to our lives, a man working at a used car shop sometimes visited here and asked her if she would sell the sedan with a catfish face. Such topics. I was sure that she did not care about such things. I could somehow discern that by the way she talked. Even so, she might think she had to convey the message with the words in the squeezed-out, husky voice. She might be afraid of the timespan in which she said nothing and remained quiet. *I guess that is right.* Unless she kept on talking, her conversation partner would end up thinking about what she did not know. She might not be able

to bear it. No, in her case, was it just her occupational habit? I might be taking myself too far by thinking that she cared about me by that much.

“Now, I hope this time with you continues forever.” She said, and sighed. She was getting her shoulders out of the blanket.

Her shoulders looked cold, and I touched one of them. As I thought, it was cold.

The shoulder moved, and she reached for a cigarette. She lit it, and exhaled the smoke.

“In my room, I usually do not smoke in bed.” She spoke. “You know, the odor would attach to the blanket.”

“You should not smoke.”

“I am taking a day off tonight.”

“Are you skipping work?”

“I will pretend to catch a cold. Hear this. My voice is hoarse, isn’t it?”

“Do you need such a reason?”

“I think that doesn’t work because my voice always sounds strange. Let’s see ... At best, I can tell them that I am having a headache, or I am in poor health, or something like that.”

“Will you tell them so on the phone?”

“Right. I don’t have a telephone here. I will go downstairs and call them. To get the energy boost to do so, I am smoking the cigarette now.”

“If you worry about me, you need not to do so. If I am being your burden, I am getting out of here.”

“Do not say such a thing.”

“For example, if you like it, I will wait for you here. Why don’t you go to work?”

“Hmm, that’s also an option. They won’t suspect me that way.”

I wonder why they might suspect her. About her sheltering me? The company should have already been informed that I escaped from the hospital. Before long, they might call her workplace to ask about me. Uncharacteristically, I thought of such a thing

absent-mindedly. I mean, it was an atypical act for me. I wondered to myself what I would expect, but I was not sure. Anyway, my thought was not getting clear. *I am wondering if the drugs like anesthesia or a tranquilizer is still working within my system.*

She got out of the bed and got dressed. The room was dim. But I could see her body well. It looked a bit aged than she whom I knew well. *Is it because of this situation? Or, has my brain become able to gradually capture the reality accurately? In other words, is the effect of the drug becoming less potent?*

After getting dressed, she left the room. I heard the sound of the door opening, closing, and the footsteps fading away.

I stretched out my arm from the blanket and grabbed the pack of cigarettes. It was light, but luckily several cigarettes were still in it. I felt a bit guilty because they were her cigarettes. *However, I do not have my cigarettes now.*

Oh, if I were to leave this place, I would have to borrow money from her. We can do nothing without cash. That is the rule of the human society. When in the military base, when in a hospital, I seldom had the opportunity to use money. I got misled into thinking that the system involving money vanished from the sight utterly.

I wonder if she lends me some money. How can I pay her back? Do I have anything valuable? No, I am carrying nothing. Also, I doubt I will be able to repay. In the first place, how can I make the ends meet from now on?

My eyes saw the smoke drifting. *Might I be able to discern it as clouds?* I squinted, but it did not work well at all.

This room is too dark. Should I imagine my conducting a night flight? When I started thinking so, I heard the door open. I thought it was too soon for her to come back here, if she actually called them on the phone.

She entered the room. She jumped into the bed and lay down there. While being careful of not dropping the ash of the cigarette, I raised my body.

“I came up with a better idea.” She said in a cheerful voice.

“Better than what?”

“What do you mean by ‘than what?’”

“You came up with the better idea than what?”

“If you are asking me, wouldn’t you ask about the better of the ideas?”

“So, what have you come up with?”

“Taking a trip right now.”

“Who?”

“We.”

“What do you mean by ‘we’?”

“You and I, of course.”

“Oh, I am included.”

“Are you crazy? Do you understand the situation? If you continue to stay at such a place, they will find you soon.”

“Hmm, maybe, you’re right. But, if they find me, it would not be too bad for me.”

“Really? Even so, don’t you think traveling is fun?”

“I have never experienced traveling.”

“Are you kidding? Haven’t you?”

“What about you?”

“I have. Many times. But, umm, it was when I was a little girl. After I became an adult, I might not have been to very far places.”

“Are we going on a trip by car?”

“Yeah. I think it would be better than by train.”

“I’m not sure.”

“We will stay in a hotel at each destination, and eat delicious meals there.”

“Do you have money?”

“No worries. You can count on me.”

“Thank you. I don’t have money at all. I was thinking about what to do from now on. If I go back to the hospital, I believe I can get my personal belongings. With them, I will be able to withdraw money from my bank account.”

“Why don’t you go to a bank and tell them you lost a bankbook? I actually lost mine once. When I cried in a bank, they gave me a new one.”

“Really ... Right, if they can confirm my identity, then they will give me a new one, probably.”

“If you can do that, we should get prepared immediately.” She stood up from the bed. “Well, I wonder where I put the largest suitcase ...”

“Where are we heading for?”

“I haven’t thought of it. Any place will do fine.”

“Any place that you want to go to?”

“Somewhere with a hotel.”

She entered the walk-in closet.

“Oh, yes, how about getting on an airplane?” I heard just her voice.

“It costs us much.”

“You’re right. We are in no hurry in particular, you know?”

“Will you be able to leave work for such a long period of time?”

“Who cares? Never mind that. You need not worry.”

“Don’t you have to call your workplace?”

“I think it was about time that I left.”

After hearing the statement, I stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray. The smoke drifting near the ceiling was stationary.

I think I have to think about myself more. While I play with her, will I be able to come up with a good idea? But what is a good idea? I don’t have an objective in particular. I have not had any trouble. I am not falling into hard times.

Oh, yes. For example, I might think of killing myself.

Suicide.

Even that was not so serious for me. If so, I did not want to get her involved in the act of self-destruction. I did not know why. But I was just certain about it.

We had a discussion about whether to take a car, a train, or an airplane. But I had imagined getting on a ship. Besides, it had to be on a river, not an ocean. We could go down the river on a small boat. It would lead us to a lake or a sea eventually. I was imagining such a scene several times.

However, I would be the only person on the boat.

She was not aboard.

I had never even imagined that the two of us would go together.

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I got into her car, and we departed.

“The man running the drugstore below once said he wanted me to sell this car.” She spoke to me while taking the wheel. “I should have sold this car to him and bought another as the replacement.”

“Is there any part of this car that you dislike?”

“No. It’s not like that at all. But if anything, we prefer a new one, right?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Every new thing is a good thing. Don’t you think so?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Is it not the case for airplanes?”

“Ah, yes. Of course, I would be very glad if I have the opportunity to get on a new aircraft. Still, I am relieved to get on the same old one that I am accustomed to.”

The car went through the broad street and got on a highway on an outskirts of the city. We were traveling west. The sun was in the sky ahead of us. I did not think that we would go any farther before sunset.

“Hey, why don’t we talk about fake old tales?”

“Fake old tales? I think old tales are generally fake.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. Well, we tell the stories of our lives. But they have

to be fabricated lies. It is the rule.”

“What do you mean?”

“So, I will show you the example first.” She smiled.

She started telling a story about the time when she was a little girl. Her parents lived in a distant place because of their works. The younger sister of her mother fostered her. It was a small town near a port. Their house was a cabin at the corner of a yard in somebody else’s large mansion. Her aunt worked at the estate.

“The lawn was very comfortable to the skin. It was a bit sloped. When I rolled on it, I could see the sky that was rolling over and over repeatedly. Because it made my head spin round and round, I could not stand up for a while. And then, yeah, a dog was there. A big dog with long hair. It was very quiet and so big that it did not move if I leaned against it. It would not get angry at me.”

I was about to ask if it was really a fake story. She might have wanted me to ask about it. But, she would answer, “Of course, it is fake.” Because of her occupation, she might have prepared such stories all the time. As she fabricated stories, her fake tales might have been developed steadily.

She then talked about a rich person living in the mansion. The master and his second wife. And two teen boys, who were the children of the first wife. She then explained, there were many maids and butlers, one of whom might have been a relative of the rich.

When she grew up a little bit, she could also enter the mansion occasionally. One of the boys liked her and brought her to his room. Then, he read picture books aloud for her. She did not understand what they meant at all and was afraid because all the pictures were painted entirely in black. The bed was bouncy like a trampoline. The boy played on it and cried once when he fell off from it. Such a trivial story it was.

While we drove on a boringly straight road, the sun set in a moment. I brought my body close to her and read the meter. It was a habit of us pilots to check the instrument panel all the time.

“Sorry to interrupt,” I said. “You may want to replenish this car with gas.”

“Oh, you’re right. I thought I still had plenty more.”

“We have been going for long hours. Two hours have already passed.”

“That much?”

We saw the lights of what appeared to be a city, and we got off from the highway. We found a gas station along the street, and refueled there. I was the one who actually removed the fuel-tank cap and put the gasoline.

“Wow, you can do such a thing. That makes you the genuine pilot that you are.”

“Anyone can do such a thing.”

“I cannot.” Laughing, she put a cigarette into her mouth.

“Hey, you should not,” I warned, in a slightly louder voice.

“Oh, what?”

“Smoking is dangerous. The gas will catch fire from it.”

“Oh, I see ...” She showed a startled look, took the cigarette from her mouth into her hand, and sighed. “It’s dangerous. That’s a relief. I’ll feel more secure if you are with me.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“I cannot travel alone. I will probably lose something and end up going in a different direction. I cannot bear that.”

“Have you ever traveled alone?”

“No, I have not.” She shook her head. “I know I would definitely end up having a bitter experience.”

What kind of bitter experience? I found myself thinking about it.

After refueling the car, she went to the cash register to pay. I was waiting for her while sitting on the catfish-faced hood of the vehicle. There was no other car. At the cash register, a big young man in a white jumpsuit was standing. His chin was as prominent as that of a robot. He was glancing at me. After talking with him for a while, she came back to the car.

“You are hungry, right? I asked him about a delicious restaurant ... There is one just nearby.”

We got into the car again.

“He asked me from where we came.” She said, while starting the engine. “I guess that people can tell if we are traveling.”

“This is a small town. So, we are recognized as strangers, I suppose.”

“Ah, you may be right.”

The place she mentioned was a drive-in style restaurant facing the main street. The variety of the lineup on the menu was moderately so-so. It was the kind of place that I would expect to see a high school student, who was as blunt as a reptile, working as a waiter. Of course, even after we entered the place, the anticipation did not change. It was a restaurant that would meet my expectation.

Few people were inside the restaurant. When we sat at a table by the window, we no longer saw other customers. I heard music, which was so cheerful that I could dance to it or perform gymnastic maneuvers with it. But it was chattering, as if the speaker cone was made of aluminum foil. Both of us ordered the standard beef steak. She asked me if I would drink alcohol, but I declined the offer. She said she could not drink because she had to drive. If she was worrying about drunken driving, then all I had to do was to nominate myself as the designated driver, of course. But I did not make such a proposal. It was none of my business, and I would much rather prefer to avoid that.

“I wonder if I could eat it up.” She said, while leaning forward. “It depends on its taste, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t think you can finish it.”

“Oh? Because of its disgusting taste?”

“No. It has more to do with its quantity.”

“I should have asked them to reduce the amount.”

“Yes.”

“When you were a child, were you taught by your parents not to leave the served food?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Now, no one would scold me if I leave food on the plate. I feel something strange about that.”

“Did your aunt scold you?” I asked.

“What? Oh, umm, yes. She was quite strict. Thanks to her, I have turned out to be such a refined lady.” She burst into laughter and chuckled for a while.

The steak dishes were brought to our table. As expected, they were too large for us to eat them up. I think steak is the type of food that simply lacks the element of surprise more than any other food in the world.

There was a phone booth near the entrance of the restaurant. I looked at it several times. I was thinking about making a phone call and whom to call. She seemed to notice it. When she lit a cigarette, she suddenly showed me a sad expression.

“Do you think I should make a phone call?” She had her lips crooked.

“Yes, I do.” I nodded. Of course, she should do so.

“What will I say to him? Hey, what do you think I should say?”

“You say, ‘I will take a day off.’”

“What reason?”

Reason. Why does she stick to such a thing?

“Let’s see,” she was looking up at the ceiling and thinking. “I have come to my friend’s house and am finding out that she is ill. So, I will have to nurse her. That’s, it. It goes something like that.”

“You may say so.”

“Will he order me to have the friend on the phone?”

“You can insist that she’s ill.”

“Even though she’s supposedly ill, he might think she can be at least on the phone.”

“You may say you are out of her house now and are calling him from a restaurant.”

“Ah, that’s a good idea. But will he be able to tell that I am in this restaurant?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Okay.” She stood up. “I will make a phone call.”

“Relax.”

She suddenly frowned and held out her both hands toward me.

“Oh, how kind of you.” She hugged me.

She exhaled a short breath and left the table to make a phone call. After entering the phone booth and lifting the receiver, she waved to me through the glass.

I took one of her cigarettes again. Only a few cigarettes were left in the pack. *I will apologize to her later*, I thought.

Then, I started thinking that there was a problem with the current situation, in which I was relying solely on her. I picked up my ID card from a chest pocket and checked the telephone number written on the reverse side of it. Calling the number was the only other way I could choose.

After a while, she came back. She was looking nervous and was not smiling. She sat on the seat, immediately took a cigarette, and lit it. Uncharacteristically, she was keeping silent.

“Is anything wrong?” I asked.

“No, nothing wrong. He said nothing in particular.” She exhaled the smoke. “But, he asked me about you.”

“What did he ask you?”

“He asked me if I knew your whereabouts.” She pouted. Her eyes were ready to shed tears. “Of course, I said I didn’t know. He told me that he had received a call from a woman, apparently your supervisor.”

I immediately understood who the woman was.

“He got nervous because of the phone call.” She made the smoldering tip of the cigarette generate a fiery bright red glow, and exhaled the smoke with her sigh.

She was also getting nervous, too. Pilots of our company were keeping the business of her mansion going. So, those involved would definitely want to avoid

any trouble. She could not possibly make any excuse about running away with the pilot, who just escaped from the hospital. Even she could understand that.

“What should we do? We must be careful not to be found by them under any circumstances.” She uttered.

The waiter came to our table to clear it. Although both of us left about half of the steaks on the table, the waiter did not ask us anything, and took them away without words. He did not even ask us if we wanted coffee after the meal.

“Can you lend me just a small amount of money? If you can, I will leave you alone. You should go back home. If we go separate ways now, we will be able to make this situation look as if nothing has happened.”

“Do not say such a thing.” She begged in a faint voice, and shed tears. “Never say that again, please.”

“Why?”

“I know myself. You don’t want to be with such an aged woman forever. I know that.”

“I do not say such a thing.”

“I know ...”

She was smoking while sobbing.

I kept silent. As she mentioned, I could not be with her forever. However, it had nothing to do with her age. No, that’s not true. There was a particular relationship with the age issue. I mean, if she were younger than the current I, then I still would not be able to be with her forever anyway.

It is easy for me to say, “I will be with you forever.” She might want even such a lie, I imagined. But unfortunately, I do not engage myself in useless, meaningless, and uncertain things. That’s my rule. I learned it from my experiences in the sky. It was a promise to myself. I do not do certain things when I fight against enemies at the risk of my life. Not doing anything useless is a courtesy for respectable opponents. If I break the promise, I cannot bless myself when I am shot down and fall.

A waiter was looking at us from the vicinity near the counter in the distance. I observed the cars coming and going on the road through the window. Then, I

looked at her reflection on the windowpane intermittently. She was smoking again without words. I had yet to understand what type of woman she really was. I knew the pattern of the tattoo on her white breast, but knew nothing about her real existence. The words coming out from her mouth were almost lies. They were tales. They were not incoherent, though. Each of them made sense. That was the very reason why I could not believe them. I guessed she herself did not want me to believe them. Because she needed to make me believe just at the scene for the moment, just during the single night, she might have repeated the processes of living such days. If so, such a way of life was honest, simple, and not bad. Our jobs were completely the same as hers. We only needed to believe we would win during just one flight for the day. We repeated them. We could not continue to fly for many days forever.

As about five minutes had passed, she started telling another story. It was the sequel to the fake tale she had told me in the car. She talked about the episode, in which she just started going to school. Her aunt died of illness, and her biological mother came to see her. However, since the mother could not live together due to her circumstances, she was placed with her relative's family. The man of the house was always drunk, so she hated drunken men. The story went on.

I was listening without saying anything. I directed my line of sight toward the window once. Then, when I looked at her face again, she had stopped talking and was staring fixedly at me.

“Don't you want to hear such tales?”

“Yes, I am listening.”

“No, I asked whether you want to hear my story or not.”

“I'm not sure. Because I do not know what kind of story it is, I'm not sure whether I want to hear it or not.”

She chuckled moderately.

“Sorry. Am I becoming hysterical? Am I wrong?”

“I don't think so.”

“You know, I might have gotten irritated. I should not have sobbed, I think. Sorry. This is strange, because I am not getting any alcohol.”

“If you want to drink alcohol, why don’t you do so? I can take over the wheel.” I offered her the help, which I had grudged until then. “That’s the least of what I can do.”

“That’s okay. I know it is better for me not to drink alcohol.”

“What will we do from now?” I asked.

“Umm, what shall we do? I think we have no choice but to stay in this city tonight.”

“Shall we look for a hotel?”

“We should not sleep in the car, right?”

“Right, I think it would be a bit cold.”

“So, I will ask the waiter if there is a hotel nearby.” She was about to stand up.

“No, we don’t need to hurry by that much.” I stopped her. “We should calm down and think about it carefully. We are staying in a hotel, and what’s next tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow? Umm, after the departure, let’s drive on a highway again.”

“Then, we arrive at another city, eat steak dishes at a restaurant like we are doing now, and look for a hotel again?”

“Maybe.”

“Then, what’s next?”

“Why do you ask me such a question?”

“I’m not sure. I myself do not understand the reason. It is strange for me to think about such a distant future.”

“It is strange, definitely.” She frowned and showed a sad face.

“What life do you want to lead?”

“My life?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s see ... If possible, I want to live in a cabin in a grassland.”

“By yourself?”

“No. I would like to live with someone.” Just her lips formed the shape of a smile. “I wonder if I can find the one.”

“I can’t live like that.”

“I know.”

“I might be able to do so, if it is for only one year or two.”

“I told you I know. I don’t want to hear such an excuse.”

“Sorry.” I apologized.

Silence prevailed for a while.

I took my eyes off her several times.

And, we looked at each other several times.

“How nice.”

“What is?”

“You. Why are you pilots all in the same way?”

“Are we all in the same way?”

“Yeah, most of you, pretty much.”

“I wonder why.”

-5-

We got into a motel, which resembled a school clubhouse. Its parking lot was located right in front of the rooms, and only the keeper’s cabin was separated from the main building. It also had a laundry room with coin-operated machines. The only parked vehicle other than ours was a large trailer truck. The innkeeper squinted at her. My guess was that the woman’s brilliance was too dazzling for him because he had not seen it for a long time.

Our room was about to rot like a bungalow at a campsite. The bed was like a toy box made of plywood. To my surprise, the television was there. Moreover, it was set on the floor directly. It might be someone’s lost property. The carpet was like

worn-out sandpaper. The fluorescent light tube on the ceiling appeared as if it was about to lay a black egg.

She took a shower first, and then I also took it after that. From my point of view, I was not dissatisfied with this facility. I could live in the room for as long as one year. If I could replace the parking lot outside with a runway, I would not be able to ask for anything more. I was thinking about the motel like that, probably because my body was getting warmer and I was beginning to feel a bit better.

When I got out of the bathroom, she was wrapped in a blanket with her head sticking out. To watch the television set placed on the floor, she was lying on the bed, rotated by 180 degrees from the usual orientation so that her face was above the footboard and her feet were closer to the pillow side, or the headboard. The TV generated noises periodically. It was like a VHF (very high frequency) receiver I used while flying in the sky. It might be the function that was intentionally designed to remind me of how precious radio waves were.

“I have no cigarette anymore.” She said.

“Um. Sorry. I smoked a couple of your cigarettes.”

“I don’t care.”

“Shall I buy them somewhere?”

“We are just getting warmed up. You need not worry about that. Hey, come over here now.” She picked up one edge of the blanket slightly. She was apparently urging me to get inside the blanket.

Although my hair was wet, I draped the bath towel over a sofa, and inserted my body beneath the blanket on the bed.

“Ah ...” Bringing her body closer to mine, she made a sigh. Her breath touched my face. I sensed her scent in it. “It might be good, right?”

“What is good?”

“A life, such as this.”

“What kind of life?”

“Umm, like this, we take showers and get wrapped in a blanket every day. Then, we watch television shows, chitchat, and sometimes drink alcohol ... Only if the

amount is just a little bit, you know.”

“What do we do in the daytime?” I asked. I felt it was a spiteful question.

“Of course ... I have to do my work.” She answered.

“What kind of work?”

“I do not know such a thing to that extent. You know, a waitress or something?”

“As for me?”

“What can you do?”

“Piloting an airplane, maybe.”

“Right. I think you might find a job of getting on an airplane. Oh, for example, you should conduct a sightseeing flight with customers on board.”

“Yeah, that sounds nice.”

“I wonder if the customers will come.”

“I have no idea.”

“I will be your customer every day for you.”

“Even if you do so, I cannot make a living.”

As she mentioned, while I was talking about it, I started feeling that it might be a pleasing scene. It was so full of happiness that it made me feel sad.

“Perhaps, we might be able to live just with my income.” She chuckled.

“Right.”

She was laughing. The vibration traveled through my body. However, it was lasting too long. I pulled my body a bit away from hers, and took a look at her. She was not laughing. Instead, she was crying.

She saw the same scenery as what I saw, I thought.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked.

She did not answer. She buried her face against my chest and kept crying in the tunnel of the blanket. It was so thin that the light penetrated it slightly. The color of the blanket was orange. It was not too warm, though.

In this situation, I probably needed to think a bit about the reason why she was feeling sad. However, it was not that her sadness would diminish, just by discovering the reason for it. If I came to know it, I doubted I could alleviate her sorrows.

Then, I recalled the story when she was a little girl. Whether it was a real account or not was not essential to me. At least, she wanted to tell me such a thing in the past. She probably wanted me to understand that she had her own history. I did not have such a thing. I hardly told others about the story when I was a little boy. I occasionally was reminded of fragments from the past. But, I recalled them, not because I wanted to or tried to do so. If anything, I thought the memories should have vanished completely. I wish I had only the present and could think solely about it. As for the future, I only needed tomorrow and the day after tomorrow at most.

“I wonder what is wrong with me.” She murmured, while crying. It sounded as if she was also laughing. “You know, I have hardly cried. It’s weird ...”

I wanted to smoke. But we didn’t have any cigarette.

The news was broadcast on the television. I let my head stick out of the blanket, because it was news about the war. I saw recorded footage in which a fighter aircraft was taking off from the aircraft carrier. Then, a two-colored arrow was shown on a map.

Oh, just like that, we become arrows, I realized. Another arrow in different colors was shown. *The coordinate at which the arrows on both sides collide with each other will become the dance hall for them to have a lot of fun.*

That news ended in no time. Another report took over. An election being held somewhere. Then, the topic about a strike. On the television, people were shouting while holding microphones in their hands.

She was having her head out of the blanket, too. She was no longer crying.

“Sorry, are you angry?”

“Not at all.”

“Do you want to get on an aircraft?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t you feel sad?”

“Why do I feel sad?”

“Umm, I wonder what you feel in the sky, above the clouds. Is it amazingly spacious?”

“It is.”

“You are alone in such a place, aren’t you?”

“But, I usually fly with someone else.”

“Still, you fly alone at times, don’t you?”

“Yes. If my consort plane is shot down, then I come back to the airbase alone.”

“Don’t you feel sad in that occasion?”

“Why?”

“If I become alone, I will feel sad, definitely.”

“Wouldn’t that be okay if you feel sad?”

“Not okay.”

“Is that really so?”

“You know, that makes me want to cry.”

“I think it is okay for you to cry.”

“If I cry, I will become even sadder. Sadder and sadder.”

“If you become sad, what is wrong with that?”

“I would feel like dying.”

“Is there anything wrong with your dying?”

“Well, death is forbidden. That is absolutely forbidden.” She said. Her statement was slightly boosted with the ring of emphasis.

“Why do you say that?”

“I am not sure. But, I think that death is never the option. It would be

disrespectful to God.”

“You owe God something, don’t you.”

“Of course, I do.” While hugging me, she confessed. She seemed to have gotten back to be in the good mood already, and her voice regained the vitality. “In the first place, we were born to this world, thanks to God, right? Anyone owes it to God.”

“You are telling me that we are borrowing our lives from God, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, right. That’s what I mean.”

“If so, I think you can return it to God with your death.”

“What?”

“We have to return what we have borrowed to the owner someday.”

“Umm, do you think so ...? Oh? But, is it not rude if I return what I have borrowed without my using it well?”

“It might be better than keeping it for an extended period of time without doing anything with it.”

“Hmm, about it, you may be right.” She chuckled. “Oh, I get it. If you return it too soon, a demon may rob you of it.”

“Does it think that it can still use your young life?”

“Yeah, yeah. Right. So, we have to overuse it to the level that the demon does not want it anymore.”

“Oh, I see.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Indeed.”

“Hey, don’t you want alcohol or a cigarette?”

“Yes. Do you want me to buy them?”

“I will go shopping.”

“No, I will. I can get dressed more quickly.”

She laughed again.

“Funny. I am surprised that I can laugh this much without alcohol.”

“Incidentally, I will call the company on the phone once.” I got up. “Is it okay?”

“Why do you ask me?”

“Because I have to borrow money from you.”

“Ah, I see. Go ahead. You can bring my wallet itself in that bag.”

“If you allow me to do so, then I might not come back. I may be thinking of running away with your car.”

“How can I possibly think that you would do such a thing?” She got up, and stared at me. “And then, it may not be a bad idea for me to be deceived for the first time since a long time ago. I actually experienced that sort of thing in the past, although it was just once.”

“Were you cheated?”

“Yeah, but the memory ...” She showed me a smile. “It was the happiest memory ... Just by recalling it, I find myself laughing. So, I want to be deceived just once more ... Oh, the car key is in the bag, too.”

“I believe I will find cigarettes and a phone within walking distance. I do not need the car key.”

I picked up several coins from her bag. I put on a jacket and left the room. The sky was clear enough for me to see the stars. The air was chillier than expected, although it was not yet 20:00.

When I got onto the pavement from the motel’s parking lot, I started thinking that I was actually the very person who was being deceived, and she and her car might disappear before I come back to the room. Perhaps, I might have been craving for that situation.

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There was a drive-in facility across the street. I bought a pack of cigarettes at its café area. A couple of large trailer trucks were parked. Those who were eating food

were mostly males. One guy was staring at me. I did not care, and soon entered a telephone booth in the restaurant.

I told her I would phone the company, but it was a lie. As the operator was on the line, I called another number. I might have been able to make a collect call without borrowing her money, but I did not have enough confidence to do so. I mean, I had a small doubt that the number would really allow me to get connected with the intended recipient of the call.

I applied the receiver on my ear and waited for a while. I looked back, and saw the counter table of the diner. The men were drinking quietly. Come to think of it, my thought became much clearer to the level that I could recognize my mental clarity quite well. As I guessed, I seemed to have been influenced by drugs.

Finally, the ringtone started. *I think I can catch the one at this hour.* When the sixth tone rang, there was a response.

“Yes ...” I heard a woman’s voice.

“Hello,” I uttered.

“Who’s this?” Without a doubt, it was her.

“This is the first time for me to call you.”

“What? Who? Are you ...”

“Yes, I am. You told me to call you just in case.”

“Oh ...”

Silence prevailed for a while.

“Hello?” I said.

“I get it. Do not say your name, please.”

“Okay.”

“What happened to you?”

“I am getting into trouble because I have no money. You know, I have left everything in the hospital.”

“Have you run away? Seriously? Where are you now?”

“Umm, the time is running out. May I make a collect call?”

“Sure, of course.”

“Then, I will call back in five minutes.”

“Hey, are you okay? Is there anything wrong with ...?”

The call was cut off forcefully. *Time is up. If there is anything wrong, then it is this impatient telephone.*

I got out of the telephone booth and sat on the seat at one end of the counter. Then, I opened the cigarette pack I had just bought. A waiter was approaching me. He was a middle-aged man wearing a pair of round glasses.

“Sir, may I help you?”

“Thank you, but I am just making a phone call again,” I replied.

I lit the cigarette, and inhaled the smoke deeply. I noticed that I was feeling nervous. *Even before a dance in the sky, I would not be nervous by this much. I should speak over the phone after I calm down. I believe the woman who is now waiting for my call is having the same thought. What on earth will we talk about?*

As I was imagining her status while looking at the telephone booth, someone touched my shoulder. I turned around.

Leaning obliquely against the counter, one man was standing. He was holding a glass that was half-full with beer, in his hand. He was the same guy who had been on the innermost seat. There were a few more men in the vicinity. He looked the youngest among them. He looked at me, and warped his lips. Probably, he was intending to smile.

“Sir, is anything wrong?” I asked.

“You are an unfamiliar face ...”

“You, too.”

A bit later, he chuckled slightly. Then, he looked back, and appeared to be looking at his companions. Again, he turned toward me.

“If you like, shall I buy you a beer?” He asked.

“No, thank you. I don’t drink.”

“If you try, you might discover how good it is.”

“I have to make a phone call.” Saying so, I stood up.

“Hey, wait.” The man tried to stop me in a low voice.

I halted and stared at him.

“Sorry, but I have to make a call first,” I said. “Then, I can talk after that.”

“Okay, fair enough.” The man suddenly put on a smile again.

I got in the telephone booth. Then, I gave an operator the number and asked to make it a collect call.

I waited for a while. I thought of looking back at the bar counter. But since I did not want to see the man’s face, I looked at the dark parking lot outside the restaurant. I could not see the motel well because of the deeper darkness. I wondered if she was still in bed.

Finally, the call was connected with her. This time the ringtone did not ring.

“Hello.” I heard her voice. “What took you so long?”

“You know, I was smoking.” In fact, I was still holding a cigarette. Since it was getting a bit too smoky in the booth, I dropped it and crushed it underfoot. We are prohibited from smoking in both cockpits and telephone booths.

“Can you come to see me?”

“Will it be better for you?”

“Of course.”

“If I have an aircraft, I can fly to you immediately.”

“Where are you now?”

“Umm, I have no idea. I don’t understand the matters on the ground too well. I think my thoughts will be clearer tomorrow and will be able to understand the situation that I am in now. Maybe, I am 500 to 800 kilometers east of where you are. I will not be able to come to your place soon. Well, probably tomorrow or the day after tomorrow.”

“Are you okay? How will you come here?”

“I will move on the ground.”

“By car?”

“Yes.”

“You have a car. I’m relieved to hear that. How did you get it?”

“It’s my friend’s car.”

“Oh ... Anyway, be careful.”

“I will be careful.”

“I think you should not be conspicuous.”

“Sure.”

“How is your health condition?”

“Not bad.”

“That’s good. I have been worrying about you.”

“My mind is not good, though.”

“Is anything wrong?”

“It’s vague.”

“It is due to drugs.”

“Right. It seems that the efficacy is about to run out.”

“You might feel irritated at times, but I want you to withstand it.”

“Irritated?” I laughed a bit at that timing. “I have never been irritated. I wonder what it is like.”

“I think you have just forgotten about it.”

“Ah, you may be right. I might not be able to recall various things beside that as well.”

“For example?”

“For example, about who I am.”

She chuckled momentarily. “Are you kidding?”

I'm not sure. Am I kidding? I didn't know even that.

"I may be joking. Why did you tell me not to say my name?"

"I thought the call was wiretapped."

"Is it solved?"

"Yeah, I believe so. I checked the phone device just in case."

"Oh, you can do such a thing."

"Only if I have a tool and a receiver."

"Just like Sasakura."

"What? Who?"

"Err, what? I wonder who it is ..."

I could not recall whoever Sasakura was. For some reason, I understood that it was a nostalgic name. At first, I recognized that it was a very familiar existence. However, when I tried to recall it, it faded away. Like a glider attached to and pulled by a winch, my memory was ascending to the sky. It was becoming smaller and smaller. It flashed once in the end and vanished. Nothing was left behind. Only the blue sky was spreading. *I remember nothing.*

"Call me again tomorrow. Okay? Can you remember it?"

"I think I can."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

"So, be careful."

"Of what?"

"Of things around you."

"Around me? Of course, That's the only thing I can be careful of."

"You are on the ground and not in the sky. There are always some people around you, and they might be watching you."

"Yes, indeed."

“So, be careful.”

“Understood.”

I put the telephone down. I got out of the booth. At one end of the bar counter, that man was waiting for me. Glancing at him once, I walked toward the entrance of the restaurant.

“Hey.” He hailed me.

Although I was already touching the doorknob, I thought about what to do for a moment. *Shall I go out, or turn around to look back? When in the sky, I will not have time to think about such a thing. If I hesitate a bit, it's over.*

Before I knew it, the background music was changed. The tune was now a blues number that I had listened to before. I looked back, and approached the counter.

“Are you talking to me?” I stood in front of the man and asked.

“Of course, I am.” He exhaled the breath through his nostrils. Like a bull. Come to think of it, he was giving off the smell of a bull. I had been making the assumption that he was a trailer truck driver. Then, his trailer truck might be loaded with bulls. “Hey, you said you could talk after the phone.”

“I have nothing to talk to you about. What about you?”

“Yes, why don't we have a conversation while taking time?”

“I'm sorry, but I just don't have enough time. I have someone waiting.”

“Oh, where?”

“In my car.”

“Really. But don't worry about that.”

The man stood up while grinning, and approached me. He grabbed me by my shoulder and drew me closer to him. I tried to step back, but his hand was seizing my arm. It was a big hand. He was strong. I glared at him fixedly. He brought his face close to mine, and showed me the weird grin again. *Whatever is going down, I should calm down*, I thought.

“Let me go,” I warned as quietly as possible.

“Sorry. What did you say?”

“Let go of me, please.”

“Such a faint voice, eh?!” He looked back at the bar counter. “Can someone hear that?”

“I just said that to you,” I uttered.

The man turned to me. He was no longer smiling.

“To ‘you’? You mean, to *me*?”

“Okay ...” I nodded.

“Oh, you’re obedient and reasonable. So, we can have a good time together, eh? I won’t harm you.”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” I said. “Can I pick up something in my pocket?”

“What? Pocket? Which pocket?” The man laughed, while shaking his palatine uvula. “Funny. What do you mean? Are you taking out a gun, or something?”

“I don’t have a gun. I will pull out something. So, let me go.”

The man released my upper arm. I unzipped a chest pocket of my jacket and picked up my ID card. It was in a vinyl case. I showed it to the nose of the man.

“Oh, what?” He blinked and squinted. It was taking him some time to focus the sight on it.

My right thumb has already unlocked the trigger of a machine gun. I will shoot at the center of the man’s forehead. Bratatat. A red balloon bursts and vanishes in an instant. I was falling into such a reverie.

“What? A pilot? Are you?”

“I am.”

“Really?” With a surprised face, he looked fixedly at me. “I am meeting a pilot for the first time. You are still a young kid, eh?”

“Can you keep it a secret from others over there?” I said so silently.

“Well, yeah ...” The man nodded.

“If possible, I want you to tell nobody about meeting me.”

“Why are you in a place like here?”

“You know, that’s classified information. I don’t want to involve you in serious troubles.”

“Ah, as for me ... You know ...”

“May I leave here?”

“Oh, of course ... I apologize.”

“Well, no, you were not rude to me in particular.” I smiled for him. It was a courtesy.

I put the card back into the pocket and went out of the restaurant. Without looking back, I crossed the street. While waiting in a median strip for cars to come and go, I looked back at the diner just once. Its café area was so bright that I could see what was going on inside well. No one was looking at me. I confirmed that in a moment. After a large trailer truck passed by me, I ran across the road. *Everything moving on the ground is slow. It looks as if it has stopped and become motionless. It can’t be helped because we are on the immobile ground.*

The dark sidewalk did not move, either. While walking, I recalled the woman I had just talked to on the phone. Sometime in the past, maybe about two months ago, she visited me in the hospital suddenly.

At first, I could not recall her name. Still, I recognized her face, of course. I knew her well in the distant past. I was swiftly filled with the smoke-like feeling.

I had seen no human being other than doctors and nurses for an extended period of time. I had not even talked with anyone on the phone. So, when she entered my sick room, I first thought she was a new doctor. But she was not wearing a white coat. She closed the door and turned to me. Finally, I found out that she was special. I mean, a special person for me.

“It’s been ages.” She said, and moved closer to my bed.

I remembered that I was sitting on the bed, while leaning against a wall. I often sat in such a position. Was I not reading a book or something, when she was visiting me? I could not recall what kind of book it was. I read the Bible as well as newspapers and magazines. Whatever I read, the contents were not important for me. I just enjoyed the rhythms of words as if they were poems. It was the same as singing a song. I had interpreted the concept of reading books in that way since a

long time ago. By the time of the hospitalization, I had learned to feel that everything I read, heard, and even spoke, was a poem or a song.

“Hello.” I greeted her. It probably sounded monotonous. Because it was also one phrase of a poem.

“You appear to be in a better condition than I expected.”

“Surely enough, I’m fine.”

“Still, can’t you make a comeback?”

“I think I can. But for some reason, I don’t seem to get permission.” I talked smoothly. I thought I had not spoken for a long time, but my speaking ability did not seem to have gotten rusty.

“How come?”

“I wonder why.”

“I have been in a trial and under many restrictions. It is difficult for me to do anything I like.”

“Trial?”

“In the trial, the subject is not about my pointing the gun at you. It was the actual crime, though. It has got to be the most serious of the crimes that are put on the table ... So ...” She was at a loss for words. She held her hand over her mouth.

I kept silent. Then, I tried to understand what she was talking about. But they were also no more than poems. *Trial? Pointing the gun at me?* They were phrases that sounded somewhat strange to me to the extent that they seemed to be triggering something in my mind.

“I have seriously wanted to apologize to you. I am really sorry. I don’t think you will forgive me. I judged that it was the only choice at that time. I believed it was the only remaining thing that I could do by myself.”

“What about now?” I asked, as if it was also a poetic phrase.

“Now? Well, now I understand that it was not the only way. It is the reason why I have decided to come here to apologize. More than that, even if the choice that I made happened to be correct scientifically or socially, the fact remains that I actually

attempted to kill a human, who was also my close, precious friend. There is no excuse for this, in any phrases or words. I understand that. But, I just want you to understand how I feel. Please. I want you to forgive me. I will do anything to make up for it. I swear on my life.”

“I do not have any clue of what you are talking about. Anyway, I do not feel anything about it in particular. At least, it is not your fault that I am in this hospital.”

“Right, I understand that. But maybe, it might have been the catalyst.”

“Catalyst?”

She continued to talk about various topics. But, the words entering my ears made no sense anymore. They did not remain in my memory. I was just hearing them. They sounded like a lullaby, and the only assuredly positive effect they possess was to calm down the mind. It might have been the reverberation of the conviction that she was undoubtedly on my side. Perhaps, it was like my mother. But, I could not recall even my mother clearly, and it was just my simple premonition.

“I officially applied for and barely got permission to talk just for 10 minutes. I mean, the visitation with you.”

“Did you have to go through that much trouble?”

“Can you show me your ID card?” She asked suddenly. “Your hairstyle differs from that in the ID.”

I picked up the card from my pocket.

“Look at this. Your hair was much shorter in this photo. It has grown by so much.”

“Come to think of it, I have not had my hair cut so often.”

Yet, she was not looking at the photograph. She pulled the card from the vinyl case. Then, she took a pen from a pocket and wrote down something in small letters. Of course, I said nothing, because she kept on speaking.

“As for me, the photograph on my driver’s license looks weird. But what can I say? It is a proof that time goes by. Even if Kildren do not age, they still undergo metabolic changes properly. Their hair and nails both grow. Old cells are replaced

with new ones. It is the case for not only humans but also the social mechanism. The way of thinking is like that as well. What is good, and what is bad? People's sense of values keep on changing steadily."

As she continued to talk, she held out the cards in front of my face. Numbers were written on it. She did not explain the meaning to me.

"The things that do not change are, in short, the things that are renewed day by day. That is the way of Kildren, including you. In other words, it has the same meaning as a type of growth. Biologically speaking, it is fascinating. However, such constancy without changes gives rise to the more serious problem. Why are living things not designed to maintain the unchanging state? We do not know much about the field of study, which is still in darkness without enlightenment so far. Up to this point, we are sure that creatures cannot evolve without dying and being born again. If they live for a long time, they will die out as species. So, we can say, only the creatures having the function to die have survived on the earth."

While talking, she returned the card into my chest pocket. *What she wrote must be a telephone number*, I guessed. *Why doesn't she mention that?*

After that, she talked about our familiar old tales for a short while. But, I remembered them just vaguely.

She seemed to be paying attention to her watch.

The door was knocked and opened slightly inward. A man, whom I did not know, showed us only his face through the slit.

"It's time." Without looking at me, the man told her.

"Okay, I am leaving now."

The man stared fixedly at her, nodded a bit, pulled his face out of the slit, and closed the door.

"If something happens, please contact me. Whatever happens, I will do my best for you." She said, and tapped my chest pocket with her finger. The card was there. She wanted to mention the presence of the number she had just written down earlier. *Oh, now I see she wants to hide it from the man outside, who may be listening to our conversation.* I could understand it. So, I nodded without words.

“Can we shake hands?” She said.

I held out my hand.

She applied her finger onto her lips once, and then picked up a small syringe from a pocket.

“Your dream can be realized with it.” It was a faint voice.

She inserted the needle into my wrist.

I felt no pain at all.

The nurses gave me injections every day. So, I had gotten used to it.

She hastily got prepared, and left my sick room. I was struck by the image of her face turning red that was probably due to excitement.

I closed my eyes, and thought.

Who is she?

Yes, little by little, I am recalling her identity.

She is not a doctor, but a scientist.

I wonder what her name is ...

I thought it was the thing of a distant past.

She is an excellent scientist and, for some reason, is chased by someone. I am not sure why they are hunting her. I did not get it, not because I could not recall the reason, but because I could not comprehend it.

She mentioned the trial. Did it mean that she was caught and prosecuted by them?

Of course, she was not an evil person. So, even if they manage to catch her, she will not be killed. *She may have to undergo punishment of some sort or pay the price of compensation for the charge. All of them have already happened in the past,* I guessed.

What has she had to do with me?

I could not get that part of what was going on.

She said she would pay the price because she pointed her gun at me. However, I did not remember such a thing.

The night air was chilly, but my body was warmed for some reason and felt lighter than usual. Before I walked across the parking lot of the motel, I checked the surroundings once again. Mainly, I paid attention to the drive-in restaurant on the other side of the street. *Is there anyone looking toward this direction? But, this side is much darker than the diner. Probably, no one could recognize my figure in the dark.*

I deliberately walked behind a trailer truck. Her sedan was still there. I opened the door while being careful not to make any noise, and entered the room. It was not locked. It was the same as it was when I had left the room.

TV drama show was on television. Then, a laughter.

On the bed, she was not moving.

She was sleeping quietly on her stomach.

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If I get in bed, I might wake her up. Thinking so, I had decided to sit on the sofa and smoke. I did not take the trouble to turn off the television.

I exhaled the smoke. I looked at her white arm. Then, I suddenly recalled one thing.

“Fuko.” I called the name.

She opened her eyes.

She raised her head, looked at me, and smiled happily.

Smoke was drifting at the center of the room. Below the haze was her smile. I noticed that her lips were dry. I had better eyesight than average. I could even recognize the freckles near her eyes.

“Sorry. I fell asleep before I knew it.”

“Keep sleeping. You must have been exhausted.”

“Yeah. I think I have never driven for that long.”

“I bought cigarettes. I have already smoked two of them.”

She raised her upper body languidly, and reached for the cigarette pack. I stood

up, took the package on the cabinet, and brought it to her.

“That’s strange. You can just toss it to me.” Saying so, she received the pack and pulled out one of the cigarettes.

I handed the lighter to her. Then, I got back to the sofa and sat there. I was still in the middle of smoking. The room was becoming whiter with smoke.

“When you are piloting an airplane, are you allowed to smoke?”

“No.”

“For hours?”

“That’s right. We cannot fly for many hours anyway. During the flight, we are prohibited from smoking.”

“Why?”

“There is oxygen only for humans.”

“Is that so? I think oxygen is everywhere.”

“Even on the mountain top, the air is thin.”

“Suddenly, I am losing interest in getting on it.” She smiled. “I wanted you to have me on an airplane. But that’s not good if I cannot smoke.”

“You cannot drink alcohol, either.”

“What? Why?”

“When you drink alcohol, you get drunk.”

“But, do we not drink to get drunk?”

“We do not have to get drunk in the sky.”

“What do you mean?”

“We are already drunk there.”

“Oh ...” She nodded without closing her mouth. “I see. I think I can understand it.”

“We sometimes get intoxicated and vomit.”

“During the flight?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm, do you open the window in that situation?”

“We can’t do that.”

“Whoa ... So ... That’s a tough experience.”

“Well, the pilot is drunk, and no one is around. So, that’s not such a serious issue.”

“Umm, though you say so ...” She inhaled the cigarette smoke deeply and exhaled it like a sigh. “Did you call the company?”

“Yeah.”

“How was it? Did they order you to come back?”

“I have to go to a bit of distant place.”

“Really ...” The angle of her eyebrows indicated her sadness. “Where?”

“Sorry, I cannot tell you that.”

“Will you not be able to see me anymore?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You are surely honest.” She smiled. “I like that characteristic you possess.”

“Fuko,” I called her name again.

“What?”

“Thank you.”

She stared fixedly at me.

Then.

She burst into laughter. During the process, she probably choked with the fume.

“What on earth ...” She coughed.

“You saved me.”

“You will say goodbye to me tomorrow, won’t you?”

“Or right now, if you are okay with that.”

“What about money?”

“I want you to lend me just a little money. I swear I will pay it back.”

“No, not now. I will lend you money tomorrow morning. Is that okay?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

I nodded. I might have been looking as obedient as a zebra left alone in a savanna.

“Oh ...” She made a sigh again. “You know, I had a good dream, yeah. We might be able to live alone together in a distant city.”

“I thought it was supposed to be in a grassland.”

“Any place will do.”

She leaned her head to one side while smiling, and gave me a penetrating look.

“Any place is okay for me.” She whispered quietly.

I had no word to say.

“But ...” She raised her chin and took a breath. “But it cannot be realized. I know ...” She slowly shook her head horizontally. “How can we possibly lead such lives?”

“You might be able to,” I said. “I mean, with someone else other than me.”

“Right.”

“I think you can do that by yourself.”

“By myself?”

“Yeah, you can live even alone.”

“I cannot imagine it.”

“I think you just have not thought about it.”

“I have not.”

“If you think about it and lead a life, I believe you will be able to do that in the future eventually.”

“Can I live alone?”

“I believe so.”

“I doubt it.”

“You can do it.”

“Funny. Why is a person like you giving me the lecture? I am older than you.”

“I don’t mean to lecture you.”

“But, yes, you may be right. Well, will I live alone ...? I wonder if I won’t be lonely.”

“If you are with many people, do you not feel lonely?”

She shut her mouth and appeared to be thinking about it. She exhaled the cigarette smoke three times.

“Yes, I have been lonely. It is the reason why I want to run away. I thought I would not be lonely if I am with a man I love.”

“Have you fallen in love with someone because of the reason?”

“Oh, whom do you mean?”

“Is there such a person?”

“I don’t understand what you are talking about.”

“Do you love someone because you want to run away? Do you love someone because you are lonely?”

“Maybe, I do.”

“In that particular order of priority?”

“Your questions are too difficult for me.”

“Umm, sorry ...” I apologized.

“The person I love. I might not have such a person.” She showed her front teeth and frowned. “Right. I think I cannot love anyone. That is me. Rather, there are more people that I dislike than I like. I hate many things. No one loves me. So, I always get drunk and behave as if I don’t care about anything. However, you know, I didn’t drink in front of you, right?”

“Is it because you were driving?”

“No, no. But thank you. I am feeling composed. I wonder why. I think I am

getting cheered up a little.”

“That’s good for you.”

“Can we spend one more day together? Can’t you leave the day after tomorrow? Let’s be together for another day.”

“But, we might get into a downright quarrel tomorrow.”

“Yeah, maybe. That’s possible. Umm, but ...”

“If you get back tomorrow, you will not be suspected. We can make it so that nothing has happened in your life.”

“Yeah, right. I have to work until I pay back all my debts ...”

“Do you have debts?”

“Oh, no, that’s not correct. That’s a lie. Do not worry about money.”

“I will send you money as much as possible.”

“Heh.” She laughed while shaking her shoulders. “You are funny. You need not try to please me like that.”

“That’s not a lie.”

“Oh, no.” She put her fingers on her eyes. “I am about to cry ... I should not do that, right? I will cry tomorrow morning. We will do something fun until then.”

I stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray. She stretched her body and snuffed out the cigarette in the ashtray on the sideboard. *The production of smoke has ended.* Then, I turned off the television.

The tranquility was mixed with the remaining smoke.

She wrapped the blanket around her white body, and stared fixedly at me. The tears for tomorrow were trickling down on her cheeks.

Episode 2: Inverted It was, oh I admit it, that we were kindred spirits. We looked each other in the eye, we saw the same devil, we weren't afraid; it was – merry. But he outsmarted me; I'd known he could, and hoped he wouldn't, and he did, and now: it's too long to be alone, a lifetime.

This excerpt is from *The Grass Harp* by Truman Capote

-1-

It was a beautiful morning on the following day. *It is a surprise that such beautiful light reaches to the ground*, I felt.

I had decided to get on a bus at the nearby bus stop. Sitting on a bench, below which fallen leaves gathered, I talked with her for about 30 minutes. She was talking about not her past, but what life she wanted to lead. She wished to run a small café somewhere. *The dream would become her. Her dream would come true*, I thought.

A bus was coming, and I got on it. She was waving to me with her smile. Then, from inside the bus, I was seeing her get into her own car. I knew she would be going back on the expressway. It might be a slightly sad car drive for her. Even so, I could do nothing about that. I also got the impression that she appeared to be in a better condition this morning than yesterday. She might have been acting that way, though.

The bus was not crowded. I took the seat in the back. It would take about one hour to the station by bus. From the station, the destination was more than four hours by train. I could get there in the afternoon. In the bus, I slept most of the time. Still, each time the bus stopped, I always woke up. It was because I found myself sensing that a trouble was happening.

Thanks to the intermittent awakening, I did not oversleep, and got off the bus at the station. It was bigger than I expected, and the ceiling of the building was

unnecessarily high. It looked like a hangar. *Why do they need such a high ceiling?*

Platforms were lined up. Although I looked at the bulletin board, I could not find out where I should go to get on the train. I asked a station staff about that when purchasing a ticket. I asked another staff again at the platform and got on the train.

After departing, the train ran for a while in a place like a gutter of a town. I felt as if I were going down a river. Then, the buildings got shorter, and the natural view gradually started getting more pronounced. It was sparsely populated, and a flat land stretched to all directions. While seeing the racing scene, I fell asleep again.

Someone touched my knee. When waking up, I saw her at the seat in front of me.

“Fuko.” Immediately, I recalled her name.

“I found myself coming here.” She smiled happily.

“How could you have known that I am on this train?”

“I don’t know about where you go. Wherever is okay for me.”

Honestly, I was feeling glad a bit. *Has anyone had such an attachment to my life to date?* I thought human beings were not sticky, cold, or bland like metal, and had independent relationships. For example, did even my mother have such an attachment to me?

Anyway, that was the way I thought. I analyzed that Fuko had to be associated with me as a service to a customer, or as an outlet for the confusion she was holding within herself. *The word “analyze” might be a bit of exaggeration. Still, indeed, I somehow believe it that way.*

So, I was probably putting on a smile. While relaxing my lips, I must have smiled naturally.

However, I soon realized that we were in a difficult situation.

My mind was working much more clearly than yesterday. *I can now think about various things.* I felt as if I could see through many people and the distant future. It was shocking me. *Oh, is it my original human nature?*

Currently, I was moving to a place where a scientist named Aoi Sagara was. She would shelter me. I was intending to depend on her goodwill.

Fuko seemed to have quit her job and to be starting a new life seriously. But, if she was thinking that she needed me in life, then it was her misunderstanding. *She cannot possibly need me. She is having the wrong illusion.* She mistakenly thought this human, namely me, was valuable. Probably, she was still seeing me as a pilot. But it was the illusion of me, who once had such a glorious past, like a slide show. Even I myself understood it had been just an illusion, but she tried to see the past glory. It was like a fake tale she once told me. She must have created my version of a fake story.

As I have thought so, I should make the point clear for her.

However, is now not the right time?

While looking at her smile, I was ending up thinking so for some reason. And she had come here all the way to me.

But, on the other hand, I immediately give bullets to enemy aircrafts and push them back to the ground, even though they have come all the way to the sky after much effort.

No, that's a different story. Dying differs a lot from going back to the ground.

If so, shall I shoot at Fuko here?

I gazed at my right hand. My thumb.

But, wait ... there is no machine gun here. No control stick either. Therefore, I cannot assume the inverted flight orientation quickly to execute the escape maneuver.

My goodness. How inconvenient anything on the ground is.

Right, there is no refuge on earth.

We can take refuge to nowhere.

We cannot fall even more from this place.

The only thing we can do is to sit still by putting my feet and butt on earth all the time. Even when I can run a bit, I soon end up bumping into something. I will be cornered. I can go neither upward nor downward. I am not even allowed to go straight. It is evident that those who want to escape from this inconvenience have to approach the sky to a certain extent and then fall from there. No one can fall off from the ground.

Anyway.

I was keeping silent for the time being.

It can't be helped.

Although I talked to her, I fell asleep at times. Probably because of her fatigue, she too slept almost all the time. Then, a little past noon, we reached the destination. It was not that much farther than I had expected.

When we got out of the station, it was raining outside. I did not have an umbrella.

“Do you have any plan in particular?” She asked me. “How about eating something?”

“Wait here. I will make a phone call.” I looked around.

A signboard in the station showed the way to a telephone. I left her at the location and walked in the crowd toward the direction. I reached to the edge of the station building, and noticed phone booths lined up outside. I pushed a glass door and got out of the building. I started running in the rain, and rushed into a booth.

I picked up the receiver and was about to take out coins from the pocket. It was when the door was opened behind me, and I was pressed against the glass wall. At first, I thought Fuko was attempting to surprise me.

But, I soon noticed that it was not the case.

The one who was clasping my body was not Fuko.

The build was more delicate and lighter. The height was about the same as mine.

In the narrow space, I twisted my body and turned around.

I saw the face in front of me.

“Kusanagi,” I recalled the name.

The glass was misty. Raindrops were moving on it.

I looked at my chest. I felt pain at that part. Something hard was pressed against me. Kusanagi's hands were white. Her blood vessels were visible.

A gun.

However, I was not shocked anymore.

Well, yeah.

I remember this feeling, I thought.

I might have felt a bit relieved.

Probably ...

Honestly speaking, I was feeling a bit glad.

“What brought you here?” I could ask her in a calm tone.

“You have lived too long, haven’t you?” Suito Kusanagi uttered.

From the hair on her forehead.

Raindrops were dripping onto her cheeks.

They were trickling down to her sharp chin.

It was a girl’s face.

Yeah, it’s the face I saw in the past.

The face that I have known.

“I have not expected you to come here,” I said.

“No one but I can kill you.”

“Anyone can kill me, with ease.”

“Please don’t think ill of me.”

“How can I possibly do so?”

I felt a shock in my chest.

My back collided with the glass wall behind me.

It might have been shattered.

The smell of gun powder.

Ah ... wonderful fragrance.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Goodbye,” Kusanagi replied.

The door was opened, and she went outside as if she was being sucked out.

My back slipped down the glass.

My legs collapsed as if they were melting.

I sank on the concrete floor.

My chest is hot.

I wondered if Fuko was okay. *Can she go back properly?*

Raindrops were running down on the glass plates.

I cannot see anything anymore.

It's misty.

Then, from the interior of the cloud, I fly to the blue sky.

I am ascending to the brilliant sky.

I don't care about my body anymore.

I had long been anticipating the moment like that.

I can be emancipated from my body.

Like an angel.

Spreading the wings.

What a wonderful thing it is, eh?

I can be freed, even from an aircraft.

Like an angel.

I can fly around anywhere.

Air was ripped off from the wings.

I am being enveloped in the particles of light.

Lightness and brightness.

Everything will probably surround me.

I feel comfortable.

What I felt happy about was that I was shot by her.

I have not even wished for that.

It is what I have even dreamed of.

And then ...

At the moment, I opened my eyes just once more.

Wait a minute. Is this a dream?

When I opened my eyes, I found myself sitting on the seat of a train. The view appeared to be flowing outside the window. My body was shaken at regular intervals. The noise was rhythmical. Before I knew it, it was raining outside. Raindrops were crawling on the windowpane diagonally.

No one sat at the seat in front of mine.

I tried to recall the name.

Oh, I was shot in the phone booth, and about to die shortly.

I must be dreaming at the moment.

That was what I wanted to think.

I wanted to believe so.

However, the noise continued on and on endlessly.

Forever and ever.

Because I do not die, it will continue.

I do not die.

Now and forever.

I cannot die.

Never.

When I touched the windowpane, it was cold. Moist, gently cold.

It was a dream.

I knew it.

That didn't work.

By the way, who did come to shoot me?

I felt as if various memories suddenly evaporated. Like the gunpowder exploding in the outer space, it burst without sound and fell around the vicinity. The dropped materials glowed with the small red flickers, vanished into thin air before long, and nothing remained. Only the subtle scent of the memories remained.

-2-

The station was on a slope near a mountain. It would lead to a mountain pass. I saw a locomotive without following cars running on a railroad siding. After getting down on the platform, I crossed the railroad track and entered the station building. There were not too many passengers getting off at this station. It seemed that there were not many houses nearby. The train stopped at such a rural station, probably because the locomotive car needed to be changed here.

I found a bus stop. But no one was around the station. I did not see even a station employee. Maybe due to the high altitude, the temperature was low. It was to the level that I could see my white breath.

I got away from the building, and walked for a while. The black asphalt pavement was still new. I saw white guardrails starting from the middle of the slope. The yellow road sign that warned of rock fall was standing a bit ahead of me.

I have come this far, I thought.

When I pilot an aircraft, I fly farther. But, I have never had such a feeling. I cannot return to the base with the current amount of fuel. It is such a strange feeling like that. Probably, it is not a matter of distance. It is rather about time. Likewise, our lives are not a matter of distance, but time.

I stopped at about two hundred meters down the slope from the station and lit a cigarette. I could see the downward slope stretching endlessly. While curving repeatedly, the road went all the way. Beyond that, the scenery was too hazy to be seen.

There were fewer trees around here. Only grasslands and bare rocks. Over the station, high mountains were towering like those in a fantasy tale of a picture book.

I looked at the sky. Something like dots were moving there. *They are airplanes.* I could not recognize the shape. They were subtly giving off white clouds. Judging

from the altitude, they had to be large aircrafts.

I sensed the presence of someone behind me, and turned around to look back. But, no one was there. I was reminded of the dream I was having on the train.

Right, I was having the feeling that the woman might appear again.

She will come to shoot me.

I'm sure she will come sometime in the future.

I have to live until she shoots at me ...

I heard the sound of car tires approaching me from behind. I looked back. It was turning at a curve, and was going down the slope toward me. The headlights were on. Come to think of it, the vicinity was dim as if the sun had already set. It was still in the early afternoon, though.

Since I had been walking on the center line of the road, I stepped aside. The car slowed down and stopped beside me. Its windows were reflecting the light so that they appeared to be glowing in silver, and I could not see what was inside the car. The door was opened. It was a woman in a long brown coat.

“You have really come here, eh?” She smiled.

“Right. It might be a dream.”

She was approaching me. I kept myself standing. She hugged me while wrapping her arms around my torso and putting her hands on my back.

Oh, come to think of it, I once saw a scene like this before. I felt so for a moment. Is it because of the scent of her hair? Or, because of the color of her eyes?

“Get in.” She said, and moved away from me. Then, she was staring at the direction of the station.

I looked at the direction, too.

I got in the passenger seat, and fastened the seat belt. She started the engine immediately. The car made a U-turn and went up the slope, along which it had come. It was very warm around my legs in the vehicle.

I felt centrifugal forces many times while the car was driving on the curves. The sound of car tires was unique. A subtle amount of metallic sound was mixed in it. *I*

wonder if studs on the tires are responsible for the noise.

After we went down the slope for a while, we were then inside a conifer forest. The car turned to the left at the intersection, and we were on an upward slope again.

“You have managed to remember the number I wrote on the card, haven’t you? That’s good. I can’t believe it. I am actually seeing you again.”

“How was your trial?” I asked.

“Yeah ...” She sighed and then smiled. “I’m glad. You have fully recovered, haven’t you?”

“Are you talking about me?”

“Yes, of course.”

I did not understand well what she meant.

“What great mechanisms humans have! If it is broken, it can be restored. With its own power.”

“Have I recovered?” I asked.

“Don’t worry. You will get even better.”

In the first place, I had not had any notion that I was broken. It might be the proof of my being broken, though.

We drove through the forest, and the road started sloping downward. We got down to a flat ground, where I could see houses here and there. After passing by a small irrigation pond, we entered an unpaved road. A wooden fence was on the way to signal the dead end of the road. She got out of the car and walked to the obstacle to open it. I realized that it was not a fence, but a gate. She pushed both sides of the gate, looked back at me, and smiled. She seemed to be in a good mood. I felt her smile was nostalgic. *Is it a lingering scent of memory somewhere in my mind?*

She moved the car by a few meters and stopped it again.

“I will close the gate.” I put my hand on the seat belt.

“No, you don’t have to. You are a guest.”

She got off the car again and closed the gate. I saw her in the sideview mirror.

She was wearing a pair of jeans and brown boots. The road was moist and looking soft.

The car moved by a few more hundreds of meters and passed by a short wooden building. It was getting into a place like a tunnel with a roof. It was structured like a factory. The car was parked in it.

“Here.” She looked at me. “This is where we get off.”

I got out of the passenger seat and looked at the building. I saw several small skylights on the high ceiling. Just the exterior walls were made of wood, whereas the frameworks were made of light steel. The thing, which surprised me more than anything, was a biplane at the back of the building. This place seemed to be its hangar.

“Nice garage, isn’t it?” She said.

“Whose airplane is it?” I asked.

“Mine.”

“Do you pilot it?”

“Yes.” She smiled happily. “I learned to do so.”

“Did you learn?”

“Indeed, I need this to live here.”

“For what?”

“Why do you ask for what? Of course, it is for me to move.”

“Oh ...”

“This area is inconvenient. The mountain path often becomes impassable due to avalanche. When it happens, I cannot get mails. Still, I have to go shopping for food. You know, I cannot go on foot, can I?”

“But if you purchase an airplane ...”

“Might I as well buy canned foods?” She showed her white teeth. “Well, come with me.”

She started walking toward one direction. I followed her.

We got out of the garage and moved to a building like a cabin. Climbing up the steps, she put the key into the keyhole. There was a window right next to it, and I could see the dim interior.

The room was warm. A steel stove was placed near a wall to my right. She first walked to the stove, opened a small cover at the lower part of it, and put something black into it with a stick. It seemed to be fuel. I saw a red flame.

She got back toward me while rubbing her hands together. She then took off her coat and hung it on the coat hanger beside the door. I removed my jacket, and she also put it on the coat hanger.

“So, what’s next? You are hungry, aren’t you?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Well, will you start with a cup of hot coffee?”

“Sounds nice.” I nodded.

She walked to the back of the house. The kitchen was in the direction. To the left end, I saw a steep stairway. It seemed to lead to the loft. *It has got to be the bedroom. I mean, this space and the attic are the only rooms of this house.*

“Oh, if it is dark, you can turn on the lamp there.” She said.

I found it by the window. Not an electric one. It needed fire to be lit.

“Do you know how to light it?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then, I will teach you later.”

I did not think it was dark. If I wanted to read a book, then it would still be bright enough by the window.

There was no sofa to sit on. So, I was standing at the very center of the room.

“Wanna sit down? Umm, there, that one ...” She was pointing at one direction from the kitchen. “Put the books on the chair away, and take a seat.”

It was a small chair by the window. Without a backrest, it was a simple, round, wooden chair. A few books were piled on it. I moved them onto the window’s crosspiece, pulled the chair a bit, and sat on it. I felt it was relatively firm.

She seemed to be boiling water. She walked near me once, and put away the scattered objects on the floor and the cabinet. However, since she did no more than just moving them to different places, they were still visible. They were notepads, paper boxes with small items, photographs, *etc.* The worn carpet was laid on the floor. Pieces of cloths were attached to a wall here and there. *Are those incantations, or something?*

Behind the stove, there was a cabinet, on which two photographs were displayed. Both were of a smiling young man. I recalled the face. *He was a pilot. Was he her boyfriend? Or, her husband? Which was he ...?* I did not remember that. Perhaps, it was what I had not known. Either way, it was essential for them to have a relationship that would encourage her to keep on displaying his photograph. I did not care about what name that particular relationship had.

She came back while carrying two cups in her hand. I received one of them. There was no table. I did not have a place to put it on. I held the cup in both hands. The cup was warm. On the other hand, the coffee was very hot. It was the instant type, made from the soluble powder, with neither milk nor sugar. Of course, it was enough for me. When I brought my mouth close to the cup, I felt the hotness as if it involved many things and tried to bring them down to hell. I sipped it while dodging several hands that were being extended from hell.

“By the way, I am really impressed by how well you have recovered.” She sat on a wooden box over the stove. It was way too short to function as a chair. So, she was assuming the pose of looking up at me. “Honestly speaking, I almost gave up while thinking you could not make it.”

“Me, too.”

“You were giving up?”

“Probably, I still do.”

She exhaled and smiled. It was a gentle face.

“No worries. You have been able to come here alone, and speak of such a thing. You have already got back to the normal state.”

“The effects of the medicine have worn off. My mind is far clearer today than yesterday.”

“Okay, but be careful. Occasionally, the symptoms of hysteria may show up.”

“For example, might I act violently?”

“Yes. I admit that there might be the possibility.”

“Oh, it sounds dangerous.”

“Even when you are awake, you might have an illusion like a dream.”

“Oh, I had a dream. You know, while I was on a train.”

“What type of dream did you have?”

“In the dream, I was killed. Kusanagi chased me, pointed the gun,” I put my finger on the part of the chest which my heart was inside, and continued, “to my chest, and shot at the point.”

“Really ...” She showed a slightly serious look on her face. “Then, what did you think about that?”

“I felt happy.”

She raised her eyebrows a little and got her chin upward while fixing the expression. Then, she smiled shortly after that. Rather, she tried to smile. She attempted to form a smile.

“Did you want to be killed?”

“I did.”

“Did you see Kusanagi’s face?”

“I saw it. Within a close distance.”

“How was she?”

“What do you mean?”

“Umm, for example, how was her hair? Long? Or, short? Do you remember?”

I was reminded of the waterdrops dripping from her hair. I could recall the scene in minute details.

“I remember it clearly. It was short.”

“Shorter than your current hair?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Which means, it was the Suito Kusanagi of several years ago.”

“I think so.”

“I wonder if you have such a desire?”

“What desire?”

“Umm, well, that’s okay.” She put her mouth on the cup and stopped her words. Then, she raised her face once, closed her eyes, and pouted. She looked to be thinking about something. “I want to ask you a couple of questions. Relax and answer. I can assure you that it will not put you in a difficult position.”

“Okay.”

“I want to ask about your memory.”

“But, I have many things I cannot recall.”

“Well, you need not worry about that. It is not that you do not remember that, rather you just do not memorize it. Umm, I mean, you act unconsciously and get everything done well. If one stops growing and still keeps aging, even a normal person ends up being in that status. One remembers the past well, but cannot recall what has recently happened. You have heard of such cases, correct?”

“That is what old people experience ... Do I already belong to that elderly age group?”

“No, your body is still young. It is true for sure. So, if anything, I might be able to state that your mind has aged, relatively speaking.”

“I see.”

“When someone loses the physical change, then the one will tend to process the same routines subconsciously. It can also be said that the movement of the body gets streamlined. The processing channels get short-circuited, and nothing remains in memory. Since you move without thought, you don’t remember the information. Moreover, the routine of inputting and outputting memory is omitted, and you are more likely to perceive things abstractly. For example, you forget proper nouns and start thinking about things just with their concepts.”

“Yeah, that’s right. I do things the way you say I do.”

“You Kildren have that common tendency. The fact has been pointed out independently based on the data in the past. In a thesis, one scholar wrote that the aging processes are programmed into the organisms’ DNA as a protective measure against not remembering anything. In short, aging is a possible growth pattern in a way, and change is always needed for the self-preservation of the organism.”

“Changing is, you mean, equal to living, you say.”

“Yes, but ... The sample size is way too limited. We cannot clearly determine if it has to do with their individual variability, characteristic properties, or physical factors. However, the symptom that indicates the vague thoughts and inability to register anything in memory has been reported with fairly extreme examples of more than ten people.”

“And what will happen next?”

“I don’t like to tell you candidly about that ...”

“No problem with that.”

“In the worse-case scenario, the symptom like the collapse of personality has been observed.”

“Does the one go insane?”

“It is mainly a memory disorder. Mental disorders are seldom observed.”

“Specifically, how is the symptom?”

“Yeah. Well ... When you wake up every morning, you have to look for a new you. But, as of now, the rapidly progressive symptom has not been reported. I don’t think their brain functions have any problems. They are young, healthy brains. We cannot find the reason.”

“Can we not avoid it?”

“Female Kildren might be able to avoid it. But as for male Kildren, theoretically, they will remain Kildren throughout their lives. Of course, even if they free themselves from Kildren, the disorder will still remain.”

“It means that we cannot get back to being normal, doesn’t it?”

“Correct. According to my estimation, it would be difficult for them to revert to the original condition, once they are in the abnormal state. It is because such signals are inscribed upon you. They are like scars. You can compensate for the shortcomings by applying different networks to a certain extent, but cannot erase the scars. Scars themselves are the networks. They will remain forever. On the other hand, I can state that attempting to augment the scar with another network renders the scar conspicuous. The human mind is embedded with such natural characteristics in the first place. One can never forget a dreadful experience and suffers from a mental disorder, correct? The one will not erase the scar and forget it, but try to keep it forever. You know, the body thinks that the method can be a way of defense to escape from danger.”

“For what does the body need the defense?”

“That is, of course, for survival. The final goal of any living thing is to make the descendants prosper.”

“As for us Kildren, we cannot make our descendants thrive, even if we continue to live.”

“Correct.”

“In short, we are already pretty much dead, aren’t we?”

“No, in modern times, humans generally choose a lifestyle in which they are not involved in the prosperity of their offspring. No one lives a life with such a simple mindset anymore.” She shook her head horizontally. “It is because our brains have become complicated. But, some parts of our bodies and minds are still based on primitive mechanisms.”

She started preparing for our meal. The time was approaching 15:00. *Is it her lunch? Has she not eaten anything yet?* I did not ask her about it. I got her permission and walked to see the airplane in the adjacent garage.

It was a two-seat practice airplane with a four-cylinder horizontally opposed engine. I recalled that I had piloted the same type just once in the distant past. *Where did I fly this type of airplane?* Probably, it was in the days of aeronautical school. Anything other than that was not likely to be the case. I forgot the name of the aircraft type. There were traces of the repeated paintings on the airframe. There was neither the manufacturer name nor aircraft type name left on it to be seen. Its

propeller blades were made of wood. By touching their curving parts, I could check out the smoothness.

I got on the main wing and entered the cockpit in the rear part. The part of the fuselage behind me was upholstered, just like the wings were. Some of the meters and gauges had been removed, and round holes remained on the aluminum plate. It was an airplane just for low-altitude, visual flights. The wires around the base of the control stick were double-lined and still new. *Did she perform acrobatic maneuvers, or something?*

Since I had not expected to sit on the seat of an aircraft, I was so delighted. I grabbed the control stick with my right hand. There was no trigger for a machine gun. It was a thin, light control stick like a cane. I moved it a little. As the main wings were visible toward the upper direction, I could observe the aileron movements quite well. A fuel tank was above me. *Is it made of zinc alloy? It is like a hot-water bottle.*

I closed my eyes.

Ah, I might be satisfied, even if I die here now.

If I have a switch on my body, I think I can turn it off at this point.

I had such a calm feeling. Just for that, it was worth running away to this place.

-3-

While we were having a meal, I heard some sounds outside the house. She stood up swiftly and walked to a window to see outside.

“It’s the police.” She looked back at me. “Sorry. Go up to the loft and hide in there.”

I stood up and looked around the room. Then, I grabbed my jacket and walked to the back of the room. As I saw her bringing my dish to the kitchen, I climbed up the ladder.

There were a mattress and a blanket in the loft. A small lamp, several books, and notebooks were piled up at the corner of the space.

I decided to hide in the blanket. But, if someone came up to this space, then I

would be found easily.

I heard a vehicle approaching. It seemed that she opened the door and got outside.

Silence prevailed. I only heard the sound of a car door opening just once. I could not hear the conversation. Without a window, I could not see outside at all from this attic.

I wrapped myself from head to foot with the blanket, and kept on closing my eyes.

I will check the runway later. When I have to do so, I can just get on the biplane and take off. Does the engine have the starter? I recalled how the cockpit looked like. I thought there was no such switch. Still, she flew the plane by herself. The most challenging part would be the time during which the plane would be towed to outside.

Again, I heard the sound of the car door. Then, a little later, a loud noise echoed. It seemed that someone was getting into the house.

I kept still in the blanket.

A creaking sound. *Is it the ladder?*

Someone is climbing up.

I may be done here.

Then, I felt someone just near me.

Suito Kusanagi is shooting at me. I saw the illusion at the moment.

The blanket was pulled off. At the same time, a hand touched my body.

It was her.

“That’s okay. They went back.” She whispered to me.

“Why has the police come here?”

“Well, I am still in such a position. Sheriffs sometimes come to see me. They confirm that I am alive here.”

“Did the topic about me pop up during the conversation?”

“No.” She shook her head horizontally. “No worries.”

She lay down beside me.

Then, she put her arms around my back, and brought her body close to mine.

“Oh, it is a nostalgic feeling for me. You know, I have been living alone. I have forgotten about such warmth of humans. Sorry. Do you mind?”

“No.”

“If so, may I stay here like this just for a while?”

“Sure.”

She embraced me tightly as a child would do.

“Just by doing this, I am ...” Her voice and breath caressed my ear. “Oh, I feel so happy. Hey, aren’t you recalling the memory of your childhood?”

She was looking delighted. I could sense that her body was quivering a little. I did not understand why she was mentioning the time in childhood. Was she referring to the memory, in which her mother embraced her? *Or is she implying that she played such a game with her friend?*

I too put my arms on her back and drew her body close to me. Little by little, her body temperature was being transferred to me. She touched my hair and stroked it gently. I kept silent. Although I thought about what to say, I could not come up with it.

“While doing this, don’t you become composed?” She asked.

“No, not in particular.”

She seemed to be smiling slightly. I felt it with the subtle vibration of her body.

“I don’t think such medical treatment is good.” The strength of her embrace on me was weakened. “It might be counterproductive. That’s a problem.”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Thank you for accepting me.” Her voice sounded joyful. “It’s mysterious. All pilots I know are not aggressive at all. Same to you, too. I thought you were more sensitive. But, you are not such a type at all. Very calm and gentle.”

“While on duty, I become sensitive.”

“Yes, but I wonder why? Why do gentle people like you fight in the sky while shedding each other’s blood? Why do you and your enemies shoot at each other?”

“Well, I’m not sure,” I answered just with the words.

I knew the reason.

It is entirely the same as the reason why she and I are embracing each other. We embrace the opponents with the control stick to assure the one’s warmth, and turn the machine gun toward the target as if in kissing him or her.

Is this love?

Is that love?

She became silent.

I stayed quiet as well.

After a couple of her breathing, she started separating herself from me. She got up, smoothed her hair once, smiled at me, and put her feet on a tread of the ladder.

“Aren’t you tired? Why don’t you sleep for a while?”

“No, I slept on the train along the way.”

“Do you have anything you want to do?”

“What about the meal?”

“Oh, that’s right.” She uttered. “Sorry. You are not done, are you? I put away your dishes. I will warm it up and serve you again.”

“No, I don’t need that. I am afraid that you were not done with the meal.”

“Umm, I’m okay as well.”

“May I take a walk around here?” I asked her while getting up.

“Taking a walk? But it is cold, and there is nothing interesting around here.”

“It is much colder in the sky, and literally there is nothing up there.”

“Well, you’re right.” She curved her lips and nodded. “There might be a wider variety of things around here than there is in the sky.”

She said my jacket was not enough for the cold weather, and allowed me to borrow a fur coat. It was the one as if a hairy animal twined around my neck. I did not quite prefer to bury my face into it. However, since I thought it was rude for me to decline the offer from her, I decided to wear it and went outside. She gave me the rough geographical information about a route to pass through the grassland.

“Do you want me to come along?” She asked.

“No, that’s okay. I will be back soon.”

I started walking. When I looked back on the way, she was still seeing me off at the door of the cabin.

What I wanted to check most was the runway. I was walking on the slope. From the place around the cabin, the grassland was gently sloping downward. There were few flat grounds. Still, the short runway, which was about 200 meters short, was constructed in the vicinity. Beyond it, a grassy land stretched endlessly. The biplane could take off from each direction. Only when the wind blowing from the mountain was strong, I should be careful because the plane would be carried away downward. If not, it would not be so difficult. However, of course, I imagined that the variety of weather conditions that would enable me to fly would be limited, compared to that for the flat lands. *Actually, fairly strong wind is blowing now like it is dancing around.*

Only the higher part of the mountain behind me could be seen. The vicinity near the road was cloudy and vague. I could recognize from the distance that just the area of the cabin and the hangar appeared to be elevated, with the white rock formation below them. The grassland spread below me, and I saw a pond, located hundreds of meters from me. And then, I saw a blackish forest. All other things in the view were encased in hazy mist, and they appeared to be connected boundlessly with the clouds in the sky.

While staring at the view, I could mistake it for the place away from the ground, namely heaven. *Kusanagi might have shot me in the phone booth of the train station. The train might have changed the destination, and I have arrived at heaven, perhaps. In that case, she is no longer in a trial. She might have died in prison and have come here.* That is what I would

imagine.

However, if this place were heaven, then I would have expected more people to welcome me. *I mean, I believe that not a few people among my acquaintances should have been transferred to heaven.*

I walked to the end of the runway and turned back. Then, I went down on a small path in the deep grassland to the opposite direction. Occasionally, small white rocks appeared on the ground. Were they fragments falling from the rock face above? As I walked for a while, I entered an open space with a hollow land and a muddy place was in it. I saw a house-like building beyond it. *That is probably the house next door. The distance would be about 500 meters from her cabin. Can the neighbor hear a gunshot from the distance? At least, if the biplane takes off, the neighbor cannot hear the sound.*

The sky was sunk in gray as usual, and I could not see the sun. The air was wintry. But, it did not seem to be about to rain. The temperature was not below zero. I even felt the wind was a bit warm.

I saw something flying. *It's a bird.* I stopped walking and followed the flight track. While making a banking move, it maintained its altitude. It appeared to climb up with the ascending current. *Is it a hawk? It might be looking for prey on the grassland.* Although I waited for a while, it did not descend.

After walking for a little more while, I found a blackish rock formation, and sat on it to take a rest. Only because the road was not flat, I was more tired than expected. I thought I could walk forever, unlike flying. It was not quite the case. Walking also tired me out.

I looked up at the sky. I could not find the hawk anymore. *If it were an enemy aircraft and I lost it, it would have meant an extremely dangerous situation. But I need not worry about it.* Recognizing the fact made me chuckle. I was surprised I could actually laugh alone. Moreover, it was when I was on the ground.

I looked around. The hawk fluttered its wings and took off. Its hunting seemed to be done. It was holding something.

I put both hands backward on the ground, and looked up at the sky.

It was when I noticed it.

One aircraft appeared from the clouds and was approaching me. Then, I heard

the delayed engine sound.

It descended to the altitude near the ground, choked the engine, and headed along the slope for the direction of her house. It gained the altitude and started turning.

It's a fighter aircraft.

I was shocked. Then, I hid myself behind the rock. *But, I am not on the aircraft now. I need not to hide. Fighter aircrafts do not shoot at ones on the ground.*

The aircraft was already fairly far from me, and I could see her getting out of the cabin. She must have noticed the approaching aircraft.

When it turned and descended toward the ground again, it dropped something small. It was falling straight toward the ground.

As the engine sound was getting louder, the fighter aircraft climbed up. In an instant, it disappeared into the clouds. It was a splendid climb. Only a few types of aircraft could execute such a maneuver. I had seen that particular aircraft type in the past. I could not recall the name, though. It might be a remodeled version or a new model that I did not know. It might be mounted with a new engine. *It is not the model my company uses. This means that it's an enemy aircraft.*

Is this area in such a region? I was stunned. *It might be in a neutral zone, I had thought. I understand that bombers pass through any regions. However, if fighter aircrafts enters this area, then it means that there is an airbase or an aircraft carrier on the sea, not too far away. Ocean? It can't be. The sea has got to be very far from here. But, of course, this area is not quite outside the flight range from the ocean. The notion of their reaching here is not impossible.*

Or, is there an organization that uses the fighter aircraft for purposes other than for war? For example, for what? It is not for mail delivery, is it? It is like operating a combat tank to plow a field.

The aircraft appeared above the clouds.

I let my eyes follow the track. The crisp shadow of the aircraft was running on the white clouds.

The one let its wings go vertical, and it made a turn. I too fell in the same direction.

We both looked above to locate each other, and my body was being pushed

against the seat.

My left hand holding the throttle lever was waiting.

My right hand holding the control stick was standing by to make the next move.

The airframe creaked, the air whistled, and vapor was streaming at the edge of the wing.

The windshield chattered. The polycarbonate was being warped.

A feint maneuver.

Then, bringing it back immediately.

The radius of the turning circle gradually decreased, and the acceleration increased.

Cutting into the circle.

The opponent was coming.

The concept of up and down had already vanished.

We passed by each other, so closely that the wings almost made mutual contact.

It was too close for shooting.

Looking back.

I made the quick observation of the space behind me desperately.

High throttle.

Which way?

Left.

Roll and turn over.

Start diving.

That was the downward.

The airframe was vibrating.

Is one of the cylinders grumbling?

The opponent was ascending toward me.

Roll over, and go inverted.

However it may turn out to be, now is the time.

I let it slide with the rudder, and made the adjustment.

The one was sliding obliquely, too.

Come on.

My right hand was waiting.

Bring it on.

I shot.

I saw the sparks flying off from the other's machine guns.

I banked to the right immediately.

The world seemed to be revolving in the opposite direction.

I pushed down the elevators.

Engine slowdown.

Trying to locate the opponent.

Where is it?

Inversion.

Where?

I found it behind me.

It's fast.

It is climbing.

Up.

Entering the stall.

Just go down faster.

Am I about to be shot?

Facing the ground, I was falling.

High throttle.

I was being absorbed.

Making a roll by using the torque effect.

I let it dive fast.

The one was flying toward me from my side, but I managed to dodge it.

Falling even more.

Shall I choke the engine?

I followed the opponent.

It started turning steeply.

It is too late for me to recover.

I lunged into the clouds.

At the time, I opened my eyes.

I was having difficulty in breathing. My pulse was beating fast.

I felt as if the opponent was just about to appear from the cloud before me. *I'm relieved. It already isn't around here. By the way, why did I make a mistake? No, it could not possibly turn so steeply. Despite the fact that it was just my own illusion, I was getting too pessimistic.*

I tried to stabilize my breath. I shook my head, and ejected the delusion that was possessing me. *Indeed, this is the delusion, which I suffer from when the drug efficacy wears off.*

The aircraft I saw earlier is also just an illusion?

I looked at the direction of her cabin.

I found her walking toward me. She was still more than 300 meters away from me. There was no way that she could recognize my current coordinate.

I went down from the rock to a narrow path.

Then, I climbed up toward her.

“Sagara.” Her name poured from my mouth. *Is it the second time?*

Of course, her name is Sagara. She is a scientist.

Why have I come here to rely on her?

I had to think about the reason.

-5-

I joined her in the middle of the grassland. I thought she was going back to her cabin. She kept on going down the path. Then, she passed by the blackish rock formation I had been sitting on, and started climbing from the forking trail. The sight, which I had not been able to see, was appearing.

I wanted to ask her about the fighter aircraft. However, because she continued to walk, I followed her without saying anything. She would speak first if she wanted to. As a side note, she was not carrying anything. Although I witnessed that something dropped from the aircraft, she did not seem to have picked it up.

We got on a rocky stretch. Relatively tall plants grew thick just around the area. They were not weeds, but the height was not tall enough to be classified as trees. Steep slopes rose sharply from the place, and the moss-like substances were attached to the blackish rocks. There was no road beyond that point. We could not go up without climbing the rocks that were like stairs for giants.

When we stepped on the first rock, she stopped.

I looked at the view that was opening up below me. It was too hazy for me to appreciate an unobstructed sight. Still, I could see the meadowland below, surrounded by the fan-shaped forest. It sloped to both left and right almost symmetrically. I could roughly estimate that this coordinate was the essential part of the landform.

“When I come here, I feel the urge for wanting to fly.” She said, and took a deep breath. “But I should do it in summer. It is too cold now.”

“I saw a fighter aircraft,” I told her. I reconsidered that it would be unnatural if I did not talk about it.

“Right. It seems to visit here occasionally.”

“For what purpose?”

“Who knows ...”

“To deliver mail?” I asked.

She looked at my face. Then, she relaxed her lips slowly.

“Correct.” It was her answer.

My mind became clearer again. In short, I thought it became clear several times, but it was still murky. *So, I'm not sure if the current shape is my original condition.*

She walked toward me, and climbed up to the rock as if she wanted to stop me. *In other words, does she not want me to know anything about the object the aircraft dropped? I wonder if she is cheating on me. Indeed, it is nothing more than a mail delivery. Which means she somehow communicated with the aircraft.*

But it was her freedom. Although it might be forbidden in this region, it had nothing to do with me, at least. It was a very natural thing. *None of my business.*

So, I had immediately decided to break away from this topic. I had an urge to push down the control stick to execute a half-roll maneuver.

“Do you actually think the pilot of the aircraft can see you during such a flight?” She inquired.

“No, that’s impossible,” I answered. I was sure about that. It was not a matter of eyesight. In terms of the angle of the flight orientation, it was impossible for the pilot to see me.

“I’m relieved.” She uttered. “So, do you have an opinion or a question about this view?”

“No, nothing in particular.”

“Well, then, shall we go back? Or do you want to take a walk a little more?”

“Well. You know, I have not walked all so much yet.”

“There is no path in the direction. If you want to walk, you may want to go that way.” She pointed toward the direction of her cabin. “A pond is there. A beautiful pond. You can launch a boat there.”

“Where is the boat?”

“We have to bring it by car. Shall we go there tomorrow?”

“If we have tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow will come.”

Her reply was filled with confidence. I was a bit relieved about the fact that there was actually tomorrow for her.

We got off the rock formation, and made the return trip along the trail in the grassland.

“What life do you want to live?” She asked while walking.

“What do you mean by what life?”

“If you cannot make a comeback as a pilot, how do you think you can live a life?”

“I think I cannot make a comeback anymore.”

“If you think so, I am a bit relieved.”

“I cannot imagine what life it will be. But, maybe, I can live whatever life I desire. I don’t dislike working. However, a working environment, in which I have to communicate with many people, will not probably suit me.”

“Why?”

“When communicating with someone, I have so many things to think about to the extent that I get exhausted.”

“Ah, I know how you feel. So do I.”

“By the way ...” I had decided to talk about the issue. “If you shelter me, will you not have to deal with troubles?”

She stopped suddenly and looked back.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m worried if my staying here will have you in danger.”

“Oh, of course, I cannot deny the notion of danger.”

“Really. If that is the case, then I cannot stay here for too long.”

“No, you are wrong about that.” She was staring fixedly at me. “If I don’t want the situation, I would not have invited you in the first place. By the time I visited your patient room, I had already made up my mind.”

“But.”

“Don’t worry.”

“I don’t want to give you trouble ...”

“That’s not trouble. As you pilots do, I fight, too. I once thought I had to give it up. I can say that everything is my fault. So, I just try to do my duty. Rather, I guess you are the one who is in trouble because of me. Be honest, and tell me.”

“No, honestly speaking, I have no place to go, even if I leave here.”

“If so, do not say such a thing anymore.”

“However, I cannot stay here forever.”

“Forever, you say ...” She looked down. Then, she started strolling again. “Right, I don’t have a prospect of such a distant future. To begin with, I don’t think my life will continue for so long. Probably, an assassin will come here and shoot me someday in the future. I can project only such a future.”

“Who will kill you?”

“I still have the data that no one else has. I kept it in a place where no one can easily find even if I am killed. But, it will be better if I am killed. Probably, they will force me to confess by injecting drugs or torturing me.”

“You can just disclose such dangerous data.”

“Right.” She nodded while looking forward. “I wonder what justice this is. What mission is it? Ethics? Or, it might be nothing more than the pride. I’m not sure. But that’s okay. I will kill myself before being caught by them. You know, I always carry a gun.”

“I do not know well the thing called science. Is it such a wonderful thing?”

“What?”

“I mean, is it attractive enough to make you so obstinate?”

“Ah, I see. You think so ... Yes, you might be right. But, if you say so, is your fighting in the sky such a wonderful thing?”

Her counter-inquiry made me understand it in an instant. *Ah, that’s the same*, I thought.

“We fight in the airspace of science against something.” She looked back and smiled. “It does not involve an aircraft piloted by a human.”

“Who pilots it?”

“No, it is not an aircraft in the first place. The opponent whom we have to shoot down is an angel.”

“Angel?”

“Right. It might be a demon, though. But they are both the same beings.”

“Same beings?”

Her mysterious talk ended at that point. The trail slope was getting gentler, and we were close to her cabin. She started running to the center of the vast grassland. I stopped and watched her.

At a point about 100 meters from me, she crouched down. She seemed to be picking up something. Probably, I guessed that it was the thing that the aircraft dropped.

It might be a bone of an angel, I thought.

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The supper was also frugal, but I was not dissatisfied with it at all. She opened a wine bottle and drank it. She offered it to me, but I did not take it. I was about to be drunk just by the scent.

I heard a small electric sound. She stood up and walked toward a wall. Then, she picked up the receiver. I had not noticed that the telephone was there. It was hidden in the books that were piled up.

“Yes ...” With a cautious look on her face, she replied.

She took a look at me. She did not smile. She was listening over the phone for a while.

“From now?” She checked the clock. “Oh, umm, of course, I can. But what will we talk about?”

Then, she kept silent again.

“Okay. I suppose it will not take long ... Well, do you know the address? Yes ... right. Okay ...”

She put the receiver back to the phone, and walked toward me.

There was no table in the room, and we were using a stepladder, which she brought from the kitchen, and which was placed between the two of us, as a table. I was sitting on a wooden chair, and she was on a wooden crate. She took the wine bottle from the floor and poured it into the glass, which was on the lower tread of the stepladder. She sipped the wine.

“Someone is coming here at such a late hour. Talk about having no common sense.”

I looked at the clock on the wall. If it was right, it was 15 minutes to 20:00. I did not think that a visit at that time on the clock would not be so thoughtless. However, it might be considered to be out of common sense in this region.

She tilted the glass and drank up the red liquid. I noticed that the skin around her eyes were turning pink. I thought she had already drunk a lot. The bottle was black, and I could not see inside it. I could not tell how much she had consumed it.

I said nothing. I thought she would tell me what I should do. So, I just waited.

“I think you can hide in the loft above.” She said.

“Okay.”

“You know, it is cold in the hangar.”

“I don’t dislike it. I can hide in the biplane.”

“No, that option will be more dangerous. The potential visitor might say he wants to see what is in it. However, if he decides that he wants to check out a lady’s bedroom, I can deny it, right?”

“Who is coming here?” I asked. I was not interested in the topic, but I felt I had to do so as a courtesy.

“He works for a newspaper company.” She said briefly. “Well, his name is, Somanaka? I think that’s what I heard. Do you happen to know him?”

“No,” I answered. “I might recognize the one if I see the face. But, I hardly remember people’s names. I cannot recall even aircraft names. Place names, neither.”

“Do you remember my name?”

“Sagara.”

“Thank you.” She smiled. “What is my first name?”

“Aoi.”

“I’m glad. Am I somewhat of a special entity to you?”

“Maybe.”

She sighed. Then, she raised the bottle and was about to pour it to the glass. But, she looked at the clock in the middle of the process, and gave it up.

“How soon will he come here?” I asked.

“He made a phone call at the station. So, it will still take more than 20 minutes from now.”

“By car?”

“No one can come here by any other means of transportation.” She stood up. “So ... Are you done? Did you eat enough?”

“Thanks. Yes, I’m full.” I stood up. “I will put them away.”

“No, I got this.”

We brought the glass and dishes to the kitchen. She washed almost all of them. The water was shockingly cold, to the extent that it nipped my hands.

I went up to the attic and wrapped myself in the blanket. While climbing up the ladder, I saw her putting on a pair of glasses. *Despite getting drunk, will she pretend to have been working?*

After that, I became sleepy and dozed off. I was not in bad condition. Since I ate unusually much food, I felt my body was heavier, more or less. *But I need not worry about my weight if I don’t get on an aircraft.*

After all, I no longer have anything to do with anyone. I am just an existence that a scientist is interested in as a kind of specimen like a fossil. I am here probably because she needs to collect data for her experiments, I thought. I was not dissatisfied with that notion at all. I felt no inconvenience about it. If I cannot pilot an aircraft, then I have nothing that I want to do and nowhere to go. I have no one to want to meet and nothing that I want to buy.

I lay down, pulled the blanket to cover the lower half of my face, and stayed still.

Why am I still living?

I think it is mysterious.

Even though I want to do nothing, is it okay for me to live?

I am neither sad nor lonely.

No anger. No indignation.

Happy things and joyful things are already far from me.

I might not need emotions anymore.

I am just living like a machine.

But, I feel that such a way of living is pure and comfortable for me.

Conversely speaking, why do we have the thing called emotion?

We think about things that do not exist. Selfishly, we get angry or feel sad.

Then, we try to tell others about them.

People who have settled in the swamp called earth.

While we mix with each other.

Such a surplus.

We ended up being wrapped in sticky substances.

Now, I still do not have such stuff.

Thanks to that, I feel free.

If I choose to live in this muddy swamp from now on.

Will I become a sticky being before long?

The sticky substance makes my body heavier and heavier.

In the case, I will never be able to fly anymore.

Aside from that.

Before I fall into such a situation.

I want to fly to the sky, just once more.

Then.

There.

Is it possible for me to die?

Ah, it is so wonderful to the level that I make a sigh.

Splendid.

Indulgence.

I want such a serene thing.

But, I was no longer in the position that would allow me to choose the option.

The current version of me has sunk in the swamp completely.

Too late.

I'm afraid that I seem to have to admit the fact.

I am no longer a child.

I cannot be a child forever.

It is natural, eh?

The usual thing, this is.

When I closed my eyes, I felt as if my body were floating in the air.

I'm sinking now, aren't I?

I'm in the middle of sinking.

I will soon reach the bottom of the swamp.

My head went down, and my legs were lifted. I felt such gravity.

I repeated my breath slowly.

I had a premonition that I would see the illusion of being shot.

I want to be shot.

I want her to shoot me.

I want to experience the heat within my heart just once more.

The cold, wet glass.

The bullet, which had penetrated my body, made a web-shaped crack on the glass.

Blood.

Red.

Hot.

My body slipped off.

Stalling.

Flying inverted.

Dive.

The sound like howling echoed deep in my ears.

It was gradually getting louder.

What sound is this?

Is it the sound generated within my body?

My heart beat like drums and echoed like machine guns.

When I opened my eyes, the sky spread there, as I expected.

The windshield was clear. No misty part and no crack.

Clouds.

White.

Cold.

Inversion.

Is it the direction toward the ground?

Toward the black ground.

Rolling.

Looking back.

A propeller and a cowling.

The engine is in good condition.

I looked at both wings. The white vapor streaks were streaming at the edges.

Zippering through the air, I was descending.

My body was about to float up from the seat.

My right hand resumed the grip on the control stick.

I seemed to have been dreaming.

Where is the enemy aircraft?

Flying inverted.

Up.

My body sank deeply in the seat.

Half-rolling.

Looking around.

Half-rolling again.

Searching for the opponent.

Where did it go?

There is no place to hide in.

Gone.

No sign of it above me.

I checked below me again.

Downward was the least visible.

I strained my eyes.

The thin white streak was moving.

That's it.

I felt relieved.

Yes, I have just brought it down.

I shot the one with my right hand.

I had forgotten about it.

How many times have I repeated it?

When I come to, I'm moving subconsciously.

I'm fighting unconsciously.

Maybe, I knew that method would allow me to do it faster.

My instinct bypassed my will, and I was flying reflexively.

Then, I came to, or I recovered consciousness.

I was struck by the feeling as if I had been dreaming.

It was like the sensation after I had had a long dream.

The heart beat fast.

Having trouble breathing.

My body had been in an extreme condition.

But my mind had been sleeping.

I could no longer remember what the dream was about.

For the time being, I was descending while turning. I watched the falling enemy aircraft. Right, this was the last one. Then, I was also the final survivor on my side. There was no aircraft in the sky, except for mine.

It became tranquil.

I am alone now.

As I repeated breathing, I sweated profusely.

I could not remember how I could finally win the tight dogfight. In short, the opponent was formidable by that much. Right, judging from the roughness of the flight, the pilot was likely to be young. If he were more refined, he might have been much more formidable. To have to encounter me was such a misfortune for the enemy pilot. But I was not sure. It might have been fortune. I might have been the unlucky one. That day might have been the best day for me to go down. As I thought so, I started chuckling.

What is so funny?

I am getting drunk.

I transmitted a pulse radio signal to communicate with the airbase, but I got no

response.

Anyway, I had faith in the magnet, and decided to return toward the direction that the compass indicated. *Check the meters. No sign of malfunctioning.* I took off the goggles, and felt that my hair was cold like a slug.

I rubbed my eyes.

Then, when I opened my eyes again, the gray wall was in front of me. My right hand was grabbing the edge of the blanket.

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It appeared that a man was entering the house.

“Have a seat there.” She said.

“Ma’am, sorry about my visiting at such a late hour.”

“Of course, it’s a late hour.”

“I apologize. But I want to see you as soon as possible. Umm, do you live here alone?”

“Well ... It’s a matter of privacy.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“You are Mr. Somanaka, right?”

“I am Somanaka. What I want to ask you about is Suito Kusanagi, of course.”

“I think I do not know anything that you are yet to know.”

“But, I heard you two were childhood friends.”

“There were many childhood friends other than me. I was not that close to her, in particular. It was only to the extent that I just saw her at school.”

“How did you feel when you heard Captain Kusanagi had died in the latest massive battle?”

“Well, at the time, I was kept in custody by the police. I did not know the news of her death. I was informed of it about one month after that.”

I was shocked.

Probably, yes, I felt as if I could see my face that was showing the stunned state.

Suito Kusanagi died?

Was she shot down?

I did not know that.

A massive battle? Half a year ago ...?

Come to think of it, almost all the aircrafts took off.

They were summoning pilots.

Two mighty forces collided with each other in the sky.

I was reminded of the memory.

Yes, that was terrible.

Smokes and fragments were dancing in my mind.

Explosions and vibrations.

Flashing lights and volatile smokes.

It was as if the sky itself was being shaken.

The number was too massive.

The enemies were too numerous.

Like bees, there were many of those.

They were scattered like fireworks.

At the time.

What did I do?

Did I survive?

I don't remember it well.

Could I return to the base? I don't have such a memory.

Was it shot down as well?

But, who shot Kusanagi down?

Was there anyone who could shoot her down?

If there was the one, it must have been the Teacher.

No one other than him could accomplish such a feat.

The Teacher?

Suddenly, I recalled the name. The information pertaining to its identity was getting caught at the edge of my memory. I tried to grab it like I was picking up paperclips with my fingertips, but they slipped out of my hand.

Whom is it about?

But, surely, I remembered the name.

Then.

Did Suito Kusanagi die?

I could recall her face clearly. Moreover, I could vividly imagine her thin white fingers, which put the gun against my chest.

Before I knew it, I was trembling a little.

It was not cold.

I was not scared.

Probably, it was the quiver with excitement to fight.

I grabbed the blanket firmly, and held my breath.

I felt I had to listen to the conversation between the two below.

“I was quite disappointed. While she was alive, I wanted her to notice it.” The man was speaking. “I wanted her to notice the fact that she was being used.”

“I think she noticed it,” Sagara commented.

“Really. But she did not quit flying. She did not stop fighting.”

“I think that’s a different story. Well, pardon me for asking you this, but have you decided to come here to talk about such a thing?”

“Oh, pardon me. I was getting sentimental. Anyway, I had a good impression of Captain Kusanagi. I don’t have the slightest intention of driving her into a difficult

situation. It is completely opposite of that. I want you to understand the circumstances. I am not the kind of person who try to proceed with the antiwar movement by brandishing idealistic theories.”

“If so, what brought you here?”

“Um, I’m not sure ... At first, right, I had such a tendency. It was the theme that my company granted me. I was asked to cover Kildren and describe the warped images of humans. The story would bring the peace of mind to the general public. By feeling pity for the children being involved with the acts of war, people can make sure of their own peace. But, the more I learned to know such theories, the more I realized that we were wrong. Kildren are not warped. Those who are warped are not Kildren, but us.”

“Right. You are fortunate because you have realized it.”

“Yes, sure. Next, I started thinking that they were the victims. They were those who were created by this warped society and by the distorted beings called humans. However, that notion was also wrong. They are not the victims, to say the least. Rather, they are the victors who have much more dignity than we have. The victims are adults, the majority. We are the pitiful ones. Until I learned to accept the fact, I had been mired in the internal conflict to quite a bit of extent. Why should I regard the participants of war as victors? Why? No matter how much I thought about it, I could not find the answer. In short, in the end, I had to come down to just one question. That is, why do we hate the act of war? Why so? Are we just plain cowards? When I was giving thoughts about such a matter, I met Captain Kusanagi. You know, I talked with her. And then, I came to the realization. I was convinced. If someone meets with them just once, it would become obvious. Or, by looking into their pure, beautiful eyes. They are the true eyes that humankind originally owned.”

“I understand what you are saying. Partially, though.”

“Forgive me. I am the type of person who speaks too much. I have started thinking that I want to convey my current feeling to as many people as possible. To realize it, I need the truth. Just a fairy tale would not work well. By writing an article based on the truth, I want to make an appeal to many people for my sentiment toward Kildren.”

The man then shut his mouth.

Silence prevailed for a while.

“What do you want to know?”

“I heard that Kildren can become the existence that is not Kildren. Is that right?”

“I don’t know.”

“Doctor, since you discovered the fact, you got involved in the mess.”

“Mess?”

“Pardon me. Am I wrong?”

“I cannot say a sure thing. You know that the police arrested me and the case is under trial, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“The word ‘mess’ is not suitable, and I am the cause of the chain of disturbances. It is not that I got involved in the commotion.”

“You have been researching Kildren, right?”

“No. My specialty is biology. I admit that I am interested in genetic issues, but Kildren is not my specialty. I think laypeople would not understand it.”

“I guess you know the pilot named Kurita.”

“Yes.”

“You must have met him, I believe.”

“Of course, I have. He is an acquaintance of the pilot, who was close to me.”

“The pilot, close to you, was Mr. Honjo?”

“Correct.”

“You approached Mr. Honjo for your research.”

A brief silence.

“You should leave here now.”

“I apologize. I did not want to hurt your feelings. I just thought you might speak candidly after I tell you what I already know. Please forgive me.”

“Either way, I don’t have any information you want to obtain.”

“I heard Mr. Kurita was dead.”

“Oh, really.” She replied.

“Have you already known so?”

“No.”

“There’s a rumor that Mr. Kurita escaped from the hospital. Then, he ran away with a prostitute. But, in the end, he was found and shot.”

“I can’t believe it ... Why was he shot? The police could not possibly do that.”

“The one who found him was not the police, but his superior did. It seemed that the order was to shoot him to death when he was found. In such a case, the killing is outside the jurisdiction of the law and processed just in the company as if it is the war-related issue. It is not regarded as a crime.”

“I think you appear to know who shot him.”

“Captain Kusanagi shot him. I said it was a rumor, but, that is not true. I just lied about it. I heard it directly from her.”

“You ask me to believe that?”

“No, whether you believe that or not does not matter.”

“Then, what do you want me to do?”

“For tonight, yes, I should leave now. Please do not have a bad impression on me. I just want to understand. I want to understand them deeply. I think they wish to be understood by someone.”

“They really do?”

“I’m not sure. But at least, I hope so. I mean ...” He paused once.

I cannot see his face, but his voice is familiar to me. I started noticing. It seems that I have met this man, who is speaking, before.

“So, anyway, I want to know them as accurately as possible. Anything is okay. The information is too limited. How were Kildren born, and why are they becoming extinct? Did anything wrong occur? Was it a mistake? If so, they are too

pure. It is to the level that I wonder why those having such pure hearts actually exist.”

“You said, ‘pure hearts.’ It sounds subjective.”

“Oh, I admit that I have taken it too far.”

“I want you to leave now. Still, I would like to say something to you.”

“Okay.”

“Some of humans are Kildren. Also, some of human beings have pure minds. Or, almost all the humans might possess pure minds. However, I suspect that the facts are hidden from the outside.”

“Doctor, is that your opinion?”

“It’s not subjective, but my objective view.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I hope we will see you again. Not at this late hour. Next time, I will make an appointment and come here.”

“That will be nice.”

“If you like, how about having dinner together?”

“You are going too far.”

“I apologize. You know, I just want to listen to your story for as much time as possible. I carelessly ...”

“If you promise me to speak off the record, we might have dinner together.”

“I promise to make it off the record, of course.”

“Are you staying around here for a while?”

“Until the day after tomorrow.”

“Then, if you have another opportunity.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“But I don’t know anything important. You may not want to expect too much. Still, I can talk about what I know about the past.”

“I’m grateful to you. Then, I’m leaving ... Thank you so much. See you next

time.”

“Take care.”

“Oh, by the way. Pardon me, just one more thing ... Doctor, you went to the hospital of NBA about a month ago, right?”

“Yes. How do you know that?”

“I saw you by chance. For what purpose did you visit there?”

“Do I have to answer that?”

“No, not at all. But, if it is not inconvenient for you, I would appreciate it if you do.”

“A friend of mine works for the hospital. I just went to see her about the research.”

“Really ...”

The silence continued for another seconds.

“What about it?”

“When I was passing by that hospital, I saw police vehicles and plain navy-colored cars parked there. I suspected that something had happened there, and asked people around the area. They all answered that they did not know what happened. It was strange and unnatural for them to give me the same answer, I thought.”

“And?”

“Did you hear anything from the friend?”

“No, I did not.”

“It is the reason why I have come here.”

“Oh, so you have come to see me.”

“Right. I remember you were at the hospital then. I thought I had to see you as soon as possible.”

“How come?”

“May I tell you my guess?”

“I’m not willing to. I suppose that your idea is bound to miss the point.”

“Really. Of course, I can give it up. Even if someone other than you were in this place, I would not let out the secret to anyone. I want you to believe it. I am on the side of you, Doctor, and Kildren. I will not definitely do anything that will cause disadvantage to you.”

“Thank you. Your statement has reassured me.”

“So, I am leaving.”

“Goodbye.”

I heard the door being opened and closed. Then, silence.

I was still hidden in the blanket, and stayed still. *I cannot be off guard until she calls me. She did not talk about me. Even if I was getting the impression that the man was on our side, she did not appear to believe him completely. It might be the right thing to do.*

When about five minutes had passed, I heard her voice right beside me.

“That’s okay now.”

I got up and looked down from the attic. She was in the middle of the ladder. She looked upward at me and smiled.

“Were you sleeping?”

“No.”

“So, were you listening to our conversation?”

“I was.”

“Have you met that man?”

“Umm ...”

“Mr. Somanaka, working for YA Newspaper Company.”

“I don’t know,” I answered. I had a feeling that it would be a lie, but I thought it was the right answer at the time.

I got out of the attic and climbed down the ladder.

“What do you think about him?” She put her shoulders on a wall, and crossed her arms.

“I think he might not be a bad person.” I gave her an honest opinion.

“Well, maybe. Anything else?”

“He was talking about the pilot who had let the aircraft crash and died.”

“Yes, what do you think about that?”

“Umm, nothing in particular.” I shook my head.

“Don’t you have any thoughts, such as; ‘It cannot be,’ ‘It is a pity,’ or, conversely speaking, ‘I am envious of him?’”

“I’m not sure.” I shook my head sideways again.

“Sorry, that’s okay. It may not be what you think about all so seriously.

“I have not known that the information about which pilot has died is given to the general public.”

“Well, they announce the report, and their names are posted on newspapers.”

“Oh, really.”

“I suppose many are interested in such things.”

“By the way, he knew you went to the hospital.”

“Although he said he saw me, I believe it was a lie. At the time, I entered there by police vehicle through the back gate. I suppose no one could have seen me. So, someone in the hospital gave him the information, I think.”

“Which means, Mr. Somanaka has known that I was in the hospital.”

“I doubt it. Those working there must have known my face because it had been broadcast on TV. But, I assume your name was not revealed to them. Those who took care of you had to be limited. General staffs could not know who was hospitalized.”

“Was it really that much of top secret? I’m impressed that I could actually escape from such a place.”

“Right.” She smiled. “How did you manage to get out from there?”

“Through the window.”

“On which floor was your patient room?”

“Fourth.”

“Oh my ...” She put her hand on her forehead. “How reckless. Where did you get the rope?”

“Rope? No, I just walked on the eaves and climbed down a drainpipe.”

“You did perform such a daredevil act.”

“It would be hard to reverse the course by turning back on the way.”

She burst into laughter.

Episode 3: Humpty Bump And the box I kept, it's somewhere in the attic now, I must ask Verena please to give it to me, it would be nice to see my first loves again: what is there? a dried honeycomb, an empty hornet's nest, other things, or an orange stuck with cloves and a jaybird's egg – when I loved those love collected inside me so that it went flying about like a bird in a sunflower field.

This excerpt is from *The Grass Harp* by Truman Capote

-1-

On the night, I shared the blanket with her. Except for the loft, there was no place that we could sleep in this cabin. If I slept in the cockpit of the biplane, it would be too cold. It could not be helped because it was an open cockpit. She told me she would buy another blanket if she got a chance to go to a city, though.

I had a dream. I felt I had a lot of dreams. It might be appropriate for me to state, *I have experienced the lives of many people*. Most of them ended disappointingly. There was no such thing as emotional upheaval. I thought I experienced the dreams dispassionately. It was maybe because I was totally used to having a delusion.

In one dream, when I was walking in the market, lots of people came and went. I was suddenly shot from behind displayed merchandises. In another dream, when I was trying to moor a boat in the cool shade of a tree at the waterside, I abruptly felt sick and buried my face against mud. It was impressive for me that each way of dying came along with the sense of sinking deep. It was similar to the acceleration I felt when I was falling while revolving slowly.

In the dreams, I encountered many deaths of other people. One time, my mother died. Another time, my sister died. When I was about to kiss the face in the coffin, someone stopped me. *You should not do that. Drive this nail in the coffin.* The one said, and handed nails and a hammer to me.

The procession in a graveyard. It lasted endlessly. While I was walking on the ground, the rain started falling. But, when I looked up at the sky, it was glittering, and I saw shadows of aircrafts in it.

I left the procession and started to ascend.

The engine was splendid.

The main wings were sucked into the air.

The rudder moved smoothly.

The propeller was like a webbed foot.

The fillet stroked the air gently.

I did not blink.

My eyes caught an enemy aircraft and followed the track.

I will come and get you.

Wait for me.

Everywhere, forever.

I sped diagonally to the airspace above the clouds.

This is the place.

This is the worthiest.

The throttle level at middle-low.

I tilted the wings down slowly and eased up on the angle.

Making a big turn.

The opponent did not escape.

Wonderful.

Now, it's all here.

I have no request.

No wish, either.

Neither beauty nor righteousness.

No words, no reason, no ideal.

Whatever exists up here.

Air.

Two aircrafts.

Then, eyes gazing at each other.

Come on.

Now?

Is this it?

My breathing stopped, and I gauged the distance between us.

I waited.

The creak of the airframe.

He's coming.

Smoothly.

Cleanly.

I tilted the control stick a bit.

My left hand was pushing up the throttle lever gently.

I put my both feet onto the rudder pedals softly.

The engine was dancing.

As the airframe appeared to be craving for acting violently, I calmed it down by adjusting the various control surfaces carefully.

Before long, I let it accelerate straight ahead.

I had the wings oriented vertically like a sword, by flying knife-edge.

The edges of the wings were shining as if they were becoming blades.

The enemy's sword shone for a moment.

Sounds vanished.

Colors faded.

Only the light and darkness spread.

A dot and a dot and a line.

Curves and curves.

Coordinates.

Space.

My right hand touched the trigger.

Right.

Left.

To the right.

To the left, and to the right.

As the airframe quivered slightly, I cut in.

Great.

I was being absorbed into it.

The very sense of my body was vanishing.

My existence no longer consisted of any material.

My mind became hazy.

There was no signal anymore.

In the silence, the last consciousness of mine was floating.

It was flying.

Smoothly.

Fly.

Singularly straight.

I shot.

Turning to the left.

While executing the corkscrew maneuver, I captured the view of the world that appeared to be revolving around me.

I was chasing the enemy who was still alive in it.

Stay alive.

Wait for me.

Once again.

Cross your excellent sword with mine.

The shine.

Up.

Turn.

I directed the nose of my aircraft toward the opponent.

So, once again.

To the right.

Then, I slid to the left.

Making a feint.

Preparing to use the flaps.

Checking the gauge readings in a moment.

Hard banking.

Choking the throttle.

Flaps down.

To the right.

The opponent made a quick move.

Trying it again?

High throttle.

Ailerons.

Bringing the flaps back to the previous position.

I accelerated.

Squeeze. Flaps down.

To the left.

Up. Bringing them back.

Adjustment with the rudders.

I let it skid horizontally.

I felt the acceleration sideways.

It was approaching.

Good, it's fast.

The one is piloting in an interesting way, eh?

This is fun.

To the right.

Checking around.

There was no one else.

Okay, we are alone.

Let's have a good time.

Flying inverted.

I made a dive.

Checking the meters.

Rolling over.

I stabilized the nose vector with the elevators.

Now, it's a showdown.

The wings were shining.

Locking on.

Three, two, one.

Fire.

Break away.

To the right.

Up.

While being inverted, I dove downward.

I looked at the enemy.

Where is it?

Half-rolling.

Is it above me?

It was shining.

White.

Is it the sun?

It is blinding.

I could not hear the engine sound.

“Are you okay?”

It was a woman's voice close by.

When I opened my eyes, it was dark.

Night?

I turned my face sideways. *Is it still at night?*

I felt my body was heavy.

She is right beside me.

“You were being disturbed by a nightmare.”

It was a dream.

I knew it was a dream.

Right, I know everything is a dream.

All of myself are dreams.

Suddenly, I felt slightly sad.

I did not understand why.

“Since you were trembling, I thought I should wake you up ...”

I was still quivering.

I was breathing rapidly.

In the dream, it was so fun.

Why?

“How pitiful ...”

The woman’s hand touched my hair.

It was not pitiful.

She was not right. There was nothing pitiful about me. The sad thing was this reality. The poor thing was my body that was being left in this real world. *I myself can live in my dreams. I can fly there anytime I like. It is splendid. No one else can understand it. The splendor is always with me.*

Even so, due to the reaction to the exquisite excitement, my body might have been shivering. *Like an engine overheats, like the spars of main wings creaking, my breath and pulse might have been pushed to the limits of their capabilities.*

Indeed, I was sweating.

Her face was getting closer to mine.

Her fingers brushed a lock of hair on my forehead.

Her lips touched my forehead.

Then, she also kissed the part of my face near my eyes.

“You’re adorable.” Her mouth moved.

I closed my eyes.

Then, I tried to look into the sky.

The proud sky.

The zing ringing in my ears, like a howling effect, drifted from left to right.

-2-

On the following morning, when I woke up, I heard her voice.

I got up. She was talking to someone below. I soon realized that she was talking on the phone.

“Yes, thanks. So, then, I will bring him there.”

I was waiting for her silently.

I could sense the presence of her getting closer to me and climbing up the ladder.

Her face appeared, and my eyes met with hers.

“Oh, you have already gotten up? Did you happen to listen to my conversation on the phone?”

“No, I just got up. What’s going on?”

“Are you ready to get up now?”

“What time is it?”

I climbed down the ladder.

I washed my face at the kitchen sink. She made me a cup of hot tea.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Hey, I knew you were listening to my phone conversation.”

“Only the last part, though.”

“To the hospital. My friend works there. I think you may want to consult a doctor at least once. You know, I am not a doctor.”

“My condition is not bad at all.”

“Umm, I know that. But you are not normal.”

“Not normal?” I repeated her words.

Yeah, from the beginning, I have, we have not been normal. There's no way I can be normal after all this time.

“Anyway, it is going to be okay. Don't worry. In fact, his specialty is psychology. He would not operate on you or ask you to take medicine.”

“So, what will he do to me?”

“He will just talk with you.”

After changing clothes, I and she agreed to go out together. So as not to be conspicuous, I borrowed her clothes. I wore a knit hat to hide my face and put on sunglasses. Also, I covered half my face with the scarf. When I looked into myself in the mirror, I noticed that I was looking very suspicious. It would have been a surprise for anyone witnessing the person in the mirror that he was not carrying a gun.

The weather was better than yesterday. The car she drove was going down a mountain road. After a lake appeared in the view, we kept on going along a flat, straight road.

“What do you think about the idea of ending the war?” She suddenly asked me while driving.

“It's a difficult question, isn't it?”

“Right, it's difficult.”

“I know someone has such an opinion.”

“So, what do you think?”

“Well, I think it is natural that someone has such an opinion.”

“So, what do you think about those wanting the war to end?”

“I'm not sure. Even if someone wants fistfights to end, the game of boxing will not go away.”

“Yes, that’s right. After all, boxing is a kind of sports.”

“What’s the difference between sports and war?”

“Killing each other is not sports.”

“But, they are the same in terms of competing in skills. In war, we might end up dying, though. Even boxing matches and car races are much more life-threatening than doing nothing, I think.”

“You insist they are the same?”

“No, that’s just an excuse.”

“So, what do you mean?”

“Sports will not disappear because there are people who want to do it and those who want to spectate.”

“You say that the same is the case for war?”

“I’m not sure, but I think it might be the case. Although I don’t want to witness the war, many people seem to crave for it.”

“I doubt it. Many people would feel they don’t want to watch it. That’s how I interpret it. They would want no one to lose their lives for nothing.”

“Fewer people lose their lives for nothing in war than in sports,” I replied.

“But I think it is wrong to find the meaning of life in killing each other.”

“You may be right. I don’t know what is right.”

“You know, human beings originally fought against each other to plunder something, right? If they did not fight, they could not survive. Such conflicts have inevitably existed in the world of living things. Only the winners could survive. However, that is not the case anymore. I believe that, with their wisdom, humans have built the society in which they no longer had to fight against each other.”

“We no longer need to plunder anything. Don’t you think that it is the reason why we can fight purely?”

“But, the lives that were lost will not be brought back. Aircrafts are destroyed. What was born and what was created will end up disappearing.”

“I think it is worth it.”

“Oh, I wonder why you have become that way.” She smiled wryly. “How can I explain this?” She glanced at me once, looked to the front again, and sighed. “I’m not your private tutor, though.”

“Of course, you are not. Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t you have any objection?”

“None.”

“Make an appeal to me for the justification of fighting in the sky, please.”

“No, I can’t. There is no such thing as justification.”

“Still, do you want to fight? Why?”

“I don’t know, but ...” I looked for the right words. There was no such thing, though.

“But?”

“If you fly, you will understand it,” I replied.

“I have flown. I learned to pilot an airplane. But, that scared me a lot.” She chuckled. “Right, I can somewhat understand why you feel comfortable while flying. But, I feel safer when driving a car.”

“Just flying an airplane is different from flying an aircraft and then being engaged in aerial combat.”

“Do you say I should fight in the sky?”

“Yes. By doing so, I believe you can understand how I feel.”

“I think I would never be able to. To begin with, I will probably die before I understand it.”

“Correct. So, only those who understand can survive.”

“Oh, I see ... It is the result of natural selection, I suppose.”

The phrase “natural selection” is slightly different from what I have in mind, I felt. Rather, those who can believe fighting is the act of graciousness will lose their lives one after another. It might be the reason why the descendants of those who think that avoiding to fight is beautiful have

survived. Those who have become extinct after going through the selection are normal ones. The species of Kildren has just been born and are destined to become extinct easily rather than going through the selection processes to disappear eventually.

It was a two-and-a-half-hour drive. We got to a middle-sized city, and she parked the vehicle at a parking lot of a building, which was as big as a school. After getting out of the car, we walked on an asphalt road for about five minutes. The site was so spacious that it looked more like a factory or a research institute than a hospital.

We entered a long, narrow, two-story building and went up the stairs to the back end of a corridor. The notion of security was rather absent, if it was a laboratory. *Is this a facility attached to the hospital?* People walking in the corridors were young ones, wearing regular clothes. I did not see anyone in white coats or those who looked like patients. There was no patient room, either.

She stopped and knocked on a door.

After a moment, the door was opened, and a tall man was standing inside. He was wearing a beard and a pair of glasses. He was in a brown sweater. The pattern on the fabric surface looked as if dust had clung to it.

“Hi.” He held out his hand to shake her hand.

“Hello.”

“Come to think of it, I should have visited your place.” He said in a low voice.
“Now, come in ...”

I bowed and entered the room by following her.

“Last night a person from a newspaper company came to my place. So, I think I should come here.”

“Haven’t you been followed?”

“I think we haven’t.” She replied.

A white desk was at the back of the room, and there was a window on a wall on that side of the room. The blind was pulled down. On one wall was a bookshelf that reached to the ceiling. On the other wall was a cabinet whose interior could not be seen. Two sofas were placed in front of the desk. She took a seat on one of them, and I sat next to her. The man walked to the desk, brought something back,

and sat on the chair opposite us. Then, he put whatever he brought on a table. It looked like a small tape recorder.

“Nice to meet you. I’m a friend of Dr. Sagara’s. My name is Hayase.”

“Nice to meet you.” I bowed slightly.

“Dr. Sagara told me most of the story. Anyway, make yourself comfortable, please. You need not worry about anything. Are you okay?”

I nodded without words.

“Here.” She took an envelope out of her purse. It was folded in two. “I got it yesterday.”

“Okay.” He took it, reached back, and placed it on the desk. Then, he looked back and stared fixedly at me. “Now, umm, yes. In fact, I have not seen a Kildren before. You are the first one. May I ask you several questions?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“What’s your name?”

“Name? You mean, my name?”

“Of course.”

“I cannot recall it.”

“Can you not recall your own name?”

“No.”

“So, what’s her name?” He indicated her with his hand.

“She’s Ms. Sagara.”

“It was the name I spoke of earlier. Do you know her first name?”

“Ms. Aoi.”

“You can remember it.”

“I have retrieved it.”

“Is there anyone else whose name you remember? If it is a person you know, anyone will just do.”

I thought about it. The first person who came up in my mind was a woman with white skin.

“Fuko,” I answered.

“Fuko.” He repeated the name. “Ah, then, do you know what it is?” This time he pointed his finger at the object on the table.

“Is it a recorder?”

“Yes, I’m recording what you speak. But, I promise not to use it for anything other than therapeutic purposes. Do you allow me to do this?”

“I do.”

“Is there anyone whose name you can recall?”

“Err, Suito Kusanagi.”

“Oh, I see. She’s famous.”

“Is she famous?”

“I mean, even I know her.” He smiled. “Perhaps, do you know her personally?”

“No, I don’t remember. I have almost no memory of anything other than the time when I was flying in an aircraft.”

“Don’t you have the memory of when you were a kid?”

“I vaguely remember things that might have happened, and nothing more. But I am not sure if it was a dream, what I saw in a TV drama, or what I read in a book. I do not feel that each memory is mine.”

“Have you been experiencing such a condition for quite a long time?”

“Umm, I’m not sure. What I can recall is, err, the memory since I woke up in the bed in the hospital three days ago, saw a window, and decided to get out of there. I had dreamed before then. Everything that had happened before seemed to be the dreams I had when I was sleeping in the bed. I feel that I have had many dreams. But the more I try to recall them, the less I can retrieve.”

“But, you remember the memories of the situations in which you were flying in an aircraft, right?” She asked from the side.

“Yes, but even these memories might have been dreams,” I replied. “Even if they were dreams, they were much clearer than other memories. By recalling them, my body moves automatically. So ... I wish they were not dreams.”

“Let’s get back to the subject. Do you have anyone you remember?”

“Err, Kurita,” I mentioned the name.

“Kurita ... Kurita who?”

“Jinro. Jinro Kurita.”

“What is the person about?”

“He died.”

“Really ... How?”

“He was shot by Kusanagi.”

“Did you witness the scene?”

“No.”

“So, you heard it from someone?”

“I may be remembering it wrong.”

“Okay ... Do you remember anyone else?”

“Kannami.”

“Sorry?”

“Yuichi ... Kannami.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s a pilot.”

“Anyone else?”

“Umm, that’s all.” I shook my head horizontally.

“Do you remember your father or mother?”

“No.”

“Do you have siblings?”

“Siblings? Err, I might have them.”

“Can’t you recall it?”

“No. I cannot say whether the memory was about my siblings or another persons.”

“Well, really ...”

“Uh.”

“Oh, do you remember something?”

“The Teacher,” I mentioned the name.

“Teacher?”

“Right, that is his name. His codename.”

“Can you picture the image of his face?”

“No ... But I remember his aircraft.”

“Aircraft? What type of aircraft?”

“The propeller is placed on the front part.”

“Isn’t that normally the case?”

“Not necessarily. Another thing, a black cat.”

“Cat? What about a cat?”

“Umm, it probably is a marking on the aircraft.”

“Marking. Is it on his aircraft?”

“Yes.”

“The Teacher gets on the aircraft, correct?”

“Yes.”

“However, you don’t remember the Teacher’s face.”

“I don’t. Because it was dark.”

“Dark?”

“For some reason, I felt that way ...”

“Among those you just mentioned earlier, whom can you picture in your mind the faces of?”

“Fuko and Kusanagi.”

“If so, can you recognize them when you meet them?”

“Maybe.”

“Do they know you?”

“Probably, they know me. Fuko knew me.”

“How about Kusanagi?”

“She intends to kill me. Of course, she knows me.”

“Did you just say that she intends to kill you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure, but it is probably because I made an escape.”

“From the hospital?”

“Right.”

“You mentioned the person, who you said was killed by Kusanagi, didn’t you?”

“It’s Kurita.”

“Pardon me.” She interrupted from the side. “It was the topic that the man named Somanaka was talking about.” She looked at me. “You think that way because you heard the conversation, don’t you?”

“Maybe.” I nodded. But, I felt I had known the information since before the conversation. The credibility of information pertaining to Kusanagi killing Kurita was vague.

“Do you remember any other pilot?”

“Err, umm, I cannot recall any other name.”

“Other than pilots, who else comes to your mind?”

“None ...” I shook my head sideways once. But somehow, there was someone

who got stuck in my mind. “Err, Sasakura. I remember Sasakura.”

“What type of person?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Can you recall the one’s face?”

“If I meet the one, I may be able to.”

“So, let’s change the subject a bit. Well, is there any part in your body that’s not feeling right?”

“No, nothing. Except for my head.”

“Do you think your head is wrong? Why?”

“You know, I cannot recall anything. I don’t even know who I am.”

“Is it because of your head?”

“I think it is.”

“Have you ever gotten injured?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Do you have any part of your body that aches?”

“No.”

“By the way, how old are you?”

“I don’t know.”

“How old do you think you are?”

“About 20 years old.”

“You have seen yourself in the mirror, right?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Have you done so recently?”

“Umm, when I put on these clothes this morning, I looked at myself in the mirror.”

“Do you recognize your face?”

“I don’t have a sense of incongruity. No, I don’t know who the person in the mirror is.”

“But the one appeared to be about 20, right?”

“Yes.”

“It might be rude to say this, but at first sight, I think you look to be 15 or 16.”

“Really.”

“The one in the mirror looked like the one at age 20. I think that you had accumulated that much of life experiences, and expected the one in the mirror to look that way.”

“I’m not sure.”

“Even if you might have felt vague in your mind, the time has passed. It might be the proof that you have been feeling the experiences.”

“I have the feeling that I have had many dreams.”

“Partly due to drug effects.” He said, while taking a glance at Sagara.

“Right.” She nodded. “What I am really worried about is that the overreaction emerges when his medication wears off.”

“How long does it take for the effects of the drugs to wear off?” I asked. “I’m already feeling much better. I think I’m okay now.”

She explained, “No, you still need more time. It requires 48 to 96 hours.”

“What will happen after that?” I asked.

“There are so many things to be reminded of at once, to the extent that you receive the shock. As a consequence, you will try to forget everything. You might never be able to come back to reality. I think it is too risky. But it’s inevitable.”

“Really.” I nodded. *I don’t dislike that*, I thought.

“Don’t be afraid. That’s okay.”

“I’m not afraid.”

“You should be able to alleviate the condition to some extent by continuing to communicate with those closest to you so that you are not alone.”

“So, that is the reason why you told me to see you soon.”

“Yes ...” She nodded, and looked at him again.

“That is the worst-case scenario, and that’s just the way it is in some cases. It is not something you should be worried about.” He smiled. “In fact, your awareness is very solid. What you are saying makes sense. In a way, memory impairment is the evidence of an appropriate defensive response. In other words, by forgetting what you have remembered, the ego is protected.”

“Ego? Do I have it, even though I don’t know who I am?” I asked. It was a little funny, even though it was about me.

“You are who you are. Even if you forget your name, you have not abandoned yourself. A name is a public concept. You do not call yourself by your name, do you?”

I sighed. I tried to smile, but I could not this time. *He might be right*, I thought. *But it’s not just my name that I’ve forgotten. I don’t know my life history. The past is gone. There are only the past few days and the present.*

“Let’s take a short break. Would you like something to drink?”

“Uh, I will take care of that.” She stood up.

“Oh, you do. Thank you. Please.” He half rose from the chair, and said. “Well, after a short break, shall we try hypnosis for a moment?”

“Hypnosis?” I asked.

“It is a type of medical treatment. You might be able to recall what you have forgotten.”

“Isn’t it too soon?” She looked back at the corner of the room. “Well, I mean, his mind may not want to recall anything in the memory yet.”

“Yes, you are right about that.” He nodded. “He must be having a conflict in his mind about it. Right, well, it may surely be too risky now. We’d better not hurry and rush in. So, shall we try it some other time?”

I was wondering if I should tell him, “I want to try it today.” *I want to know about myself. I want to know the information as my own memory, not from someone else’s. The sooner, the better. Why is it risky?*

But I held back and kept my mouth shut. I did not think I was in a position to make an appeal strongly. The two of them were taking on extra troubles for me. I did not know the circumstances, but that was what I could observe. *I can't afford to burden them with the responsibility to take care of me any more than I am doing.*

-3-

After drinking some tea, Sagara and I left the doctor's room and walked on the road to the parking lot. As the parking lot was appearing in sight, she grabbed my arm and pulled me into the space behind the building.

"There is someone in the parking lot." She whispered. "Can you take a look at it and tell me what is going on? You have better eyesight than I do."

I peeked out of the corner of the building and looked at the direction. Then I pulled back my face quickly.

"There are two men. They are watching your car from a distance."

"Turn back and go to the end of the crosswalk of the building that we just left. There is a gate leading to the back street. Get out of there and walk to the west on that road. I'll drive around this area to get to you. All right?"

"Okay." I took sunglasses out of my pocket and put them on.

"If I don't show up in half an hour, go back to the doctor."

"Got it."

She patted my shoulder once and went out. I quickly turned back the way I had come. I walked straight ahead, without looking back, without hurrying. There was no one nearby. I saw a worker pushing a dolly to carry the load and a middle-aged woman on a bicycle. I passed by the bike, but the woman did not even bother to pay any attention to me. I looked behind me for a moment, pretending to follow the bicycle with my eyes. No one was within sight.

I looked up at the sky. *That's right. Enemies would not come from above me on the ground,* I recalled.

Somehow I had a feeling that the danger was imminent. *Someone must be pursuing me, because I escaped from the hospital. Who would be disadvantaged by what I did? That is, of*

course, our company or, in other words, our military. I wonder if they're worried about some kind of security breach pertaining to confidential information. Maybe there was some critical information that I have forgotten. It was not that they could analyze my head to see if I had forgotten about it or not. While I was in the hospital, they were watching me close enough to keep it secret. Now, they probably have no choice but to kill me. That's quite an orderly thing to think about.

That was evident in Sagara's demeanor. She was so frightened. She was even more scared than I was. *What is she so afraid of? Is it my death or hers? It does not seem to me that she would be afraid of something to that degree. Will something greater be lost? If that's the case, what is it?*

I crossed the hallway and went out into the parking lot. Two men with tennis rackets were standing near a hatchback car with its rear door open. One of them saw me, and the other turned toward me. I kept on walking. It looked like a dead-end, but there was a gate located a bit to the right. To the left, a substation-like facility could be seen surrounded by the wire fence.

I walked straight through the gate and got out of the premises. It was a road of about 10 meters wide. I saw a factory-like building across the street. A concrete fence stretched laterally. I walked to the left. That's the west.

The fence on the side of the hospital was made of steel, more than two meters tall. I could see inside the parking lot that I had been at a moment ago. The two men were still there. They seemed to be watching me. *Does it mean that I am being so conspicuous?*

After a short walk, a few shops appeared on the other side of the road. On my side of the street, the hospital fence was still extended. The parking lot was now hidden behind the building. If I walked for too long, then I would end up being too far away from the hospital to turn back. *I have to go back inside the hospital if something happens, so I should be in the more sensibly appropriate place.*

I stopped and took a cigarette pack out of my pocket. *I have not smoked a single cigarette since this morning.* Although I was wearing Sagara's coat, I put some money, the cigarette pack, a lighter, and an ID card in the pocket. These were all of my possessions. Still, they were more than I got to carry on a sortie.

I lit a cigarette. *Smoking one cigarette will allow me to lighten my weight by that much, I*

always thought. I want to burn each piece of the firmly fixated memory in my head one by one, and let it go up in smoke. I wondered if that doctor could do that. He mentioned hypnosis, or something. If it were like a cigarette, the bitterness would disappear completely, and then I would feel lighter.

On the other side of the road, a young woman walked toward me with her dog. She was wearing a short skirt and white boots. She was straightening her back and was looking like a pair of compasses. While I was looking at her, she crossed the street to my side. She was getting very close to me.

She stopped in front of me. The dog was small and had long hair. The dog was putting its nose on my shoe to sniff it.

The woman was Suito Kusanagi.

I was startled. But, I quickly pretended that I did not know her. I was wearing a pair of sunglasses, and she did not see my face. There was no way that she could notice who I was.

My heartbeat sped up.

“You are Kannami, aren’t you?” She asked.

My heart painfully jolted once.

Still, I remained silent.

Why? Because I really did not know who I was.

Kannami?

“I am afraid that I had already been discarded. So, I have nothing to do with you.”

“Umm, I’m not sure ...” I replied so anyway.

“Do you carry a gun?” She asked.

“Gun?”

“If you are carrying it now, shoot me and run away now.”

“Why?”

“By doing that, you can be truly free.”

As Kusanagi said so, she relaxed her lips. Her eyes were not smiling at all. Her eyes were piercingly focused on me. She could have shot me down already.

Silence.

My body was slightly vibrating. I was quivering.

Gun?

Where is the gun?

I always carry it. I don't remember where I left it.

Oh, when I am not on an aircraft, I can do nothing. Really, nothing ... It's over. I closed my eyes once. Then, when I opened my eyes, the woman in front of me had already disappeared.

I looked around my feet. The dog had also vanished.

They were moving on the other side of the street. I saw the back of the woman in the miniskirt walking away. I crossed the road hastily and followed her. The dog stopped first and barked toward me. The woman looked back, too. The face with the black hair. She was not Suito Kusanagi.

I put on the brake on myself. In a pocket of the coat, a finger of my right hand was touching the trigger of the control stick. *Wrong target.*

Don't shoot.

Sigh.

What about my left hand?

I looked at it. My left hand was holding a cigarette.

The smoke was rising from it.

I see ... This is a hallucination.

It was a dream.

Although I was not asleep, I was having a dream.

That's okay.

It was just a dream.

That's okay.

I was still alive.

I was not shot.

My heartbeat finally slowed down a bit.

I crossed the road again and got back to the position I had been at.

I smoked a cigarette, and calmed myself down. It was a bit hot. My body temperature might have risen. Why was I having that hallucination? *Maybe, is that what I want?*

I don't think I was asleep. I'm sure I had a clear consciousness. If I had a gun in a pocket, I might have shot that woman.

It was the drug withdrawal that Sagara was talking about.

However.

Maybe this is what reality is all about in the first place.

I was sure.

It would be like that.

I wouldn't be surprised at all if my whole life is an illusion. That's how tenuous my memories are. I might still be sleeping in the hospital bed. I mean, I might be in the middle of dreaming as of now.

I had a dream that had lasted for too long.

I exhaled the smoke.

Oh ... what shall I do?

Should we break this imperfect chain of events now?

Yeah, it is like Kusanagi said earlier.

She might have implied that she wanted me to commit suicide.

It might as well be me. It might as well be anyone. Shoot anyone. If I do that, people around me will not leave me alone. I will be confined, bound, and drugged. Then, after that, there will probably be infinite freedom. The flat time will be waiting for me. Will I not be free, just by killing someone?

I looked up at the sky.

Blue.

Beautiful.

That's right. It is freedom.

I had calmed down a bit.

Freedom.

Angelic freedom.

Anyone will just do.

I have to destroy them.

To get the freedom.

A vehicle was approaching me from the front. The car was looking familiar to me.

It stopped beside me.

I threw away the cigarette, pulled the door, and got into the passenger's seat.

The car started suddenly.

The woman in the driver's seat was checking the rearview mirror frequently.

"Are you okay?" She asked.

"Yes."

"I have also managed to be all right." She smiled. "But we should be careful. Going back to my home may turn out to be dangerous. There is a chance that they are attempting to ambush us somewhere in the middle of the way home."

"So, what's next?"

"Let's take a quick detour."

-4-

It was a factory located along the road. A highway could be seen in the distance.

She proceeded to move the car into the parking lot. Many automobiles were parked in the facility. It seemed to me that half of them were clunkers. They were unlikely to be operational. The factory building was placed at the far end. As we got closer to it, I realized that the building did not have much depth. It was not that big in scale. If three cars were put in it, then it would be full.

She got out of the vehicle, and I followed her. On the way here, she had kept on looking behind our car to make sure that we were not tailed. *Is she the one who is being pursued? Or, am I the one who is targeted? Either way, who might be on the track of us? They are not likely to be the police. As for the police, they came to her cabin last night. She herself is free of charge. So, I am the one who is being shadowed? But, I cannot think of any reason for the police to be after me. So, the likely cause of the pursuit, if there is any, is my company. Of course, I cannot recall the company name. To begin with, I know nothing about the organization of the company. I had been in the air force since the day I joined the company. The air force was not the only asset of the company. But, I did not know what type of military forces our company had. Are there such things as armed forces of other companies? If that is the case, do they cooperate with each other to fight alongside?* I knew nothing about these matters. Probably, they did not give me the information. It was what I did not have to know.

Sagara might know such things, I thought. I also thought I should ask her to explain them to me. But, I would fail to get them straight in my mind. If I knew that, what the hell was I supposed to do? What would be the point of learning of the information?

Who is fighting with whom, and for what reason? Can we understand war just by remembering it in words? Absolutely not. That much I can understand. I know that with intuition.

That's not the point. How shall I put it? It is heavier metal and more sludgy black oil. There is a willingness to fight like that kind of metal and oil, and touching them directly with the hands is closer to the concept of understanding them. If that is not the case, then I am sure that one day we will all be entangled in the mess. In the end, we'll learn that we hate war. Everyone hates war. They are piling up the phrase "hate, hate, hate" like clunkers in this facility.

But we need a place to put the scrap metal.

They are covered in heavy metal and black oil.

It's the same with any mechanism. They just put on beautiful bodies and render them invisible. All cars are like that. They shine with metallic paint jobs. The silver molds are shiny. The seats are just as fluffy as sofas. The wood-grain dashboards are smooth as picture frames. Fun music

comes from the speakers. The fun and cleanliness hide the weightiness and blackness of the chassis. The key mechanism is hidden from view.

This rule does not apply to airplanes.

It is because aircrafts cannot afford to carry excessive weight in order to fly.

When an airplane is scrapped, a tombstone will be built at the location. The gravestone will read: *I have flown to the maximum. Then, I shall return.*

I sensed a smell of gasoline. *Not bad.*

I held back from smoking.

She started talking with a man in front of the factory building. He was a fat man in a blue work garment. He glanced at me several times. The man was smiling all the time. He was holding a monkey wrench, with which he could beat her to death. His arms were thick. The wrinkles on his hands must have soaked up oil and were stained. No matter how many times he washed his hands, they would give off the oil stench. *When he holds a fork, his grip will be the same as that for a spanner.* He bared his teeth and laughed aloud. Even if there was a wire in a sausage, his teeth would be able to chew and rip it. *Impressive. He's terrific like a machine.*

The two of them were walking toward me.

“Yo. How ya doing, young man?” He said to me. He raised his hand that was not holding the wrench.

I bowed to him slightly.

“Are you really okay about that?” The man asked Sagara. “Obviously, your car is nicer than mine.”

“Can that car not go up a hill?”

“Yes, it can. I promise. If you shift gears properly, that car will climb any uphill slope.”

The man approached a white truck and tapped the front tire with the monkey wrench. Then, he moved to the rear wheel to tap it. He walked around the truck and came back toward us.

“You may wanna refill the gas tank.”

“Thank you.”

She handed the car key to the man. Then, she walked to the driver’s seat of the truck, and climbed into it as if she were going up to the jungle gym. She beckoned me from inside. I opened the door of the passenger’s seat.

“I’ve decided to replace my car with this one.” She said.

“Where are we going?”

“We will go back to my home once. I have something I really want to take with me.”

“And then?”

“To the place of that man, Hayase.”

“You mean the hospital?”

“No, there is a place that can shelter you. It is in a neighboring town.”

On her third attempt, the starter succeeded in getting the engine running. The truck swayed its body to the right and left, and then got out into the street.

She seemed to be having trouble shifting gears, but the truck ran anyway. By the time we passed under a highway, her driving had gotten steadier.

“I am accustomed to driving a truck. I used to drive it in the past.” She explained. “I like it because the driver’s seat has a great view.”

We pulled into a gas station. She stopped the engine and got out of the vehicle.

“Err, where is it ...?”

I opened the door and checked the rear part.

“Here.”

“Can the pump nozzle reach the filler neck?”

While we refilled the gas tank, a door of the cabin was opened, and a short, old man appeared.

“Hi, mister, we want extra gasoline. Do you have gasoline cans?” She asked.

“We do.” The old man did not smile at all, and returned to the cabin slowly.

The gas tank of the truck was filled. The old man came back with metal cans dangling from both hands.

“How many do you need?” He asked.

“Then, we want those two cans.”

We put the empty cans onto the load-carrying platform of the truck, and filled them with gasoline. I also noticed a folded green sheet and ropes on the platform.

She paid cash to the old man. I climbed into the passenger seat first and waited for her. She got back and closed the door.

This time, the engine started on the first try.

“Good. Getting lovely with time.”

“Sorry, who is?”

“This truck.”

Then we turned back along the road that we had used, and rode up the hill to the highway. The truck continued to run reasonably well, though not going too fast.

“If I say something like this, you might scold me.” I had decided to talk about what I had been thinking about. “If the pursuers are from my company, I don’t think you’ll be bothered if I leave you.”

“We’ve already had our discussion on that.” She replied while looking forward.

“I mean, I could make a comeback to the company and pilot an aircraft once again. Doesn’t that work as a solution to everything?”

“That doesn’t solve anything.”

“So, what is the solution?” I asked.

She did not answer. She looked in the rearview mirror. I found myself looking backward. There was a small window right behind me, and I could see a vehicle behind the truck. It appeared to be a bus. I saw no other cars that looked suspicious.

“Do you believe you can get on it?”

She means getting on an aircraft, I speculated.

“I’m not sure. I believe I can, though.”

“Before that, you will be drugged, and your memories will be erased. You might not be able to remain you anymore. Do you still want to get on an airplane?”

Will I not be me anymore?

But, I thought the current situation was already close to that.

“Your face might be altered.” She continued. “Next time we meet, I won’t even be able to recognize you anymore. You may not recognize me, either.”

I kept silent.

I can imagine such a situation. But I don’t know how I would feel when I experience it actually. I cannot compare it with the situation in which I am in a different condition.

“After all, it’s the same as your dying. I mean, you will be a different person.”

“That’s not true. I can remember some things.”

For example, what will I be able to remember?

Right, I will remember flight. I believe I will not forget it.

While sitting back in the seat, I leaned a little to the side. I looked at the sky through the window. *It is a high sky. It stretches only above me. As long as I am here, the sky is only above me. It can only exist far away. On the ground, there is no sky around me.*

“Do you want to fly that much?”

I kept silent. *I don’t want to hurt her,* I thought.

“You have yet to get back to your normal condition.” She continued. “I want you to wait more. You had better spend more ordinary time and construct solid memories. I mean, you should build up yourself. Take a lot of time. I want you to put up with it until then. You will understand what humans are like. Human beings may not be as beautiful as Kildren like you think they are, but that is who we are. You are a human, too. Don’t forget it. Don’t worry. I believe you will be able to live as a human.”

“As a human...” I whispered in a low voice.

I admitted that I could not understand the meaning of the phrase “as a human.” It did not sound attractive to me. *Am I a human? Did she mean I am a human because I*

am not a machine? Or did she say that in contrast to other animals?

That's not true.

She used the word “human” to mean “adult.”

In the same sense, I considered myself not to be human.

I'm still a child and wish I could be a child forever. I believe so. Isn't that the part that doesn't mesh with others? Adults were once children. They have grown from children to adults. But they have already lost their children's minds. They can never get back to children. Then, they speak softly to children.

You should grow up as soon as possible.

Adults try to convince children that they are inadequate and that adults are the only human beings who are complete. Deceived children worry about growing up and then hurt themselves. Children lose so much and fall into adulthood.

In the past, there had been no adult who could remain a child.

The only thing that could realize it was death.

The only exceptions are death and us, Kildren.

I am starting to understand.

In short, from the point of view of grownups, the very notion of children remaining to be children is such a distraction, because it subverts the principles that adults hold dear. I mean, that is the main principle that all children eventually become adults. Sooner or later, we all become ugly. It will fade and then dull eventually. That is the basic premise.

Adults are trying to teach children that remaining a child is such sufferance.

In fact, it's just a matter of cutting it off.

Am I wrong?

It's just a matter of cutting off the dullness.

It's just a matter of cutting off the ugliness.

For the sake of bitterness and beauty.

Am I wrong?

That's all it takes.

I looked at the view outside the window. *The sky.*

I found myself in a state of high spirits.

That's not good. I have to calm down. If not, the weird illusion will appear again. The woman next to me is carrying a gun. I might steal the gun from her and shoot her with it. No, I should not think about that sort of thing.

Sigh.

I took a deep breath, while being careful not to let her notice it. Slowly.

-5-

As we started to drive up the mountain road, we occasionally saw a helicopter in the sky. I checked Sagara in the driver's seat. She did not seem to have looked at the sky yet.

"A helicopter is flying." I pointed my finger at it. It was quite far away.

After a while, she noticed it too.

"Oh, you are right. Do you have any idea of what organization the helicopter belongs?"

"I don't. It's too far away for me to read the number."

"Number?" She laughed. "No one can see it in the distance. Can you recognize the color?"

"A white body with navy blue stripes."

"What? Can you see them?"

"The number is four digits, and I think the first digit is 4."

"That's not the police, is it?"

"Not the police. It does not seem to recognize us."

"It is the direction of my home. They might be watching the station."

The truck drove up the hill and entered a short tunnel.

"I should have disguised myself, too."

Few cars were on the road. There was no sign of being followed by a car. When we crossed the bridge over the valley, we got off the highway. From there, it was an uphill road. The sky was getting narrower and narrower because of the tall coniferous trees around us. I could no longer see the helicopter.

“As long as I am with you, they’re not going to attack us. At least I am a civilian.”

“Attack?”

“Yes. If you are by yourself, then they can kill you. Since you are still an employee of the company, it would be regarded as the act of combat.”

“I think they cannot recognize me from such a high altitude.”

“You are right. I am left with no option but to enter my cabin. If we get in there, they will notice it. The garage has a roof. So, I want you to get on the airplane immediately.”

“Airplane?”

“Yes, in the front seat. There is a cover on it, so hide inside. It would take me, well, about five minutes to clean up the cabin. If the chopper lands by then and someone comes out of the craft, I will let the truck dart out. As the helicopter chases me, you make an escape.”

“To where?”

“Umm, I have no idea. Maybe, to the direction of the rocky stretches. Anyway, stay away from my cabin. I will be back again. Then, let’s escape together by truck. The helicopter cannot fly for that long, can it?”

“Why do we need to stay away from the cabin?”

“I will blow it up.”

“Oh ... You mean, the cabin?”

“Yes. It is the reason why I bought the extra cans of gasoline.”

“But if you do that, you might be disadvantaged in the upcoming court.”

“I might be.” She looked at me and smiled. “You have become a quick thinker.”

“It is inadvisable.”

“I knew it from the beginning. That’s not what you need to worry about.”

“Isn’t there any other option?”

“No such thing. So, please, just do as I say. We don’t have time to argue.”

“Understood.” I nodded.

We made sure that we were on the same page. *If the helicopter does not come down, then the two of us will flee in the truck after the chopper leaves.*

Our truck took a couple of curves, and we were reaching a straight slope. I could see the sky. I saw the helicopter still hovering at a high altitude. *She replaced her car with this truck, so they are not expecting us to be in this vehicle.*

“How about not going home and waiting for the chopper to leave?” I asked.

“Right, that may work well, but time is running out. Someone may visit my cabin while we are doing so. Don’t worry. I will take care of this.”

Her hut came into view. Fortunately, nothing seemed to be happening there. No car or people in sight.

The truck veered off from the road, and pulled into the driveway. Along the way, she exited the vehicle once to open the gate. Then she got back to the truck and went deeper into the premises. She did not close the gate, probably because she decided to leave it open in case of emergency.

I sat deep in the seat, careful not to be seen from above. I tried not to look at the sky. Still, I could hear the helicopter’s rotor sound clearly.

“They’re watching us.” She warned.

Our truck was entering her garage.

“Hide in the place. Got it?” She said before getting out of the truck.

“Is the biplane fueled?” I asked.

“Sorry?”

“We had better run away by airplane.”

She gazed at me.

“Look.” She pointed toward the backside. “There is a tank at the back over

there.”

“I’ll fuel it,” I said. “Is the plane maintained?”

“What do you mean by ‘maintained’?”

She got off the truck, closed the door, and walked out of the garage. She was looking up at the sky. Soon she was out of sight. I heard the faint sound of her opening the cabin door.

I got off the truck and went to the plane to check the fuel storage tank. The fuel caddy was a manually operated type. Fortunately, it had wheels on it. I pulled it out and put it next to the plane. The airplane fuel tank was placed above the cockpit. I held the fuel pump nozzle attached to the end of the tube, climbed onto the plane’s main wing, stepped my foot into the cockpit, and removed the lid of the fuel tank. I inserted the pump nozzle into the filler neck. There was a short rope attached to the pump nozzle, so I tied it to the bracing wire on the wings so that it would not come off.

I got off the main wing, loosened the valve, and then moved the lever on the caddy pump up and down. I eventually started feeling a good response, and I could see the fuel going up the tube. *This fueling procedure would have been easier, if the fuel caddy storage tank were positioned up higher than this.* Thinking so, I kept on pumping the lever.

I felt the rotor sound was getting closer. *But it’s not like it’s coming down yet. Is it watching the vicinity?*

The outside view from the garage was the side of the road, and nothing else. There was nothing unusual in that direction. I could not see the cabin she had entered.

I worked on the fueling for a while, and then she came back. She glanced at me and nodded.

“Almost there. I just got a call. It was from Hayase. He said we had better get out of here immediately.”

“How come?”

“Well, I have no idea ... Either way, we should not stay here for too long. Hey, you can stop working on that. I think it’s safer to drive than fly.”

She walked to the loading platform of the truck, and pulled out the two tanks of gasoline.

“Are you okay? Be careful. Need help?” I asked.

“No. If you get out, you will be spotted from above.”

“They will see you carrying the tanks.”

“They might think they contain fuel for the heater, right?”

She walked out the door, while carrying the tanks with both hands.

I still kept moving the lever of the fuel pump. The muscle in my arms were already tight. My arms were sore, and I was getting closer to the edge. But, I managed to use my whole body to keep it going. *I wonder how much fuel there is in the tank. I don't know. It might not even have reached half the capacity.*

Then I looked at the big door, which was currently closed. It was bolted. If I did not open it, the plane would not be able to get out of the garage. I wondered how far I was from the runway at that point. I recollected the memory pertaining to the view outside.

I looked back to see what she was doing. I noticed that there was a car running on a mountain road in the distance. It was not passing us to another direction. The vehicle turned to the driveway and was approaching us.

I stopped the work and ran to the part of the cabin just in front of the open part.

I could see her moving backward, while carrying gasoline tanks and getting out of the cabin's front door.

“A car is coming!” I shouted.

She turned around, and looked at me. Then, she directed her face toward the driveway.

“Hurry!” I called her out.

I looked at the sky. The helicopter was hovering right above us.

“I'll get the plane out,” I said.

She put the gasoline tanks down around her feet, and searched a pocket.

“I don’t have a lighter.”

I ran toward her.

“Open the door over there!” I commanded her.

I saw the car on the road coming toward me. Then, I looked upward.

She passed by me, and ran into the garage.

I took out a lighter. The area near the entrance of the cabin was already reeking of gasoline. I pulled a cigarette out and lit it. I exhaled the smoke just once.

Then, I stepped away and threw the lit cigarette into the cabin doorway. It was about three meters away from me.

A little later, a yellow flame grew. Then, there was a deep sound, and then a larger flame rose up.

The car was very close, and it was parked. It was a navy blue sedan. I saw a van coming toward me from the road in the distance. *There must be a lot of crew members in that vehicle.* The advance squad consisted of only two personnel. Probably because they were waiting for everyone to get together, the two did not get out of their car, probably because they were waiting for the entire force to get ready to move. They did not seem to be having any intention of using their guns.

The cabin began to spew fire through the windows. There was no way to put it out.

I ran into the garage. The back door was already open. She was removing the wheel chocks for the airplane. I jumped onto the main wing, pulled out the fuel pump nozzle, and closed the lid. Then, I jumped off to the ground, and the two of us lifted the rear part of the airplane. It was to correct the orientation. We had to get the fuel caddy out of the way.

“I will pilot it.” She said.

“No, I will. Get in the front seat.”

“After the engine starts.”

I entered the cockpit first.

“Where is the battery?”

“Turn on the ignition. It’s in the bottom right corner.”

There seemed to be no starter. *Do I have to start it manually, by hand-propping the engine?*

“It’s dangerous if I do it indoors,” I shouted.

But, she was putting her hands on the propeller blade. I heard the low rotor sound of the helicopter. I turned to the backside, and looked outside through the garage door. Due to the difficulty stemming from the angle issue of the line of sight, I could not see too far. I heard an explosion. It sounded like something popped up in the cabin.

“Okay. Ignition is on.”

She pulled the propeller blade with both hands and spun it around the axis. The engine made a light explosion sound. If the recoil caused the propeller to reverse the revolution, then it would be a dangerous procedure that could cause a serious injury. She was not even wearing gloves.

“Be careful!”

She reached out her hands once again, and gave the propeller a spin.

The airframe vibrated, the propeller reversed the revolution once, and then the recoil let it revert to its original direction once again to assume the normal rotation. At one point, it looked like it was going to stop. By pulling the choke lever, I managed to keep it rotating.

“Get in! It’s alright.”

She walked to the left main wing and stood right beside me.

“Are you okay? Can you handle it?” She asked.

“Yes, I can.”

She got herself into the front cockpit.

I cranked up the engine. *It’s still wobbly. Little by little. It’s getting stable.*

The helicopter was flying low, and appeared ahead. It was appearing to look into the garage.

“They’re here!” She looked back and pointed at the direction.

I took a look at it just for a moment. The van had just arrived in front of the cabin, and was just coming to an abrupt stop. It was the second car.

I pushed up the throttle more. I brought the choke lever back a little bit. But the engine gasped. It seemed that about two of the cylinders had failed to get ignited. I pulled the choke lever once again.

“Hurry!” She looked back and yelled.

I pushed up the throttle lever. The objects in the garage were blown backward by the wind. Small things were flying up and dancing around.

The engine was getting revved up, and the aircraft started to move forward sluggishly. Little by little, it accelerated, and finally, it left the garage.

The chopper landed on the grassy field to our right, and the crew were coming out. But when they saw our airplane, they hurriedly turned back to the helicopter.

I controlled the rudder to steer the plane to the left, and went down the hill obliquely.

The cabin was completely engulfed in flames. I saw the two cars across the fire. The road between the cabin and the garage was impassable due to the flames. Because of the direction of the wind, the garage was about to catch fire at any moment.

While running around the cabin to keep themselves far away from it, the two men were running toward us.

I pushed up the throttle.

Our airplane was 50 meters from the runway. The fire that I had just observed a moment ago was showing me the direction of the wind. It was blowing from the mountain. It was a crosswind, coming from the lateral direction, and it was not too strong. It will not be a problem. I checked the meters. The fuel gauge was indicating that the fuel tank was a bit less than half full. Everything else was normal. I could not find any oil-related meter. *My guess is that the engine is still too cold. It needs a heater, but we have no time to get it warmed up. If it stops, that would be the end.*

She was looking behind us from the front cockpit. With no rearview mirror, I looked just forward.

Due to the bumpiness of the road, I was busy with handling the rudder. My seat position was not fixed firmly, so it was difficult to operate with both legs. I could not afford to look back.

The engine was still grumbling like a baby. But, it might be getting warmed up gradually. *As long as I don't reduce the engine speed, it is fine.*

Finally, we reached the edge of the runway. I pushed up the throttle more.

She, in the front seat, took out the gun. She held the gun in both hands toward the rear. I could not look back. *Is someone chasing us?* I pushed up the throttle even more.

She pointed the gun upwards a bit and fired one shot. It was probably a warning shot.

The runway was covered with short weeds. The acceleration was slow. I pushed up the throttle farther more. I noticed that the cylinders were tending to get wet and fouling out was imminent. I got the choke lever back to the previous position immediately. *Sorry. Please don't be in a bad mood and run smoothly.* Among the four cylinders, the front two were suffering from overcooling. *If I try to make various adjustments to conform to the front two, then the rear two will grumble. I have to find a compromise.* Our airplane was running while hopping.

The movement of going straight was getting stable gradually. I looked back. The two men were still running, but they were already far way from us. I then twisted my body to the opposite direction to look to the rear again. The helicopter had taken off. It was coming toward us, while tilting its airframe.

I opened the throttle even more. *Okay, it is ready to fly now.*

The bracing wires of the main wings made a noise. I tried to move the ailerons slightly. I felt a good response. I lowered the nose of the aircraft a bit. The tail was lifted, and off the ground. *Now, it can run smoothly.*

She was already facing forward. We were already leaving the ground-bound pursuers behind.

I looked back again and saw the helicopter going up. *Are they giving up on catching us on the ground?*

I was having a sensation of being able to grab the air.

I pulled the control stick to deflect the elevators upward.

The airplane was being lifted.

I held the nose of the aircraft down to prevent it from pitching upward.

The crosswind tilted the airframe. I adjusted the aircraft orientation with the rudder. The wheel on one side touched the ground once.

The aircraft hopped once more.

It was in full throttle.

The engine was getting revved up gradually. I closed the choke valve even more.

Climbing up gently.

She raised a hand and gave a thumbs-up. It looked like a blessing for me.

I looked back. The helicopter was approaching us. It was faster than we were. They were going to catch up to us soon.

We were accelerating, of course. I made a bank maneuver gently, and we flew along the side of the mountain.

The helicopter came up beside us.

I was wearing sunglasses. She was pulling down her head. *Oh, she's trying to make them mistake me for her.*

Our airplane was accelerating faster and faster. *Will our top speed be faster than theirs? We won't know until we try it.*

We took a turn toward the helicopter.

The chopper hastily pulled up and put on the brakes.

So, we were able to pull away again. *It's all right now.*

She in the front seat popped her head out.

“Which way to fly?” I asked her loudly.

“What?” She asked back.

While the engine was at full throttle, we could not have a conversation. I pointed

with my finger in a couple of directions. She pointed to the right. That was the direction of the city in the foothills. But if we headed that way, we would not be able to escape from the helicopter.

This time the helicopter was catching up with us from the left. She pulled her head down again.

I choked the engine to the mid-low and made it a bit quieter. I shouted into the fuselage.

“Can you hear me?”

“Yes, I can.”

“Fasten the seat belt!”

“Wait, please.”

I knew that. She had not fastened the seatbelt until then. It was the reason why she could look to the back by that much.

“Okay! Done! Fly to the foot of the mountain.”

“Before that, I will get the helicopter off our tail.”

“But how?”

The chopper was flying beside us. I checked the terrain below. The altitude was 50 meters. Below us was a forest. I spotted a straight road.

I lowered the altitude gradually.

I am pretending to land. I turned and decreased the altitude. The helicopter was coming down as well.

While making an extra banking move, I revved up the engine slightly.

I put the elevators down once.

After a moment of weightlessness, the plane pointed downward.

This acceleration is rather good.

The airplane swooped down toward the road.

I looked backward. The helicopter was getting farther away from us, but it was still trailing us.

Well, then ...

The tall coniferous forest had an opening only around the vicinity along the road. Our plane was descending into the valley-like spacing between the trees. While the road was getting closer, I slowly and gradually pulled the control stick to deflect the elevators. At the fast speed, we flew and grazed the ground. We had gotten ourselves all the way down to the altitude of five meters.

The chopper was behind and above us.

Higher engine output.

The airframe danced, and the engine roared.

Finally, have all the four cylinders woken up?

I pulled the control stick to angle the elevators upward. The nose of the aircraft was pitched upward.

We were lifted even more.

The nose was almost pointing to the zenith.

I looked back to locate the helicopter.

It was attempting to lift the nose and put on the brakes.

There are woods on both sides. To go back, it has to turn around.

Our plane is flying above the chopper. So, what can it do next?

Our climbing speed was going down.

I started the inverted flight maneuver.

The chopper looks as if it has stopped in the air.

Our plane was oriented completely inverted. The elevators were still maintaining the same angles.

Then, we were diving to the helicopter.

They could not have expected me to loop the loop here.

The sensation of the main wings bending.

The engine kept running.

We could not maintain the inverted flight forever.

The reason was that the fuel tank was installed high above the fuselage.

The helicopter was losing its forward flight speed.

Our plane is probably appearing to fall at an oblique angle.

The chopper began to turn its tail. It seemed to be changing the direction to retreat.

By using the ailerons, I made a roll to the left.

The aircraft was brought to the upright orientation in an instant.

It was falling even more.

The helicopter was in front of us.

We grazed just above it and went up.

We slid to the direction, from which we had come, to backtrack.

I pulled the control stick to deflect the elevators upward.

She screamed in the front seat.

“It’s gonna break!”

It won’t break. This is an everyday occurrence of an aircraft.

The nose of our plane was pointing to the zenith again.

The chopper seemed to have managed to turn around and was facing us.

Executing a somersault that was smaller than the previous one.

While descending, I had the main wings go vertical.

We were falling while assuming the knife-edge orientation. I controlled the nose angle with the rudder adjustment.

The helicopter turned its nose to the left.

It is intending to fly forward.

I made a feint for a moment by flying downward.

She yelled something again, but I could not catch it.

One second before the stalling, I let the airframe assume the upright orientation.

I pushed the throttle up.

At the altitude of 10 meters, I entered the pitch-up control.

The tires of our aircraft were about to touch the road surface.

I heard a massive sound behind us.

I looked back.

It seemed that the helicopter had landed.

The tail rotor apparently bumped against something, and the helicopter was getting off balance.

Was the helicopter making an emergency landing, because it could not hold on anymore? Or did it fall on its rear end and make the tail collide with something?

I continued to let the airplane gain the altitude gradually. We went through the valley in the forest, and finally returned to the open sky.

I saw a large trailer truck coming toward us. Due to the helicopter blocking the road, that was guaranteed to be a problem.

After ascending to the altitude of 200 meters, I choked the throttle. Finally, tranquility took over.

“Are you okay?” I called out loudly into the fuselage.

“I thought I was going to die.” She replied.

She showed me the direction in which we were going to fly. We flew at an altitude at which I could survey the terrain. Otherwise, we would get lost.

We have just enough fuel to get us there on a one-way trip. Once we land on the destination, we are not coming back unless we refuel the plane. I wonder where she is going.

Still.

I am feeling really good.

If this is entirely a hallucination, then it is not so bad. For example, my body might be dead already, and this could be a dream I am having during my last breath. Wonderful. A person's life is like that. Everything is an ephemeral illusion.

It's a little short on altitude, but this place is wonderful anyway.

Everything is clear in the sky.

It's free, and then soft.

I took off the sunglasses that I was wearing in place of goggles. The air coming in through the windshield polished my eyes more clearly.

The sensation of floating in the air.

Only the air was around us.

There was none but air, and nothing is being blocked.

I had never thought that it would feel so good to be away from the ground.

It's so exhilarating that it makes me want to dance.

However.

The only thing I'm dissatisfied with is ...

The one to share the experience with me.

Right.

I have no one to dance with.

Not that fat helicopter.

As for me, rather than this blunt biplane ...

More sharply.

I wanna dance with somebody.

-6-

We chose a place for the biplane to land. It was a playground on a riverbed near a small foothill. It looked like a glider airfield. Two small gliders were at the side of the runway, with each airframe being tilted laterally. But there was no airplane in sight.

Before we landed, I saw a car running on an embankment. A man in the driver's seat was waving toward us. He was the doctor I had met in the hospital. She, in the

front seat of our airplane, waved toward him.

After turning and circling, we approached the airfield and landed without any trouble. Once I stopped the engine, she got on the main wing, came to me, and held out both hands.

“You are terrific. It is amazing!” She brought her face close to me and kissed on my cheek. “I knew that you remember how to pilot it.”

Why not? I was going to say so, but I kept my mouth shut.

I looked up at the sky. I did not see anything flying.

Three men appeared out of nowhere, walked up toward us, and bowed. After we got off, the two of them lifted the rear part of the biplane, and moved it to somewhere.

The two men pulled the plane into the nearby bushes, and cast a broad net over it. The other man climbed up a tree beside them. He opened a bag that was on a branch and dropped a large number of fallen leaves onto the net. Several large bags had already been placed on the branches. One of the men climbed another tree on the other side across the net-covered airplane, and dropped leaves from that side. Immediately the plane was out of sight, hidden in leaves.

The man, who did not climb a tree, led Sagara and me into the bushes. When I looked back, I could no longer see the plane.

There was a circular tunnel about two meters in diameter, and the opening was on the slope of the bank. It was something like a drainage ditch. Its lower half was buried in the ground. Nets were folded and placed next to the entrance. A few bags of fallen leaves were also lined up. The man lowered his head and walked into the tunnel. After she and I entered, the net was spread over the entrance. The place also seemed to be camouflaged, too.

Maybe due to the fatigue from having piloted the airplane, I was feeling a little sleepy. I felt that my body was getting fluffy. I felt that the very sensation of my feet touching the ground was unreliable. *This, however, is always the case. Everyone gets airsick after a flight.*

It was getting dark, and light bulbs were turned on here and there. I saw a door, and we went through it. To my surprise, the interior was as spacious as a garage.

One small desk was placed near the center. A bearded man was sitting at the desk, and was reading what looked like a letter. He just raised his eyes, and looked at us.

The man, who had led us into the room, bowed, and went back the way we came.

She and I remained in the room. The only person except us was the bearded man. He stood up, walked around the desk, and stopped in front of me. I bowed to him slightly. Of course, I was not wearing sunglasses anymore. But I still had the scarf around my neck, and half of my face was still covered.

The man held out his hand.

He seemed to want me to shake hands, and I accepted the offer.

I noticed that there was a staircase in the back on the right.

I was surprised to notice that Suito Kusanagi was sitting on it.

Kusanagi was wearing a uniform, and staring fixedly at me.

I held my breath, and could not move.

She will shoot me, I thought.

But, Kusanagi was not moving.

“What’s wrong?” Sagara touched my arm from the side.

I turned away from Kusanagi and looked at Sagara for a moment. However, since I was holding my breath, the words did not come out of my mouth.

Then, once again, I looked at Kusanagi.

There was no one on the stairs anymore.

Episode 4: Duralumin Somewhere near midnight the rain slackened, halted; wind barreled about wringing out the trees. Singly, like delayed guests arriving at a dance, appearing stars pierced the sky. It was time to leave. We took nothing with us: left the quilt to rot, spoons to rust; and the tree-house, the woods we left to winter.

This excerpt is from *The Grass Harp* by Truman Capote

-1-

The man was a bit shorter than I was. His gray beard looked as stiff as it had been frozen. His shirt's top button was missing, and he was wearing a jacket without his arms through the sleeves. It was not warm in this place. Of course, there were no windows, just the yellow glow of the room lights. *I guess that this room is in the basement. Does the stairway at the back lead to the ground level?* From what I could see, there was nothing that looked like a room heater.

"Don't you ask me where this place is?" He spoke. It was a low voice. Maybe it was echoing. "Or, do you want to ask me who I am?"

I kept silent because I did not want to ask either of those questions.

"Well, excuse me. Forgive me if I make you uncomfortable. I won't tell you my name. I can't even tell you about this place. In short, that's the kind of place this is."

"He's on our side," Sagara standing next to me explained.

What does she mean by "our side"? I thought. I ran away from my company's military force. The police may have been pursuing us. I'm sure they are allies in the sense that they share such common circumstances.

But to be precise, it was from the hospital that I escaped. I did not dislike to fight in the sky. Actually, the opposite was true. I just could not stand the fact that I

could not fight.

For example, if I were commanded to get on a fighter aircraft right now, I would be happy to return to the cockpit. I had a feeling that Sagara was misunderstanding this point.

“Anyway, I can’t say it’s very comfortable, but I think you should stay here for a while to get the treatment.” The man told me. “Hayase will be coming here shortly as well.”

Hayase was the doctor, who was driving a car on an embankment earlier. *Is he going to treat me here?*

Will I ever be healed? I don’t even know what’s broken, though.

“You might want to show him the hangar next to this room.” The man suggested to Sagara.

“Of course. Perhaps, it’ll help him recall something.” She smiled.

The man got back to his desk. Sagara and I went up the stairway in the back.

About two meters above the floor, there was an exit. Opening the door, we came out into a dark tunnel-like area. From there, we went straight down the tunnel for about 30 meters. The walls were plain, covering the earth with boards and blocks. The incandescent light bulbs hung from the ceiling every five meters or so were glowing.

We then went down the stairs, after reaching the end of the passageway. This was a concrete staircase. The walls and ceiling encasing it were bumpy as if concrete had been pasted on a rock face. The surface was a little wet when I touched it.

“This place is an air-raid shelter that was built during the previous war.” She explained. “It leads to a sewerage system, so we can go pretty far without getting outside. And there are a lot of routes.”

“Whom are we hiding from?” I asked.

“First of all, from the police.” She answered. “And then, from your company. In other words, it’s all the general frameworks of this country.”

“Why are you resisting in such a way?”

“This is the only way for us to resist.”

“Well, my question is why you are resisting.”

“That’s because we want to stop it, of course.”

“Stop what?”

“The useless war.”

I shut my mouth.

She fights to stop the useless war.

Is it not indeed another useless war?

Are there both useless wars and useful wars?

Are the one side which thinks it is useless and the other side which thinks it is useful foes and friends, respectively?

However, those who are fighting each other think that it is not in vain.

I’m not sure.

But, for me, it doesn’t matter if the fight is futile or not.

Wasteful or not, the value of the fight remains the same.

Am I wrong?

We were descending the stairs. It was dark here, but the air was moving slightly, and I could tell that there was a large space. In the distance, I saw a small spot, from which the light was leaking. *Is that a ventilation opening?*

“Is this place also underground?” I asked.

“Yes. Above this is a road on the embankment.”

“Does the glider runway outside belong to the club?”

“Yes. The club is a part of our organization. As far as I know, that glider has never flown.”

“Did you learn how to pilot a plane here?”

“Yes.”

“You learned it so that you can fly over here, right?”

“No, I have never been here since I purchased the airplane. I don’t want to arouse suspicion.”

At the bottom of the stairway, she flicked a light switch on the wall. A little later, the fluorescent light flickered and came on.

I was still in the middle of the stairway. I was holding a cold railing with my hand. What I saw there stopped me.

“Sanka,” I uttered the name.

The aircraft was barely able to fit into the hangar. It sat there, with the nose facing the back end of the hangar. A fighter aircraft with canard wings. Two shades of blue camouflage. No number was written on the airframe.

Was this the reason why I felt the air somehow?

I thought this place was capacious, but it was not. It was the air that wanted to get out to the more spacious place.

I was too astonished to breathe.

“You remember the name, don’t you?” She commented.

I was staring fixedly at the outline of the airframe.

It is not a scrap.

It is the real thing.

It is alive.

“What?” I looked at her face. “Name?”

“You have uttered it just now.”

“Oh, what have I just uttered?”

“Say that again.”

I slowly went down the stairs to the lowest tread. I could not watch my steps as I was looking at the aircraft. Then, I calmly approached it and went around to the back end of the space.

I touched the nose of the aircraft. *It’s cold. Still, it is alive.*

It had machine guns mounted on its fuselage. *That’s right. I have forgotten about it.*

That's where it should be at.

Its slender landing gears were wrapped with yellow tapes. There were some scratches on the stabilizers, but they would not pose any problem for the flight itself.

I walked around the aircraft to the other side, toward the back end of the airframe.

I peeked under the wing. There was also a streamlined drop tank.

The engine in the cowling looked beautiful. I touched the propeller blade gently. The pitch was adjusted to its lowest. There were many spots of peeled paint on the cowling. They were not scratches that were inflicted in combats, but marks from repeated removals and maintenances of the cowling.

“Sasakura.” I found myself uttering the name.

“What?” She asked right behind me. I looked back. “Sorry? What did you say?”

But the memory was gone in an instant, like a train passing by the platform.

I looked up at the canopy.

Suito Kusanagi's face was there. *I see she's on this plane.* She turned to me downward and smiled.

“Kusanagi,” I murmured.

I knew, of course, she has been here. I walked around the main wing and returned to the front of the aircraft. Then I tried to get on the wing from the leading edge. But Sagara grabbed me by the arm.

“Hey, you have just uttered the name now.” She was staring fixedly at me. “Recall the memory. Who are you?”

I'm not sure.

I took my eyes off from her and looked up at the canopy again. I could not see Kusanagi's face. *Is she hiding inside the cockpit? Why isn't she showing up?*

“Please. Let me go up there.” I asked Sagara for permission, because she was still holding my arm.

“No, that's not permitted.”

“Let me at least get on the main wing.”

“Do you know which part of the wing you may stand?”

“Of course.”

Every pilot knows that.

She sighed and nodded.

“Calm down. Don’t do anything rash.”

“Thank you.”

I got on the main wing and peeked into the cockpit.

A seat, a belt, a control stick, many gauges on the panel, switches, indicators, and a throttle lever.

No one was there.

Why is she not here?

Was it an illusion?

I looked around.

There was no one except for her, who was looking up at me with a worried look on her face.

I felt dizzy.

Suddenly, it was hard even to stand still.

But I consciously maintained my equilibrium and got off from the main wing.

I ducked under the airframe and touched the drop tank.

It was chilly.

I wanted to apply my cheek on it.

It was so smooth that just touching it seemed to take away a part of me. I felt as if a portion of my feelings was stolen as well. Still, I could not get away from the surface.

I brought my cheek close to the cold metal.

I closed my eyes.

In an instant, the blue sky spread in front of me.

I looked to my left and right.

It was clear.

I am the only one here.

In the cockpit.

I looked back.

The propeller was rotating.

Then, I finally heard the sound, and felt a delayed vibration in my body. I clenched my right fist, in which the control stick was. In my left hand was the grip of the throttle lever. Both of my feet were lightly touching the rudder pedals. My body was cradled in the seat. My goggles and mask reminded me of breathing.

This is the aircraft.

My aircraft.

With it, I can charge around in the sky.

I can fly around.

I laughed.

From within my body, I felt the emotion welling up.

I can't believe I'm flying again.

How splendid.

How fortunate.

I shook the control stick from side to side.

After just a little bit of delay, the world turned around.

Everything was following me.

I was not touching anywhere.

I was not supported by anything.

I'm free.

Everything was irrelevant to me.

I am what I am, and I am irrelevant to anyone but myself.

Why can't such a simple thing be allowed?

Why can't such a pure thing be allowed?

I'm being avoided.

I'm being kept away.

I'm being rejected.

I'm being envied.

I'm being despised.

I'm being feared.

I'm being hated.

I'm being detested.

Why do they impose their love on those who are not what they are?

Is it to make them believe that it is love?

If it is true love, then they don't have to make others believe it.

Am I wrong?

Ah, people are all so stupid.

Look at the beauty of this plane.

Take a look at the wings.

Everything is ugly compared to these.

Love is just a thing like rust.

It was just that the rust itself wanted to think it is a beautiful activity.

They don't know the beauty.

They don't see anything.

Beauty is what this coldness is.

I'm impressed by how nostalgic it is.

My throat convulsed, and my breath quivered.

I opened my eyes, and tears welled up.

The metal had gotten wet. I carefully wiped it with my cuff.

But I could not stop shedding tears.

Oh ..., I'm weeping.

Although I'm not feeling sad, I'm crying.

Maybe it's because of the beauty.

It is so beautiful that I am shedding tears.

Is there any other existence in the world that is so beautiful to this extent?

I looked at my ugly face that was reflected dimly on the curved surface of the airframe.

I wonder why human beings are so ugly.

But, that's not the reason why I'm weeping.

No matter how pitiful or how miserable I feel, I never shed tears.

My tears come out only when I am touched by sublime beauty.

"Are you okay?" I heard a woman's voice.

I found myself kneeling. I looked back at the woman. I had a feeling that the woman was Suito Kusanagi. But that was not the case. After letting out a sigh, I stood up.

"Are you weeping?" She asked.

I said nothing. I did not see the point in answering that question.

"Did you recall anything?"

"I have once piloted this aircraft."

"This aircraft?"

"I mean, the very same airframe."

"How can you tell so?"

“I just can.”

“From what characteristics?”

“It is the same as being able to recognize a person’s face.”

“Is this exactly the same model?”

“There are various models. The first model had machine guns mounted in the main wings. This model was developed after that type. The machine guns were shifted to the nose, and the wings became thinner. Therefore, the roll maneuvers got lighter and the speed was improved.”

“What is the name of this aircraft?”

“Did I not say that earlier?”

“So, say that again.”

I could not recall the name. But I knew this airframe well. I remembered the fact. I could generate the images of the engine inside the cowling, the cylinder heads, and even the springs in the cam covers. I knew the engine sound, the carburetor sound, and the vibration sound from the stabilizer during the dive. I could recall their smell. I could sense the thick exhaust air, the burning smell of gaining the altitude, and the exhaust color that the oil and humidity would affect.

In short, I remembered all of what I saw, heard, and smelt. What I could not memorize were words. Especially, I could not recall any name. I wondered why.

I felt that my relationship with this aircraft was solid and certain, even if I could not remember its name. *I don't have to call out its name to fly the aircraft.*

This is also true of myself. I can live my life without people calling my name. Especially once I'm up in the sky, no one will call me by my name. I don't need a name.

The woman in front of me touched my shoulder.

“Don’t worry. You can recall the memories someday.”

Apparently, I was comforted by her, probably because of my tears. I was not weeping because I was feeling sad. I did not have to recall them.

A simple meal was served.

It looked like canned food that had been heated up. The stew looked as if it had already been digested. Biscuits were as dry as a parched swamp. Then there was the coffee with the oil settled in it. They were all good enough for me.

Since I and she were the only ones at dinner, we talked about harmless topics. She told me that my bangs were a little long and suggested to me that I should have them trimmed. I thought that it was a good idea. So, I asked to borrow her scissors. She started cracking up for some reason. Then she suddenly stopped laughing and said that she would love to cut it for me. But, she told me that she should not do so.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because the day after I gave him a haircut, he was shot down.” As she said this, she tried to smile just with her mouth. The area under her eye twitched once. She put one hand on her cheek and faked the twitch by looking down.

“The fact that you cut his hair had nothing to do with the result,” I said.

“Sure.”

“To worry about such things is not very characteristic of a scientist.”

“You’re right.”

“We tend to look for good luck, but it usually has nothing to do with anything,” I spoke. I might have been in a relatively good mood. “For example, the way we tie our shoes on the day we fly, or the pendant we wear only on the day we go on a mission.”

“Who are you talking about?”

“Well, whom that might be? But, everyone has such rules. Most of the time, without exception, it works, but there’s one last time when it doesn’t work. And that’s the only time it doesn’t work.”

“True.” She nodded. “Come to think of it, you were talking about someone called the Teacher at the hospital. Why is that person called the Teacher? A nickname? Or, some kind of lucky charm?”

“Code name.”

“Ah, in short, you pilots use such names during the flight, correct?”

“Yes. The Teacher was a genius of the fighter pilot. Everyone knew him. He was the legendary ace pilot.”

“Have you met him?”

“Well.” I closed my eyes. “I’m not sure.”

A dark place.

Red light.

Where is this?

It got brighter in an instant.

The blue sky spread out.

An image of an aircraft in front to the left.

It’s of tractor configuration.

It was approaching me while banking, with its wings tilted.

I was already diving, and was pitching upward from below.

The opponent passed by me overhead.

To the backside.

I turned around.

The one shook the wings. *Is it a greeting?*

Then, it climbed up.

I hurriedly lifted the nose of the aircraft to make it pitch upward.

I sank into the seat and looked at the one.

The aircraft that was supposed to be climbing had already disappeared.

I searched for it.

Rolling over, and flying inverted. It’s toward the ground.

Behind me.

When did it get there, before I realized it?

Did it stall the aircraft?

It did not look like it was flying that slowly.

It was closing in on me.

Very fast.

I saw a black marking on its cowling.

A black cat.

I evaded to the left.

I deflected the flaps downward.

Not good.

I can't make it.

I opened my eyes.

The breathing that had stopped returned. My body was almost quivering. My teeth chattered even though it was not cold. *Formidable. It was a terrifying presence.* I wondered why it was frightening.

“You’re tired, aren’t you?” She said gently.

That’s right. I was conversing with her. What were we talking about?

I was also feeling the aftermath of something horrible.

A shuddering sensation down my spine ...

I wondered what it was.

It faded away and disappeared.

All the sensations were disappearing.

“Do you want to get some sleep? In another three hours or so, Hayase will be here. He’s going to examine you again.”

“Oh, you mean the hypnosis?”

“Don’t worry. It’s a medical treatment. You know, you will get better.”

I wanted to get some fresh air. The air here was heavy, like mud. I could not tell if it was because of the dampness or the stagnation of the air. Or maybe it was just

dark, I could not tell. I could barely sense the smell of oil in the hangar. It smelled more like something else, something artificial and complicated.

I noticed that I was having a headache.

I was sure that they would object to my going out there. They had to work so hard to hide the aircraft in the leaves.

I told her I wanted to take a rest, and she led me to a room. We walked up the stairway, made the return trip through the tunnel, and entered a room, which was near the room in which I saw the bearded man. It was a small room with a bunk bed. The only light source was a single stained fluorescent lamp.

“Do you think you can sleep here?” She asked.

“Yes.” I nodded.

There was a new blanket on the bed. That was enough for me. She told me that I had better keep the lights on. She watched me lie down on the bed and then left the room.

The sound of footsteps faded away and it became quiet.

I felt a little calmed down.

I had a feeling that things were going in a different direction than I had expected. I had not cast suspicion on her before, but I was beginning to think slightly that she was deceiving me. I was also having a small speculation that she was trying to use me.

What I mean by “small” is that it’s not a big deal either way.

I kept my eyes open for a while.

The fluorescent light was humming faintly.

I looked at the stains and the cracks on the walls, then the tarnish of the door’s metal fittings, and so on, while lying on my side. *If I close my eyes, will I be able to see the sky again? Or, if I keep my eyes open, will Suito Kusanagi come in from that door? Which do I desire?* That was what I imagined.

Today, more than anything, I was happy to be able to get on an aircraft for the first time in a long time. I really enjoyed it. *I want to do that again. I thought I’d run out of*

fuel, but it looks like there's at least a fuel tank here.

“After all, there is Sanka here,” I uttered.

Sanka? Sanka ... Sanka. Sanka! Right, it is the name of that aircraft. It is called Sanka. I am recalling that. It's a beautiful aircraft. Very light. Pusher configuration, with the engine and the propeller mounted on the tail. It was an innovative design and revolutionary for a fighter aircraft. The high efficiency that stems from the pusher configuration is typically utilized for the size reduction of the main wings, which would result in better acceleration at high velocity. However, Sanka intentionally avoids decreasing the wing size. As a result, it is lighter and has better turning performances. It is agile and has an excellent climbing ability.

I had always piloted that aircraft model.

Right, always.

Have I piloted it from the beginning? Have I ever piloted another plane? I could not recall that.

Anyway, I love that aircraft.

More than anyone.

-3-

I thought I had been asleep for a long time. But I did not have a clock here, and there were no windows, so I could not tell precisely how much time had passed. I was not feeling bad. At least, I felt like the bad mood had settled entirely, and the top supernatant layer was clear.

I did not really know where I was. It was neither the base quarters nor a hospital.

I felt like I had a lot of dreams.

After I escaped from the hospital, I drove away with a woman with a husky voice. If I remembered right, I was shot in a phone booth at the station. At a drive-in restaurant, a drunken man tried to pick a quarrel with me. I got off the train at a station at a mountain pass, and a woman came to pick me up in her car. A man asked me some questions in a room that looked like a hospital. I looped the loop with a biplane. I went through a tunnel and saw a beautiful fighter aircraft. I could not tell if all these things were a dream or reality.

But, now I got my feet off the bed and put on my shoes. My shoes were placed right where my feet landed. *These shoes must be mine. The fact that I'm in this place probably means that almost all of them were not in a dream? Anyway, no matter how much of this is reality and how much is a dream, I have to come to terms with what is in front of me right now.*

I was lucky, because at least I have not woken up in the morning and found myself having become a cat, an insect, or another creature. I gazed at my hands. They were human hands. My hands were small. *I am often told that I have thin fingers. Who tells me that? I cannot remember.* With my little hands, I rubbed my face once as if I were washing it. *Oh, that's right. I have to cut my hair. Where would I find the scissors?* But first, I wanted to smoke a cigarette. My jacket was on the bed, so I searched the pockets. There were a pack of cigarettes and a lighter in it. I looked around, but there was no ashtray. Maybe it was a non-smoking area. I decided to be patient.

There was another thing in the jacket pocket. It was an identification card. It had my picture on it. And an identification number. But there was no name on it. *It's the same as part numbers, and the system uses the numbers for reference. The plug is not labeled as a "plug". It just has a model number engraved on it.*

It's all about who I am. My name is irrelevant to me. If someone looks up my data while referring to my identification number, my functionality shows up. If I am incorporated into an aircraft, then the specifications will be fully exerted. Unless I am already worn out or depleted, that is.

I heard footsteps. I could tell that someone stopped in front of the door. Then I heard a knock.

"Yes," I replied.

The door opened, and a woman was standing there.

"Good morning." She greeted. "Did you sleep well? How is your condition?"

"I slept well."

"What is my name?"

"Let's see ..." I gazed into her. Of course, I remembered her face. But, I could not recall her name. I shook my head horizontally. "I'm sorry."

"Never mind. Sorry, I have just asked you an odd question."

“Umm, is there a place where I can smoke?” I asked.

“Ah, yes. Okay, I’ll show you there. Put your jacket on.”

I followed her, while walking in a dim tunnel. At the end of the passage, we opened the door and went up the steep stairway, which was almost like a ladder.

We entered a small, brightly lit room. There was a window. It was the brightness above the ground for the first time after a long interval.

“Oh, it’s already morning, isn’t it?” I murmured. “What time?”

“Seven in the morning,” She answered. “It’s cold, isn’t it?”

I did not feel it was that cold. We were in a wooden hut about three meters square. The stairs were encased in a wooden box. The lid of the box was open. *If you close the lid, you cannot tell that there is a staircase in it.* The window was made of glass that had lost most of its transparency.

She unlocked the bolt and opened the door.

I got outside. I could feel the cold air flowing like water. It swirled around me in a small vortex. It was damp. The ground was wet, too. The tall grasses were around me. They were moving in the wind. I saw some trees. The place looked like the top of a hill, but when I looked toward the other side, I saw a river. The place seemed to be on the slope of an embankment.

I looked up at the sky. It was clear, transparent, and blue. The clouds were just floating low in the east. The sun, already above the clouds, was white and dazzling. There was nothing flying in the sky as far as I could see.

I took a cigarette out and lit it. I inhaled, and then exhaled the smoke. The vortex around me was momentarily tainted with smoke. Then, it soon disappeared. In the blink of an eye, it was gone.

“Actually, Hayase was supposed to come here last night.” She spoke. “But he did not make it. I have not heard from him. Something might have happened to him.”

“Hayase?”

“He is the doctor who will treat you.”

“Right, I met him yesterday, didn’t I.”

“I was going to wake you up, if he came here.”

“I slept very well.”

“You were exhausted, weren’t you?”

“So, what’s next?” I asked.

She relaxed her lips.

“An interesting question. What do you want to do?”

I looked up at the sky.

What do I want to do?

“I want to fly,” I answered. “With that Sanka, I want to fly.”

“Right, that’s Sanka.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Go on, please.”

“Why is the Sanka accommodated here?”

“I don’t know. They were barely able to get just one of them. I heard that they maintained it and managed to make it flyable.”

“That aircraft has flown to this place, hasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

I looked at the direction of the river. I could see just the edge of the runway.

“What about fuel? And weapons?”

“Sorry?”

“Do you have them here?”

“Yes. I can’t say we have enough of them, though.”

“If so, I can fly.”

“Where to?”

I looked at the sky again.

“To the sky.”

“But you have to come back eventually.”

At that time, I had the notion that it was okay if I could not make it back alive.

If I can die while flying.

How can I do that?

Carrying a gun, flying up in the air, if I shoot myself in the head.

That way, the plane will stay that way, remaining intact.

I felt as if I could stay in the sky for all time to come.

I felt as if I would never fall forever.

Smoking a cigarette, I walked a little.

When I reached the top of the slope, I found a road barely wide enough for a car to pass. With a gentle curve, the road separated the forest from the plain. The field was flat and seemed to stretch to no end. There were no houses nearby. I could see small black forests, here and there.

I looked up at the sky once again. A bird was gliding with its wings spread out. I stared at it.

“Are you watching the bird?” She stood next to me.

“That bird will soon start its descent,” I said.

Three seconds later, the bird went into a dive as it fell to the right. It folded its wings and descended at a steep angle toward the ground. Raising its body horizontally near the ground, the bird flitted above the meadow with astonishing speed. Finally, as it spread its wings wide to apply air brakes suddenly, the bird disappeared. Then, in the next moment, it was flapping and rising at a gentle angle. The weight of its prey was evident in its angle of elevation.

“How could you understand that?” She asked.

“What?”

“When it started descending.”

“I do not understand such a thing.”

“But, you just said ‘soon.’”

“It will descend sometime.” I looked at her and smiled. “I mean, it flies for that reason.”

From the same hut we used to exit from the underground, we went back to the basement and had a meal. There were eight of us in the dark room. Another young woman brought soup and hot water in pots. Everyone ate in silence, quietly. I looked at everyone, and our eyes met. I seemed to be the center of attention.

“Hayase must have been caught. I’m sure of it.” Someone with his back to me said.

“Yeah, probably, he is.” Another man responded in a leisurely manner.

“He was getting so close to here, though.”

“Maybe he changed his mind and went back.”

“If that’s the case, then he should have contacted us.”

“He could not do so, for some reason.”

“We should abandon this place, as soon as possible.”

“I have no intention of telling you that your decision is wrong.” The man who said that took a spoonful of soup to his mouth, and took a glance at me, while swallowing it. “Are they coming to kill us? Or, do they want their precious weapon back?”

“Can’t you at least be quiet while eating?” She looked back and said.

Even though she was looking in my direction, she did not make eye contact with me.

The sound of everyone eating echoed through the room. There were the quiet clinking sounds of the dishes and utensils.

By the way, the bearded man was not at the table. *I wonder what he’s doing now. He must be the commander here.*

No one said anything until the meal was over.

They want their precious weapon back?

I wonder if it is the Sanka.

No, it's not. I can see it in that man's eyes.

It's me.

The enemies were either going to kill me, or they were going to get me back. The tone of their voice was that they did not want to be involved and bothered by the issues having to do with me. To be sure, I could understand that my arrival was causing more troubles. I could feel the tension in the air around me.

The door was opened, and the bearded man entered the room. He stood at the end of the table and did not sit down. The room became quiet.

“In 40 minutes, we are withdrawing from this place. The two planes will fly over the eastern pass. They will meet up with our support unit at the lakeside. The rest of us will go down the river by boat.”

“Are we cruising in the daytime? That'll become a good target.” Someone said.

“There's a truck waiting for us 20 kilometers downstream.”

“Who's going to pilot the plane?” Sagara asked.

“Fukuda and Hashizume will do.”

“Sir, umm ...” One man stood up and spoke. “A biplane would be fine, but I've never piloted Sanka before. I think it's impossible for me to pilot such a weird plane.”

“I will get on it,” I spoke up.

Everyone turned toward me. The bearded man was staring at me.

Sagara looked at my face and shook her head horizontally.

“I'm the right one for the duty,” I said. “As long as you tell me where to land on, I'll deliver it responsibly.”

Silence prevailed for about 10 seconds. That silence, in other words, was their reply. There was no rebuttal from anyone. Finally, the leader glared at me and nodded.

“What about the maintenance? What about armament?” I asked.

“We can't leave anything here. We'll take everything we can carry.”

“Let’s get ready right away, shall we?” I stood up.

The bearded man walked up to me.

He was staring fixedly at me. His face was full of wrinkles. His eyes were gray and were different in size with each other, as if one of them is an artificial eye. His suspicions, expectations, hatred, and love for me all seemed to be trapped in his eyes.

“Don’t betray us.” He warned in a low, whispering voice.

“Betray what?” I asked.

Those who at the next table stood up at once.

The bearded man turned his outstretched hand toward them and gestured for them to stop.

“In the unlikely event that you encounter an aircraft, you must shoot it down.”

“Is there any chance of that?”

“There is.”

“I see. I will shoot it down.”

“That is the condition under which I will grant you permission to fly.”

“Roger. Please arm Sanka with weapons immediately.”

“Very well.” The bearded man nodded. “Let’s do our best.”

Everyone stood up and rushed out of the room. I wanted to go to the aircraft right away. But, she grabbed my arm, and I stayed there. The bearded man, who had been gazing at me all the way, also left the space. Just I and she were alone in the room.

“We may not be able to meet again.” She said. “I thought we could be together with a little longer, though. I have a responsibility for you until you return to a normal human being. However ...”

“I am normal.”

“Yes, maybe, you are.”

“You don’t have to feel responsible.”

“But, I myself don’t think so. Don’t you hold a grudge against me?”

“I don’t have a grudge against anyone.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“As long as we live, we might be able to meet again someday.”

“I wonder whether I will be able to remember you by that time.” I smiled.

“Do remember me.” She touched me. “Please.”

“I cannot make any promise.”

I left her and headed for the hangar. Three men were around the aircraft. The two of them were below the fuselage. There was ammunition on a cart, and they were starting to load it. The other man was near the engine in the rear part.

“What about the fuel?” I asked.

“It’s already in the tank.” The man beside the cart answered, “Are you sure such a thing can actually fly? Which direction does it go?” He pointed to the nose and tail of the aircraft.

He might have never seen a pusher-configuration aircraft.

As I walked to the engine, the man held out his hand toward me. I did not understand what his gesture meant.

“I’m Hashizume.” The man said. “I am the one who was first commanded to pilot this, before you were.”

“I’m sorry about being so intrusive,” I apologized.

“No, you helped me. I have never piloted this. I don’t have the confidence to fly this well.”

We had a light handshake.

“Have you piloted any other fighter aircraft?”

“Never. The guy who brought this plane here was injured. If I remember right, he was alive for about a week since he got here. I learned from him only how to pilot this ...”

“May I get into the cockpit?” I asked.

“Sure, why not?” The man seemed to be trying to smile.

“When was this aircraft brought here?”

“Two months ago.”

It has not been flown for two months, I thought.

I hope the oil isn't clotted.

I walked around to the front of the main wing from the other side, and got onto the steps. The canopy was unlocked. No one was inside. Suito Kusanagi was not there either. Just for me, the fiberglass seat was straightforward and clear.

I sat down on the seat.

My shoulders and knees felt the prickling sensation, as if cold blood started flowing through my entire body in an instant. Maybe it was because my oil was still cold.

I touched the control stick softly. I tilted it slightly to the left and right. While paying attention to the main wings, I checked the movement of the ailerons. I looked at the instrument panel. I wondered if the battery was okay.

“Sasakura.” I poked my head out of the cockpit and called out to the man below me.

“Sorry?”

“Oh ... Umm, do you have a spare battery?”

“Yes. But, you probably wouldn't need that.”

“I may not be able to start the engine. This one is particularly heavy. It might be a good idea to hook up a spare battery at least at the start.”

“How shall I connect them in parallel?”

“In front of the cowling. There's a jack under the right side.”

The man went over there to inspect it.

“Oh, there it is. Got it.”

No need for a radio. If I don't fly high, I don't need a heater. I checked the positions of

the rudder pedals and slid the seat. There were many scratches, but it was a clean cockpit. No kill mark to indicate how many targets it has shot down. Only one of the gauges was cracked, but it would probably work.

“Hurry!” I heard a man’s voice.

The bearded man was standing on the stairway. Over the railing, he was leaning toward us.

“We are moving the schedule forward. Speeding it up as fast as possible.”

He was coming down.

“How much longer will it take?”

“It’ll still take at least 20 minutes.” The man under the main wing replied.

“Do it within 15 minutes. Hurry up.” He looked up at me in the cockpit. “Take off as soon as you are ready.”

I raised my hand in response.

-4-

As the Sanka was being pulled out, all of a sudden, there was a ground tremor. There seemed to be an explosion nearby. A little later, a wind mixed with sand hit the airframe.

I looked at the sky.

Two aircrafts.

Both were twin-engined attack aircrafts.

Another explosion echoed. This time, I saw a column of smoke rising into the sky. It was close. Maybe 200 meters away.

“I’m starting the engine,” I shouted. “Connect the backup battery!”

I jumped onto the main wing and got into the cockpit. I hurriedly put on the seatbelt. I was not wearing a helmet or goggles, but that did not matter. I looked up at the sky. *One attack aircraft. Its altitude is 300. Next time, it’ll target this place. We can’t escape from the attack. I have no choice but to count on the fluctuation in wind speed.*

I heard another engine sound. I saw a biplane leaving for the runway. It seemed to be taking off.

I turned on the main switch. As I suspected, the battery indicator was pointing at the yellow condition. *It won't have the strength to turn the engine over and over again.* I heard a noise and looked back. It seemed that a spare battery was connected to the jack. The man tapped the fuselage to let me know.

I gave the signal to start the engine.

I turned on the starter.

A dull sound. Then, before long, the propeller started turning.

No explosion.

I stopped it once.

I waited for the voltage to come back up.

Please, let the engine start this time.

Starting the engine.

The propeller was turning.

A dull explosion.

The airframe shook.

No luck.

A roaring sound. It was close by.

Is it the ground, or the aircraft that is shaking?

Sand filled the air around me, and the sight quickly turned into complete whiteout. I could not see anything. *It's still shaking.*

The vibration persisted.

The engine was running.

I looked back, but could not see the propeller.

I pushed up the throttle just slightly.

After a delay, the engine speed followed suit. It was still running at about 500

revolutions per minute.

Still, it was somehow managing to turn.

I could somehow see outside through the canopy.

Flames to my right. Something seemed to be burning a little ahead to the front.

The engine revved up to 900.

The runway was appearing in sight.

The view was clear in the direction. I wondered if that biplane had taken off safely.

The screen of dust disappeared, and I could see the sky. I saw a single aircraft image moving away to the right and out of sight. *Where is the other aircraft? Probably, it is chasing the biplane.*

How many bombs does it have? When it runs out of them, it will shoot at us with machine guns. But, I believe they aren't expecting this plane to fly.

I checked the oil pressure gauge.

I locked the canopy. I signaled to the men outside with my hand.

As if to make an escape, they were moving away.

I pushed up the throttle. The value of the revolutions per minute was 1,500. The airframe shook.

I released the brakes.

Switching the fuel route.

Setting the trimming.

The aircraft started to move forward slowly.

The path to the runway was grassy and sloping. My Sanka ran down the slope as if it were rolling out.

Braking once. Then, changing the direction.

I opened the throttle further more.

The revolution rate increases.

It is breathing.

Yes, I know this.

This is the habit of this engine.

Okay, it keeps revolving.

Slowly, it was revving up again.

Left aileron up, right aileron down. Then, deflecting them the other way.

I deflected the canard wing elevators up and down.

The revolution rate was reaching 2,000.

Let's go.

The front is clear.

What about the sky above?

The black smoke continued to rise from the left.

The white smoke had gone away now.

The Sanka started running.

An attack aircraft was coming in from the right at a low altitude.

I pushed the throttle up further more.

It fired its machine guns at me.

Rows of columns, caused by the dirt kicked up by the strafing bullets, appeared on the ground. The Sanka was passing through them.

Acceleration.

Go.

The airframe vibrated.

The runway surface was uneven.

The condition was unsuitable for the Sanka's landing gears.

I persevered.

I looked behind me to the left.

The attack aircraft, which had passed me by, was making a turn. It was trying to get behind me. *If I get shot from behind, it's over.*

The engine was finally revving up smoothly.

I could hear nothing anymore.

Vibration.

It had become one with my body.

I saw a path in the sky in front of me.

I grasped the air.

Pulling the control stick for the elevators.

Quietly, my feet left the ground.

Tranquility.

Smooth.

Then, the wings glided as if they were licking on the air.

I held the nose of the aircraft with the elevators. I kept it that way until it gained speed.

The ground was still close. Keep the low pass flight all the way.

I was flying toward the river. Lowering the altitude further, I approached the surface of the water.

The altitude of 3 meters.

Behind me, the enemy aircraft was at 200.

My Sanka was picking up speed.

It was getting rather quiet.

The one is ready to shoot at me.

Watch me.

I pulled the control stick to deflect the elevators.

My Sanka quietly pitches upward.

Ascending.

The opponent also pointed up.

It shot bullets at me, but I was positioned higher than that.

Ascending.

It passed underneath my aircraft, to be in front of me.

While rolling, I confirmed the situation.

Engine running slow.

Immediate stalling.

My Sanka fell to the right. *That's this habit.*

The airframe was shaken, and the nose of the aircraft pointed down at once.

I am falling.

High throttle.

Half flaps. Air brakes.

Elevators for pitching upward.

Bringing back the flaps.

With the ailerons, banking to the left.

Adjustment to the right with the rudders.

The enemy aircraft was approaching right in the front.

Disengaging the safety lock of the machine gun.

Oil pressure check.

I rolled to the right once, and located the other aircraft.

I got closer to it.

I positioned myself between the exhaust streaks from the twin engine formation.

Fire.

Escaping to the left.

First, one down.

Climbing up. *Where is the other one?*

I see you there.

The enemy aircraft is burning beside me. The right engine is catching fire and starting to tilt in that direction.

High throttle.

My Sanka soared while rolling.

Aerially light.

In no time at all, I went up to by the altitude of 300 meters.

While flying inverted, I checked the enemy coordinates.

I could not locate the biplane.

Three plumes of smoke were rising from the ground.

I noticed the one I shot down earlier plunging to the other side of the river.

There were four smoke columns.

Is there only one enemy flying?

Mine is a fighter aircraft. Attack planes are no match for me.

I was descending toward the direction of the next enemy aircraft.

My opponent was flying straight up. It was obvious that it was trying to escape.

I was approaching from behind the target. *I am faster.*

It turned to the left.

Still, climbing maneuver continued.

When I was about to shoot the gun in five seconds, I rolled and checked my surroundings. I could see two aircrafts above me. They were still small, but they were coming toward me.

Good job. They must be fighter escorts.

Four planes in total are converging into this location. Does it mean that this is a significant strongpoint?

I don't think they knew that we have a fighter aircraft.

I got behind the target.

Fire.

Break away to the right.

High throttle.

I ascended.

The two planes above me had already split into two ways.

I turned the nose toward the one that was coming down first.

At the same time, I followed the trajectory of the other aircraft. As I thought, the one was trying to come around behind me.

The attack aircraft I had dealt with earlier plunged into the forest.

The orange fire was visible for a moment. No sound could be heard.

Now, two down. Another two left to go.

The engine condition was getting better and better. The sound was becoming smoother. I checked the oil pressure. The oil temperature was normal. I still had enough ammunition to shoot down 15 more targets.

Getting to the altitude of 500, I started turning.

I spent more time watching the birds coming from below.

The other one also started circling.

Let's dance.

I cut into the circle of turning at once. But, I quickly brought it back.

Roll.

Would the bird from below come first?

Up.

While maintaining the inverted orientation, I took the plunge.

The opponent deflected to the right. *It seems to be surprised. Is it a beginner?*

I easily went around behind it.

But, the one above me was coming obliquely from the left.

Revving the engine.

While using the elevators to hold the airframe, I slowed down with the flaps to fake the move.

I will get it a little closer to me.

I pulled the flaps back in an instant.

Elevators neutral.

My aircraft accelerated.

I ascended slightly.

I got ahead of the opponent.

Up.

The opponent pointed upward, but it was a bit late.

I was flying inverted.

I saw the two enemy planes toward the ground.

Getting up even more.

Diving.

Roll.

The plane above me fell to the left. *Is it trying to escape below?*

The one beneath it was trying to climb.

I choked the engine.

Full flaps.

It became quiet.

I heard the sound of the wings cutting through the wind.

Getting it down slightly.

I did not roll to fake.

While going down, I had the aircraft horizontally oriented.

My body was pulled with the belt.

How light this aircraft is.

The enemy aircraft appeared in front of me.

I shot at it for a second.

Up.

Turning over.

While the world revolved about me, I looked at the one below me.

Flames.

I heard an explosive sound.

Now, three down.

I kept on descending.

The remaining one started turning. *He's going to fight me. That's the way to go.*

Half throttle.

I made a banking move with half flaps.

I was sweating.

The body is getting hot.

I released my left hand from the throttle lever and shook the wrist.

I was looking to my left.

Will my opponent come out first?

The turn radius was getting smaller and smaller.

I felt as if I could hear music.

I wondered if it was the rhythm of the engine cams.

Checking the meters. The oil pressure was normal. The oil temperature was a bit high.

Oh, I have yet to jettison the drop tank.

I think I can do it without throwing it away.

I took a deep breath slowly.

Calm down.

I am alive.

That's right. This is the place where I live.

I tilted the control stick to the left slightly.

It was not anyone else's decision. My body moved on its own.

I erected the wing upward like a sword.

The opponent turned to face me as well.

We were getting closer.

It shot at me, so I adjusted the attitude by getting the aircraft down.

We passed by each other.

Full flaps.

Keeping the engine slow.

Up.

I half-rolled at the top of the half-looping maneuver, and made an Immelmann turn.

The opponent tried to make a turn to face me.

Closing in.

I shook the airframe with the rudders.

My right hand wants to shoot the gun.

Is that too much to deal with?

The opponent was descending to the left.

I rolled, and pitched upward.

Toward the ground.

I pushed up the throttle.

On pursuit.

The speed increased rapidly.

I made a banking move slowly.

To the right.

I was 300 meters behind the enemy aircraft.

Same speed.

Approaching the ground.

Black forest.

More to the right.

I choked the throttle.

It's time for the opponent to apply the brakes.

I guess it would make a feint move for the starter.

The enemy may think about getting it up and stalling. It's a risky gamble, but if it works, it'd be a lifesaver. But he's conservative and probably won't do anything like that.

He's making a feint maneuver.

I evaded it lightly, and stayed on its tail.

200 meters.

It rolled to the left by 180 degrees.

The ground was getting very close underneath us.

Still, I chased it.

100 meters.

A bit more.

Fire.

Pitching up to break away.

Did it get hit?

I held my breath and endured the acceleration.

I am pointing upward. My body was feeling lighter.

Rolling. I saw no enemy aircraft.

Flames rose from the forest, and white smoke spread in an instant.

It's too bad. It seems that it is over already.

I brought back to the upright flight.

Climbing up further.

I banked the wings to look around.

I made a half roll once.

I checked the direction toward the ground.

Five columns of smoke.

Half roll again.

I checked the airspace toward the zenith.

The vast sky stretched on forever.

Nothing else was flying anymore.

It's a beautiful sky. No cloud.

Shall I go up a little?

I turned on the radio. But, probably no one would contact me. I ascended to the altitude of 1,000 meters at once. *Okay, there is no enemy aircraft anywhere.*

There were thin clouds behind the mountains. They were the only things that I could not see.

Ah, I feel good.

How splendid it is.

My entire body was hot.

But, the air temperature was low. And the air was thin. I was not even wearing an oxygen mask. *I can't stay here forever.*

I wondered if it would be better for me to land.

I still had not heard anything about where I was supposed to fly to.

If this plane could hold two people, I would give Fuko a ride. Or maybe I could take Sagara, who was on the ground, for a ride. *I'd like to take her up to a height that a biplane can't reach. Then, maybe she would understand a little more about my feelings.*

I slowly descended, thinking of things I would never have thought of on the ground.

-5-

I landed the plane, while making sure not to break the landing gears. *Gently, softly.* Black smoke was rising around the hangar. There were four dark blue vans parked on the embankment. There seemed to have been some commotion on the ground as well. But, there was nothing I could do about it. I felt like I no longer cared about anything such as that anymore. Yes, I was having enough fun in the sky, and I probably had been completely intoxicated.

I taxied closer to the smoke, and then stopped the engine. There was still 70 percent of fuel left in the tank. The flight time was about 20 minutes at most.

I looked up at the sky again. Smoke clouded half of the sky.

I pushed up the canopy to get some fresh air. There was a slight breeze. My sweat-soaked bangs were cold. I unbuckled my belt and stepped out onto the main wing. Then I jumped down to the ground.

I lost my balance and fell forward. I put my hands on the ground. My body was still leaning, and I felt like I was going to fall down. But I held the ground, caught my breath, and stood up again. *Oh, I'm planesick after all, I thought. It is like I have drunk alcohol. Of course, I don't feel bad. Rather, on the contrary, I feel good.*

A few people were approaching me.

I was almost giddy just by staring ahead, but I waited there.

There were five, maybe six. They were all wearing helmets and deep blue uniforms. *They are not the ones who were here before.*

On the embankment, a car door slid open, and one person stepped out from inside. It was a woman. She turned her body slightly sideways and walked down the sloping ground toward me. In the meantime, I took several deep breaths. I wanted

to sit down somewhere soon.

But, those who were surrounding me remained silent. They seemed to be staring at me. *Now I am realizing that they are holding guns.*

Well, they're the enemies. That's too bad.

I don't mind being shot dead now.

I've had that much fun at the end.

Finally, the woman came close to me. She was tall and dressed in a black two-piece suit.

She stood in front of me, a meter away.

I looked at her face.

It was a familiar face to me, but I could not remember her name.

"It was splendid." She said. "You have done marvelously."

"Thank you," I replied tentatively.

"I promise you will be able to get on Sanka again. Come back with me."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"You have my word. Your flight has proven that your abilities have returned."

"Thank you so much, ma'am." I found myself raising a hand, and was surprised by that hand. Indeed, I was about to give her a salute.

I straightened my posture and saluted her.

She responded by raising one hand lightly.

"Put the gun down." She looked back and commanded.

They all lowered their guns. One of them walked to her.

"Ma'am, there's still one person left inside." Lifting his helmet, the man reported.

"Is the one Sagara?"

"Yes, probably ... She is resisting with a gun. Ma'am, what shall we do? Shall we blast it?"

"I give you permission." She nodded.

“Wait. I’ll go inside to talk with her.” I stepped forward. “Is anyone else coming with me?”

The man did not reply.

“Is the person who is inside Aoi Sagara?” The woman asked me.

“I’m not sure,” I replied. I thought I answered correctly. “But, that person is an acquaintance of mine.”

The man came in front of me. He looked at me as if he was glaring at me.

“Eight of those who resisted are already dead. The only one left is that woman.”

“Six people on our side died in the sky.” The tall woman said in a flat tone. *She must be talking about the aircrafts I shot down.*

“I’ll go back and check what’s going on inside.” I proposed. “I might be able to convince her to surrender.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “But there is no need for you to push yourself. If we compare your life to hers, you are more important right now.”

The man moved even closer to me, pulled out the gun on his waist, grabbed the barrel, and held it out to me.

“I don’t need that.” I shook my head horizontally.

“But you might be shot by her.”

“No, I will be okay.”

The hangar had collapsed, and the interior was half-buried in the earth. Rubble was strewn about. I straddled a fallen frame, and entered the ruined construction.

Before going up the stairs, I picked up a lamp that was hanging on the wall. I placed it on the stair step and checked my surroundings. I sniffed to make sure that fuel was not leaking. Then I took out a lighter from my pocket and lit the lamp.

I was having a headache, but I did not feel lightheaded anymore. I walked up the stairs and into the darkness.

The lights were out. It was pitch black.

“Sagara!” I shouted.

Where is she?

I decided to check each room, one by one, in a sequential order.

There was no one in the room where we had eaten. There was no sign of anyone in the corridor either. Next, I went to see the room where the leader of the group had been. It was almost completely collapsed. The floor was wet. Water was still falling from the ceiling. Apparently, she was not likely found within this vicinity.

I turned around and went the other way through the tunnel.

There was a fork in the path. One branch led to a stairway. It would take a person to the cabin on the ground, but the above-ground portion would have already been demolished.

I chose the other way.

Oh, she told me that it led to a sewage canal and that she could go far. Maybe she's already gone.

After a while, I came to a slightly larger space. There was a round concrete wall. I wondered if there was water flowing underneath. It was too dark for me to tell for sure.

“Sagara!” I called out her name.

If anything, I was beginning to hope that she was running away. It would be better for her, surely.

“I’m here.” I heard her whisper. *Just below me.*

I stepped out of the hole, and stretched my legs out below me.

There was another hole underneath.

It was about a meter in diameter. I held out the lamp into it. About three meters deep, I saw her white face, appeared to be floating in the air.

“Are you by yourself?” She asked.

“I’m by myself.”

“How is the situation on the ground?”

“Your allies were wiped out.”

“Where are the busters?”

“They’re still up there.”

“If so, how have you managed to come down here?”

“I told them I would try to bring you up there.”

She closed her eyes.

Silence.

Her eyes opened.

She was staring fixedly at me.

“You cannot do that.” She was carrying a gun. “It’s over. I’m going to die here.”

She put the gun to the side of her head.

“Why do you intend to die?” I asked.

“They will make use of me. I mean, my knowledge.”

I said nothing. *I cannot argue with that*, I thought.

“You’ve returned to the state of Kildren. I’m the only one who knows why.”

“Have I returned to that?”

“While you were sleeping, I tested your physiological conditions.”

“When and where?”

“In the bed.”

“You mean, in the loft?”

“Yes. I checked the results of the injection at the hospital.”

“What? Hospital?”

“Don’t you remember that? I visited your sickroom, didn’t I?”

“I do remember that.”

“I gave you an injection.”

“Yes.”

“I found out the result of that yesterday. There was no mistake in my theory.”

“Theory?”

“I’m sorry. I had no choice but to conduct an experiment on you. I could not find another way of doing it. Now, everything will be as it was, as if nothing has happened. I’m satisfied with the fact that I could clean up the mess. I’m just sorry I had to alter your life like this ... I’m really sorry about just that.”

“Life?” I wondered what she meant by the words “like this.”

“Do you want to be a normal human being again? Or do you prefer being a Kildren?”

I’m not sure.

Such a question ...

“You are going to be a pilot again, aren’t you?” She asked. “You fly an aircraft again, aren’t you?”

“Probably.” I nodded.

I can understand that question.

“Yes, you might want to do that.”

“There is no other choice.”

“You may cease to be you. And yet, that is the path you have chosen.”

“I am always what I am.”

“Yes, you are correct. It is the right thing to do. You are fundamentally different from us.”

“I don’t think so.” I shook my head horizontally.

“I think I can write a thesis now.” She smiled. “It’s too late, though.”

“You will get out of here alive.”

“No, say no more.”

“You can escape through this sewer. Don’t give up.”

“Will you run away with me?”

“I’m afraid I cannot do so.”

She looked at me and remained silent.

I waited.

She blinked once, stared at me, and spoke.

“I want to ask you for doing me just one favor.”

“What is it?”

“Shoot me.” She advanced forward crawling. “Do you have a gun?”

“I don’t.”

“If so, use this gun.”

“I won’t shoot you. I promised them that I would get you out.”

“It goes against my religion to shoot myself. That’s why I’ve never been able to kill myself. Please. Take this gun and shoot me in the head. Then, let me hold that gun in my hand. It will prevent you from going through further trouble.”

She handed the gun to me.

She turned her head to the side. Then she crossed herself modestly and clasped the fingers of both hands together.

“With my Lord in Heaven ...”

I put my finger on the trigger.

Then, I applied the force on it.

Fire.

Blasting sound.

Gun powder and smoke.

The eternal instantaneity.

Her body was flung to the back of the space.

Ah, how pitiful, I thought.

And then, I thought again. *No, that’s not it.*

I entered the pipe, and fabricated the scene by letting her right hand hold the gun.

I did not see her face.

Where is her Lord?

Is this her Heaven?

It was a noble spirit.

I made a salute.

This place is not the sky.

The surrounding is dirt.

Her body is lying there, not falling anywhere.

Blood flows out.

How beautiful.

“Hey, where are you?” I heard a voice from the upper hole.

I went out to the watercourse and climbed up to the upper opening.

“I’m here.”

I illuminated the vicinity with the lamp.

I heard some noise.

A blinding light flashed.

“What was that gunfire?”

“Sounds like it’s down there.”

The lights were getting closer.

I stepped back.

The men exited from the hole, and peered into the tunnel just below them.

I went back alone through the upper hole.

As I went out of the tunnel, I passed by one of the men.

“She’s over there,” I told the one where she was.

When I walked out to the hangar, I finally saw the natural light.

I stepped over the rubble and got outside. *Blinding.* I put out the flame of the

lamp. The tall woman spotted me and came over to me.

“I could not save her,” I reported it.

“Well ...” She made a short sigh.

“Ma’am, may I smoke here?”

“Go ahead. Do you have it?”

“Yes.”

I took a pack out of my pocket and picked up a cigarette. There were not many left. It was the cigarette I had bought with Fuko’s money.

I lit it with the lighter.

I inhaled the smoke deeply.

I remembered the color of the blood that flowed out from her head.

I looked up at the sky and neutralized the image of the blood in my mind.

“Why did you shoot down a friendly plane?” The woman in front of me asked.

“I did not know they were on my side.”

“Why couldn’t you tell?”

“Maybe it’s the effect of the drugs. I’m feeling much better now.”

“Yeah, that reply is good enough.” She nodded. Then, she relaxed her lips just slightly. “I am glad you are alive.”

“Are you glad because not only I’m alive but also I have the functionality to fight?”

She too picked up a cigarette and lit it.

“To the car.” She exhaled the first smoke, and started walking.

“What about that Sanka?” I was following her.

“Don’t worry. We’ll carry that out.”

“I can easily convey it by flying it. Do you want me to pilot it?”

“No, this area is designated as a no-fly zone. We can deal with the previous flights as an unavoidable emergency. But flying from now on is a bad idea. The press is

going to find out about this, and they are going to come and get us.”

“Sorry, I don’t understand well what you are talking about.”

“Me, neither.” She stopped and smiled at me. She was showing the happiest face that I had ever seen out of her.

She put one hand on my back and pushed it. We made our way through the bushes and went up the slope.

The sky was blue and bright.

The smoke was almost gone.

Everything is purified.

When I looked back, I could see the runway clearly. There was just the Sanka. I saw three men standing near it. *How are they going to carry it? Are they going to bring in a large trailer up here?*

Meanwhile, on the other side of the bank, there were two men. They were carrying something out of a shack with a leaning roof and collapsed walls. That’s what I came out from to smoke this morning.

I inhaled the smoke into my chest and exhaled it again.

My physical condition was gradually returning to normal.

I feel fine now.

My head is clear.

Like the sky, am I purified?

The path of the embankment looked like a beautiful curve. It was as if it was part of a huge ring.

At the end of the arc, a bird flapped its wings and soared. It was grasping something. My eyes followed it as it flew low into the forest.

“By the way, how did you manage to recover so well?” She asked me. She was still holding the cigarette in one hand. The fingers of her glove were clasping it. I remembered seeing several times the figure that her gloved fingers were assuming.

Then, as I stared at her face, I was reminded.

“Kai ...” I uttered. *Yes, it is her name.*

Kai tilted her head.

“Perhaps ...” I was able to recover thanks to Aoi Sagara’s treatment, yes, the secret injection.

“What?”

“No ..., nothing.”

Kai let out a breath through her nose and seemed to chuckle a little. Yes, she smiled with such a gentle face.

“Now ..., I’m going to have a hard time writing a report.” She uttered. “Four of our planes were shot down. Who on earth shot them down? Within just 20 minutes of time.”

“It was Sanka,” I answered.

She laughed, threw the cigarette away, and opened the rear door of the car.

I put out the cigarette, too.

Then, I got into the car.

Kai sat next to me and closed the door. The engine was ignited, and the car started running immediately.

I closed my eyes.

I wanted to immerse myself into a reverie.

A dream in which I am flying in the beautiful sky.

But, it did not work well. I could not see anything.

It is darkness.

The only thing I could hear was the erratic shaking of the car.

And then.

The poor sound of the engine.

“Boomerang, are you still flying?”

In the inner part of my ear, I heard a faint, familiar voice.

I listened carefully and waited for the voice.

Once again ...

Epilogue

When I wake up, the same morning as that of yesterday is waiting for me.

But I am not the same person as I was yesterday.

Before I open my eyes, I have such a hunch.

It's like a squirrel jumping from branch to branch, or a taguan. That is the discontinuity of everyday. The discontinuity of stagnant days.

I found myself in bed.

As I moved my body, the wood of the bedframe creaked painfully. In front of me was a plywood board. I saw graffiti on it, whoever wrote it.

Shoot.

Before you think you will shoot.

I chuckled a little. I got up, and put on shoes. I tied the shoelaces and then put on a jacket. I looked back at a lad sleeping on the upper bunk of the bunk bed. He was so wrapped up in the blanket that I could only see his head and the toes of his feet. The blanket was not long enough for him. *How can he fit his body into a small cockpit?*

I stepped out into the corridor and walked to the washroom. The window was dirty. I could see the runway outside. It was glowing white. The weather seemed to be fair. I wondered who would be flying today.

As I was brushing my teeth, one of my colleagues came out from another room.

“Yo,” I greeted him.

“After all, it seems that this team is going to break up.”

“You start off with ‘After all,’ eh?”

“We’re going to get transferred.” He said. He had a small bandage above his eye. I wondered if it was a pimple that was smashed. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. Is that really the case?”

“Well, I just heard it, last night.”

“From whom?”

“You were the only one who was sleeping.”

Oh, I see, I thought.

“Well, half of us got shot down. It can’t be helped.” He said and started washing his face with cold water. I was worried that the bandage would come off. After wiping his wet face with a towel, he continued. “There will be an official announcement tomorrow or the day after, so you may want to pack your things.”

“Was the announcement not official because I was asleep?”

“That’s not what happened.”

I did not have enough possessions to have to pack.

I went back to my room, changed my clothes, and went out to the cafeteria. I sat near the window through which the sunlight was entering the room, and drank a cup of bitter, thin, lousy coffee.

“It’s getting lonely, eh?” An old man wearing an apron came out of the kitchen and said. Then he turned on the TV on top of the wall.

I was not feeling lonely. *Maybe everyone is just oversleeping*, I thought to myself.

Oh, I see ... Some of them didn’t make it back yesterday. Is that what he’s referring to?

No, or maybe he heard the rumor that the base would be closed down, I realized belatedly. Still in a daze, I noticed that my mind was not working too well.

The television was reporting on the fighting that had taken place six months ago in a demilitarized zone. Some of the wreckage of the plane that had crashed into the forest was found, as well as the facility that had been buried underground. It was one of the latest scoops. A young female mediaperson was reporting from the area. The orange coat she was wearing was so flashy that it made me laugh.

“Does she think she’s Santa Claus, or something?” The old man looked at the television, and also laughed.

The reason why there was a battle in such a place has not been announced. There is a growing

belief that it was probably an unannounced attack to suppress the resistance. The government is expected to issue an official statement in the next few days, the reporter spoke.

According to an eyewitness, there was an aerial battle at low altitude that day, and one fighter aircraft that took off from the riverbank shot down four planes that had flown in. The fighter aircraft returned to the runway on the riverbank, but apparently it already disappeared the next day. There was no footage of it. I wondered what model it was. That was what I wanted to see the most. No, what I wanted to see even more was the one who was piloting the plane. *However, whatever we want to watch the most in a television program tends to be interrupted by TV commercials and never be shown even after the advertisement.*

I walked out of the building to the ashtray in front of the gate guard's office. Just before I arrived at the site, I lit a cigarette while walking. The guard looked at me, raised one hand, and smiled. It was the one whose name I did not know.

I smoked the cigarette there. Half of the view was that of the sky. The other half was the flip side of the ground. *Somebody is probably now flying somewhere.*

After refilling my lungs with smoke, I went for a run. My usual course. I got out of the gate and ran straight down the path beneath the road. Even though it was a road, there were rarely any cars on it. There was no one walking on the pathway either. The land around here was flat, and the view was splendid. *No matter how much I run, the scenery never changes, which is a little like the sky. That is interesting.*

I came to a place where I could see an iron bridge. The tall trees were lined up in a row, probably because someone planted them a long time ago. I could see three grain silos standing in the distance. The field now looked like a cheap beige carpet.

It was about four kilometers from the base. I ran up to the top of the embankment, did light exercises, and then sat down on the grass. *This is what I always do. I love the view from here.*

There was an asphalt road just below. A small van was parked there. I wondered if someone had come to the place for fishing. But the riverbank was a little too far away for that. It could get closer. Or, maybe the owner was just jogging like I was. I had seen people running in the vicinity occasionally.

The van door was opened, and a man got out. He was wearing a tie. If he was wearing a tie to go fishing or jogging, I could say it was a slightly strange taste.

He walked up to me, bowed his head in the middle, and smiled.

“Hello.” He greeted.

It was still in the morning. *So, he should have said, “Good morning,”* I thought.

“Umm, this is who I am. I’ve been waiting here to talk to you.”

I received his business card. It said “YA Newspaper Company” on it. I did not know how to read his name.

“About what?” I asked.

“Well, just a quick interview. For how long have you been at the current base?”

“Maybe, about half a year. But ...” I swallowed what would have been the subsequent statement, “I may be transferred to another location soon.” That would have been deemed confidential.

“Where were you before that?”

“I’m not sure ...” I might have chuckled a little. I felt the question was funny. I wondered why he would ask such a question to a stranger in such a place. I was the one who wanted to inquire. “Mister, why do you ask me such a question?”

“You know, I heard a rumor about you, so I came to cover the story about you.”

“About me?”

“Right. I have interviewed pilots for a long time.”

“Oh ... So, what is the rumor about me?”

“Despite being a rookie, you have been doing a great job.”

“That’s not true.”

“Moreover ...” He was staring fixedly at my face. He moved his face to observe me from different angles. “You look somewhat like a certain person. Haven’t you ever been told of that?”

“No. Whom do I resemble?”

“Suito Kusanagi.”

The name somewhat rang a bell within me, but I had never heard of it. I was probably showing a puzzled look on my face. I could not think of any words to

Speak.

“Don’t you know the name?”

“No.”

“Really, but Suito Kusanagi was once a top flying ace.”

“Umm, honestly, I am not interested in such matters.”

“Dare I imagine that many pilots admire an ace like Suito Kusanagi?”

“I doubt it. Usually, pilots do not admire anyone.”

“Oh, excuse me. Um, if you are okay, please keep what I told you between us. I apologize for that.”

“I don’t see what you’re apologizing for.”

“I’ve been keeping an eye on Suito Kusanagi. Oh, I mean, I’ve been covering the story.”

“Is the person dead?”

“That is what I heard. But, about six months ago, Suito Kusanagi suddenly came back.”

“Really.”

“You probably know of the scoop that was reported the other day. They said the battle happened in a demilitarized zone ...”

“Ah, I saw it on television.”

“Suito Kusanagi was the pilot who shot down the four planes at that time.”

“Oh? Then, do you mean that the pilot is not on my side?”

“I was actually the one who got the scoop of the news. I was watching her fly. I even took pictures.”

“May I take a look at the pictures?”

“Yes, I would like to show them to you. But, I am afraid that they were confiscated when I left them in the office. I mean, the whole pictures and even their original films.”

“How come?”

“Ah, well, you see, there are many circumstances. I am lucky that I was not killed.” He warped his mouth and smiled wryly. *Is he telling the truth?* I had a slight suspicion that he was crazy. “After that, I was transferred to a different department. So, I am taking a leave of absence, and I am here today.”

“Instead of coming to me, why don’t you go see that Suito Kusanagi person? She is back, isn’t she? You know where she is, don’t you?”

“Yes, I have met her already.” Saying so, he was staring at me. “She now works as a commander of a certain base.”

I did not understand what he was talking about. *I wonder why he has come to see me, just because I happen to resemble her ...*

“But ...” He shook his head slowly from side to side. “That was a different person. She was not Captain Kusanagi. She looked like it, but she was a completely different being.”

“Was she ...?” I found myself chuckling a little. It was because his face was looking too serious. “So?”

“So, I wanted to see you and make a confirmation.”

“What confirmation?”

“You resemble Suito Kusanagi more than that woman did.”

“But, I’m not the one.”

“Are you not?”

I stood up. I thought it was time for me to return to the base.

“Are we done?”

“Uh, yes. If you don’t mind, could we meet again?”

“I don’t mind, but I don’t have anything to tell you.”

“Thank you.” The man bowed to me.

I walked up the slope. My body was already cooled down. I decided to run another four kilometers to go back.

“Mr. Kannami.” I was called from below.

I stopped walking.

I turned around and saw him moving up the bank. He seemed to still want to talk to me. I waited for him.

“Would you mind sharing your code name with me?” It was his question.

“I cannot do that. I believe you know the rule. That’s confidential.”

“Sorry. I forgot about the rule.” He smiled. “Then, well, let me offer this to you as a gift.”

He shoved his hands into his jacket pocket.

What he pulled out appeared to be a key chain. It was a thin chain with a bent brown piece attached to it.

I took it in my hand. It was a small boomerang.

I looked up into his face.

He too was staring at me and remained motionless.

“You won’t believe this, but I am your...” He said.

“Sorry?” I could not hear his words, so I asked him back.

“Nothing.” He lowered his head.

I did not need the boomerang figure, but I took it as a courtesy. I put it in my pocket and started running. I tried not to look back.

I sprinted down the path that was sloped down from the embankment, and then climbed slowly along the side of the woods until I arrived at a road.

Ahead of me is a road.

Below me is the ground.

Above me is the sky.

Half the planet Earth is the sky.

Right now, I just can’t wait to fly.

After a long run, I looked back just once.

I could still see the silhouette of the man on the embankment.

He was at least 500 meters away. He might not be able to see me anymore.

As I ran, I reached into my pocket and grabbed out the gift from him.

And then.

I threw it into the water that was flowing beside me.

I really don't need it.

It just makes me heavier.

When I fly.

When I live.

The lighter, the better.

In the sky, only light things rise.

Only the free things climb up.

Wait for me.

Let's meet each other again.

Let's dance again.

Freely.

In the beautiful sky.

Boomerang, are you still flying ?

This book was first published by Chuokoron-Shinsha in Japan in 2007 and translated in 2021 for The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books.

The Interview About Cradle the Sky with Dr. MORI, Hiroshi B (Chief Editor of The BBB): Today, to commemorate the completion of “Cradle the Sky,” the fifth (final) installment of the English version of

“The Sky Crawlers” series, I would like to interview the author, Dr. MORI, Hiroshi. I am very grateful for the many new insights and learning opportunities that this annual interview has given me. Dr. MORI, thank you so much for your cooperation. I look forward to interviewing you again today.

MORI, Hiroshi: At the end of each year, I answer this e-mail interview, which makes me feel another year has passed. You have translated five novels for five years. This kind of continuity is not an easy thing to achieve. I am grateful and amazed. What I provide may not be so fresh anymore, but I will be happy to answer your questions.

B: I have always felt that Dr. MORI’s thoughts are so extensive and in-depth that it is difficult to get even a glimpse of them in a few interviews. Suppose there is anything that might spoil the freshness of the content in the reader’s impression, it is because of the biased direction of the questions provided by the interviewer (Ryusui Seiryoin, who is also the translator). I will try my best not to mess up and will start asking questions.

According to the interview at the end of a previous issue, you could continue to publish this series thanks to the movie project of the novel (The Sky Crawlers), the first volume to be published from The Sky Crawlers series. It was originally planned to end with the fifth feature (this work, “Cradle the Sky”), but due to the delay of the movie, the publisher requested that an additional short story collection (titled “Sky Eclipse”) be written at the end.

Dr. MORI said, “this series has many difficult parts to be understood due to its general lack of user-friendliness, or reader-friendliness.” Also, you added that the short story collection “could have possessed the value as reference books” “like the hints to supplement the information to compensate for the lack of sufficiency.” I think it is true that this series has a higher level of abstraction and more “difficult aspects to comprehend” than Dr. MORI’s other series, partly because of the existence known as “Kildren.” On the other hand, Dr. MORI became the best-

selling author by keeping his writing novels in a businesslike style that matches readers' demands. You did not compromise on not overexplaining the "difficult parts to be understood" of this series. Did you think that readers would be looking for such abstraction? Or was it meant to be an antithesis to the strong tendency of mystery to make everything clear?

MORI: Each of what you said was exactly what I had thought. I am sure that abstraction is important, necessary, and even desired. Even in this piece, I think the extra abstraction would add more depth to the story. I can imagine that there are readers who are looking for such a deep world. But at the same time, it would be even harder to understand.

Also, it has been pointed out that the mystery style of explaining everything in full detail may be required within that genre. Still, according to the conventional wisdom from the ancient times, it has been noted that such style would give average readers the artificial impression peculiar to fiction. If possible, I wanted to create something unconventionally new.

However, what I was looking for most in this work was reality rather than those things, such as writing styles and abstraction. And it's not the reality of the story, but the reality of the world the protagonist feels. My priority was to write realistically what the protagonist saw, touched, felt, and thought. The gaze does not go in any direction that does not interest the protagonist. The image that the protagonist has is the real thing, and nothing more exists. If that is the case, then we cannot explain or describe what does not exist.

If the protagonist speaks realistically, the world will naturally come across as real. It may be abstract, but it will be close to the essence. That is what I had in my mind when I wrote this novel.

B: I see. That makes a lot of sense. I can understand why the main character suddenly has a hallucination in this work "Cradle the Sky." In the illusory scene, the protagonist sees a landscape that is different from reality, so if the readers go through the story from the perspective of "the reality of the story," then they may lose sight of reality and tilt their heads to the side. However, if the reader thinks of it as "the reality of the world as perceived by the protagonist," then there is no contradiction.

While translating this novel into English, I kept thinking back to “A Pair of Hearts,” one of your short stories that I had translated into English before. In that short story, too, the question of “Who is this person after all?” became the biggest mystery, and the story dragged on until the very end. The last part of the story can be interpreted as the mystery either being solved at the end or fading out ambiguously without being solved. But in your mind, Dr. MORI, you had a clear answer. Similarly, there are a number of clues to the mystery of “who this person is in the end” in the work, so I think you clearly have the answer in mind. However, for this series, due to the setting of Kildren, the readers might not be able to assert that it is the only solution necessarily. For example, there are two possible answers: one is that this person was A, and the other is that he or she was B. Even if the author intends A to be the correct answer, there is no particular problem if the reader ends up reading the book while thinking it is B. Dr. MORI, am I correct in my comprehension of the assumption that this is the author’s stance? I have the impression that many authors and readers of mystery fictions are obsessed with “the only right answer.” On the other hand, Dr. MORI seems to write in such a way that even if there is just one correct answer in his mind, the story can be read and interpreted as the case being otherwise.

MORI: I think that your interpretation is just fine. And likewise, I don’t see any problem with any other type of understanding that someone may have.

For example, imagine a theatrical play being performed on a stage. I make large stage props. I also tailor the costumes that actors wear. There are right answers to what they are, what materials are used, and what processes are conducted to produce them. If there is no correct answer, I cannot make them. However, actors who perform on stage do not look closely at the stage settings. They will just feel that there is a “world” out there and play their roles. The audience doesn’t think of them as stage props, nor do they think of the costumes as makeshifts. They just visualize the “world” of the story that is out there.

The stage director will think about how the actors will perform and anticipate how the audience will feel. Some spectators may fail to get it, and the director will guide them through those misunderstandings. The author singlehandedly creates the entire world. Only if it is one world, it can be created. On the other hand, the world as interpreted is not limited to one.

Let me give you another example. When an artist crafts a doll, he may need a wire skeleton. He will knead the clay and put it into or around that wireframe to sculpt the figure. He will also have to make the dress and put it on the figure. Each of these processes has only one path, and that is the procedure that can be called the “right answer” for the creator. However, the viewers of the finished product will not see the wire skeleton, nor will they be aware of the clay. There is just a character that is not a doll, and it appears to be alive. Even if that is the case, the artist has experienced an enormous amount of thinking time to predict how people will feel about the doll. Therefore, it is unlikely that the doll will be perceived in unexpected ways.

The author can almost always predict how the work will be received. There are at least a dozen possibilities that each creator can predict. To limit the possibilities to one that is right and one that is wrong is to add unnecessary details to the “world.” For example, it would be like putting a note on a costume worn by an actor that says, “This is not a nightie.”

If you want the “world” to be real, you naturally have to create such a multifaceted form. The creator’s “intention” is not so important at the end to the world as the wire skeleton of a doll. It’s just that without that skeleton (or intention), it’s impossible to create the doll (or world of the story).

To put it simply, what the reader feels is all that matters and is the correct answer.

B: I think the metaphors of a stage and a doll have helped me better understand the story than ever before. Also, because each reader’s perception is right for the one, I want to be as close as possible to the author’s original “correct answer” when translating the text into English. You know, I do not want to end up with something completely different due to the English translator’s arbitrary interpretation.

In previous interviews, Dr. MORI said that the tricks about the identity of the characters in “None But Air” and “Flutter Into Life” were not explicitly intended by the author but came about by accident or as a coincidence. However, it would be unreasonable to think that the series’ biggest surprise, which awaits readers at the end of this novel, is revealed by accident as a coincidence. In this work, the question “Who am I?” is repeated multiple times. The female characters are deliberately referred to only as “she,” and the foreshadowing is carefully laid out

from the beginning. The effective repetition of the code name revelation in the last chapter and Epilogue is clearly a deliberate mystery writer's technique. Also, the trick at the end of this work is extremely important because it is not just a surprise, but it completely changes the way the readers perceive (chronologically) the final novel "The Sky Crawlers." When did Dr. MORI come up with the idea to create such a surprise that would shake the landscape of the existing novels in the series to its very core? Was it at the time of writing this work? Or had you been thinking about it since a few novels ago? For today's interview, I reread all the five novels of this series, and I found out that the end of Episodes 4-3 of "Down to Heaven" could be read as a signpost for "Cradle the Sky." It is also possible to interpret the Epilogue of the series-concluding volume "The Sky Crawlers" as the implication of the ending of "Cradle the Sky."

MORI: It is right in all my works that it was not intentional and just happened in the way. In other words, I come up with the idea while I'm writing, so it just happens. I have never planned to create certain devices before I start writing.

If there is such a foreshadowing in the first half of my work, it is because I thought of it when I wrote that part. Also, if it comes to me after I have written further ahead into the story, I can still go back and rewrite it. Once I complete the novel, I cannot fix a sentence anymore. So, I have to come up with the foreshadowing at least before I finish writing the story.

In the case of crime fiction, many stories have the subject of who the culprit is. It is also common to have a gimmick, like a narrative trick, to make the reader misread the story. However, in a series that has gone on for a long time spanning many volumes, I think it might be rare to find a trick that makes the reader wonder who the main character really is.

If I remember right, when I was about halfway through the first novel, I thought of the idea that it might be a story like such and such. Around the same time, I also came up with the hallucinatory fantasy of a protagonist, including the concept of Kildren. It was not an idea that I had from the beginning. In this way, the possibility that could happen arises during the writing process, and I continue writing with a number of these possibilities. As I continue to write, the possibilities I can use will be narrowed down. However, by writing in such a way that I leave as many possibilities open as possible, I will find myself writing as if everything is a

foreshadowing. That is the way I write.

I do not think that all plot threads have to be beautifully explained, because, for the protagonist, the foreshadowing is not important, and it is more realistic if it is not explained.

B: I've always felt that your works, especially your series works, have various elements that can be read in-depth, and this property is what attracts many readers, especially your loyal admirers. I think I was able to catch a glimpse of some of the secrets of your work after listening to your explanation. And once again, I am realizing that Dr. MORI's creative style is particularly successful in "The Sky Crawlers" series and has come to fruition as a magnificent mystery saga.

After reading through the five novels, I had another thing that made me wonder "if this is also foreshadowing." I am embarrassed to say that I, the interviewer, who is also the Japanese-to-English translator of this series, had forgotten that the name of the doctor that Kusanagi sees at the end of "None But Air" is Sagara. Is it by chance? Or can we delve deeply into the setting to come up with the possibility that Aoi Sagara has something to do with that doctor? I know that Dr. MORI thinks that we are free to read the story any way we like. Still, I am wondering about this Sagara, whether the setting is consciously constructed or just a product of coincidental overlaps.

MORI: It is not a coincidence that they share the same name. This is also a part of the act of preserving possibilities.

B: I am now convinced that there is no coincidence pertaining to sharing the same name. Your explanation of "the act of preserving possibilities" makes a lot of sense to me. I am glad that I have managed to confirm this point.

Among "The Sky Crawlers" series with high degrees of abstraction, in this novel "Cradle the Sky," dreams and reality intersect many times, to end up making it difficult to determine what is reality and what is fantasy. Dr. MORI, you once wrote that you liked David Lynch's films, and I wonder if you were influenced by David Lynch's style in which reality and fantasy are intertwined. Or, did you always like the world of dazzlement before that to begin with?

MORI: I think I can say that my novels are generally influenced by movies. After all, I have rarely read novels. I am also greatly influenced by music. For example,

Peter Gabriel, and others.

Originally, early novels, movies, and music were all too neatly made with typical plots (introduction, development, turn, conclusion) and formats in which every foreshadowing has the dots completely connected. This is probably because the first priority is to convince the audience. However, since there are so many creative works in the current world, art has shifted to the idea that it is time to create something more realistic. Styles of painting have transitioned from representational (figurative) to abstract, correct? It's the same thing. The reason is that extracting the essence of the work has become more emphasized. When I say "real," I do not mean real in appearance. Abstract paintings are more realistic than representational paintings. It means that the notion of being real is closer to what people feel.

"What is reality?" and "What is fantasy?" are actually difficult questions to answer. People tend to assume that what they see and feel is reality, but of course, everyone should be coming to the realization that this is not quite the case. I think this is where the reader has a "chasm" that the novel can easily exploit.

B: Personally, I could not understand the appeal of abstract paintings when I was a child and preferred representational paintings. But, as I grew older and learned to appreciate art, I became rather fascinated by abstract paintings. Indeed, I can feel that "The Sky Crawlers" series is being real in terms of not representational, but abstract painting.

The world of Kildren wandering around forever while losing sight of their own existences, is in some ways frightening. This was also an important theme in the movie version of "The Sky Crawlers," directed by Mamoru Oshii. If the premise is that "the real world, created by ugly adults, is ugly," as the message is repeatedly implied in the book, Dr. MORI, do you think that the only way to live beautifully in this world is to "break down" in some way? The word "break" here includes nuances such as "going against the notion of common sense that one must live with as a decent adult in society."

MORI: You are right. And that is the value of a child or a young person. Every adult, without exception, was once a child. We have become adults by abandoning the values of childhood. Pretending not to see the ugliness of adulthood is a way to discard the value of childhood.

However, no adult has ever forgotten when he or she was a child. They possess the childhood memories like old wounds. Some cherish the memories of the days gone by.

From the perspectives of adults, to live beautifully is about breaking down, but from the children's points of view, it is equivalent to not being created. There is value in the state before they are created.

B: The expression “old wounds” really sums up the essence of the situation, and it makes me think of myself. Although many people may pretend to ignore or forget this fact, all adults were once children. This series relentlessly confronts the readers with the fact that most adults, as they grow up, shed the values of childhood and come to accept the ugliness inherent in adulthood. That is why it is so moving and shakes the soul.

By the way, in the interview at the end of the third novel, “Down to Heaven,” you said, “I have not read 90 percent of other authors’ novels that I excerpt from.” Have you also not read “The Grass Harp” by Truman Capote, quoted in this work? In many cases, when you quote from works that you have not read, do you at least know about the existences of the works even if you have not read them? Or do you look for them randomly at real or online bookstores?

MORI: I have not read them. However, when I spend time, which is about 30 minutes at most, to search for the lines to quote by flipping the pages, I end up reading them during the process. I look at the whole text and search visually for strings of words that might be easy to quote. I pay attention to the words that look interesting and jump out at me.

I also look for books at random at online bookstores and select intuitively based on titles and other factors. It takes me about five minutes to choose a book. I order the book, receive it the next day, then flip through it, and consume 30 minutes of time. I don't even open the book after that.

During the 30-minutes of skim-through reading session to decide which quote to use, rarely do I find a work that I would like to read through, from beginning to end. I have encountered just a few such works.

B: You do not select the quotes from the books you once read, but rather intuitively from among many pieces of information. That may be the aspect that

creates the effects that are similar to chemical reactions.

I have long imagined that the YA Newspaper Company, which appears many times in this series, is an acronym for the major Japanese newspapers, Yomiuri and Asahi. On the other hand, I wonder if the “NBA” in “hospital of NBA” in this novel is also a pun on a real name. It is the same as the acronym of “None But Air,” so I am wondering if there is any meaning to it.

MORI: Neither the newspaper nor the hospital has anything to do with the actual organizations. There is no such pun intended. I think this is common to all of my works. Proper nouns, such as place names and personal names, have nothing to do with the real things, and I rarely give any meaning to proper nouns in stories.

B: Since the NBA has three letters, I thought it might be a trick with some meanings attached to it. I’m glad to know that there is no particular intended meaning to it. Thank you so much.

One of the details that left a strong impression on me in this novel is the episode, in which a disgraced mobster cut off his little finger. This was introduced to the world as a custom unique to the Japanese yakuza in movies directed by Takeshi Kitano. I wonder if you, Dr. MORI, expressed in the novel “the custom of yakuza cutting off their pinky finger after a misstep” as something peculiar, because you had found it to be strange for some time. In fact, I think foreign readers who are not familiar with yakuza customs would not understand why they lose their pinkies when they engage in misconduct. It may be similar to how they perceive samurai’s harakiri, which is considered crazy in other countries.

MORI: This was due to something a non-Japanese friend of mine had told me before. It was a simple question: “What does it mean?” You can imagine many variants of the question, such as “Is it to make the committer experience pain?” “Is it to leave an obvious scar?” or “Is it to make the committer feel inconvenient from being crippled for the rest of its life?” Outside of Japan, there seem to be several countries that have customs similar to this.

B: You had a friend from overseas who was wondering about the issue. I now understand that is the reason for the description of cutting off the pinkie.

In this series, one character says, “I have a gun to kill myself at any time,” “You know, I always carry a gun.” and “Take this gun and shoot me in the head.” There

are many such scenes. I think there can be other ways to kill oneself or others. So, I wonder if the reason you choose to use a gun as a device to take one's life away is that you feel the aesthetical beauty in the transience that lies in the decisiveness of a single shot. In Episodes 5-6 of the (chronologically) final novel "The Sky Crawlers," I felt the beauty of ephemerality as if I could feel the eternity within the moment.

MORI: A handgun suicide is not possible unless you own a handgun. In that sense, I just chose something that is somewhat far from the reality that surrounds Japanese people that we are. At least in Japan, it is not easy for children to imitate it. That is all there is to be meant.

I don't believe that suicide is an absolutely wrong thing to do. However, I am opposed to committing suicide impulsively.

Still, such author's stance is irrelevant to the story.

The setting is simply that people who fly fighter aircrafts are not civilians, but combatants and soldiers, so it would be natural for them to have guns. In reality, it is difficult to kill in an instant with either a gun or a sword, and there is no such thing as transience or aesthetics. However, when expressed in writing, such fragility or grace may develop in the recipient's mind.

B: This is the first time I hear about your thoughts regarding using guns in your story. I am convinced and have a better understanding of the choice of guns as props. I appreciate it.

Lastly, Dr. MORI and the interviewer made their debut as novelists in the same year (1996) and have known each other from that time. It was in October 2007 that we met for the first time, though. Dr. MORI, you probably do not remember it anymore, but when we met for the first time, you gave me the paperback version of "Cradle the Sky," saying, "My new book has just arrived, and I am offering this to you." With such personal memories, I am deeply moved by the fact that translating "The Sky Crawlers" series has finally reached the fifth volume "Cradle the Sky." I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. MORI for the cooperation. Thank you so much again for sharing your precious accounts with us today. I look forward to working on the translation again in the next short story collection, "Sky Eclipse," the last piece in the series.

MORI: Was that in 2007? I see. I feel like we had met much earlier than that. I

had read your works and recognized you as a writer who was close to me at that time already. I do not remember handing you a copy of “Cradle the Sky” at all.

I have never imagined that Mr. Seiryoin would be translating my works. We do not accurately predict what surprising events might happen in this world, do we? I do not think there has been any “foreshadowing” at all.

Thank you for everything. I look forward to working with you again.

This interview was conducted in December 2020, exclusively for The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books.