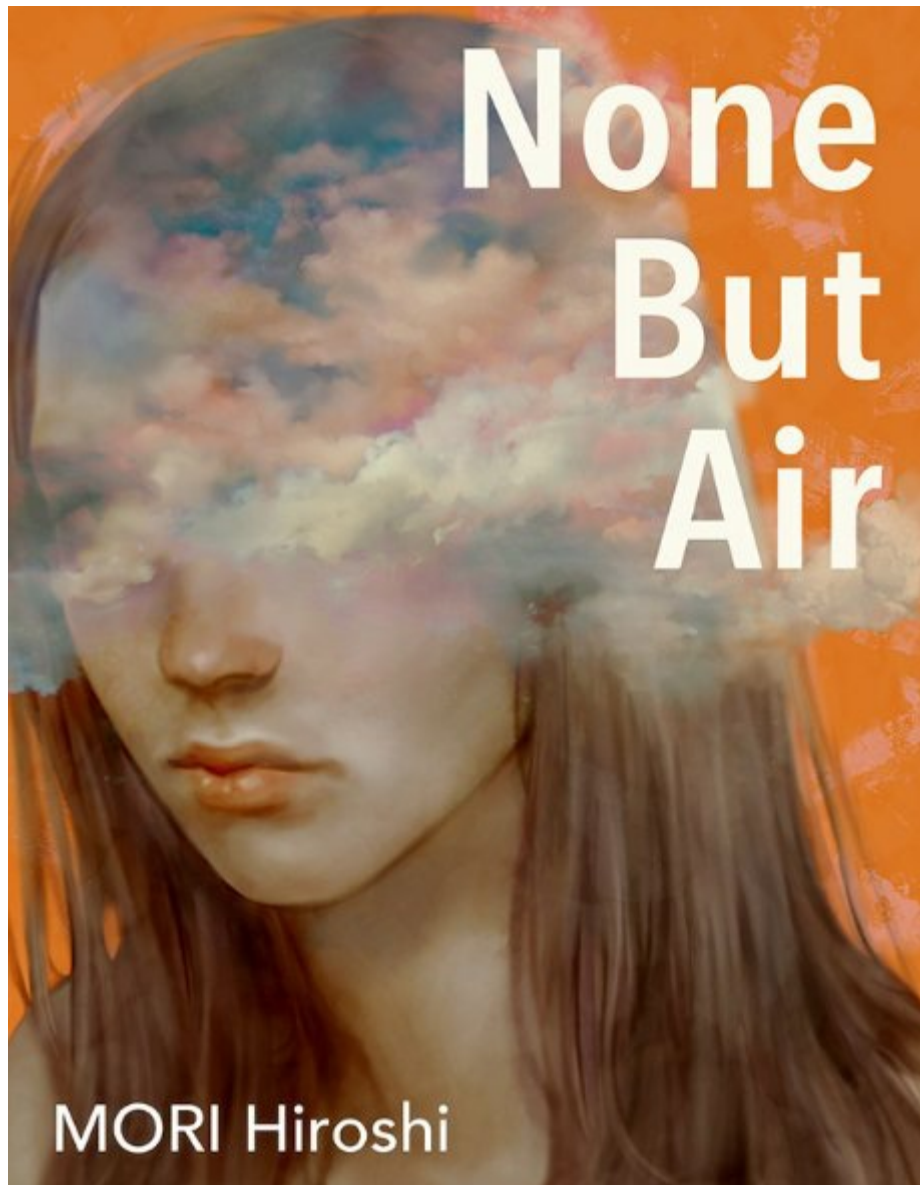
The artwork is a vertical composition. The background is a solid, vibrant orange. In the center, a woman's face is depicted from the nose up, looking slightly to the left. Her skin is pale with soft, naturalistic shading. Her eyes are replaced by a dense, multi-colored cloud formation, featuring shades of blue, pink, yellow, and white, rendered with visible painterly textures. Her hair is long, dark brown, and flows down the sides of her face. The overall style is that of a contemporary oil painting.

None But Air

MORI Hiroshi

None But Air



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Foreword

Wake up, adults.

“We are the complete form of human beings, whereas children are imperfect.”

Such a logic is equivalent to the insistence that the dead people are the finished figure and the living ones are all imperfect.

Have you noticed it?

Being an adult is equal to becoming timid by being aware of your death.

That is all there is to the value like that.

That is a silly talk by the adults who are almost dead.

In the ancient times, people fought while defending and depending on “death”.

There was no dignity of their living.

That was the only thing that the living ones could deal with.

Have you noticed that the reason for the adults being ugly lies in the fact that their frightened souls never wish to fight for anything?

None But Air

Birds are instruments that work according to mathematical laws. Humans can produce instruments to emulate all of birds' movements. These instruments have anything but the ability to keep the balance, and they are not as sophisticated as birds. Therefore, we can say that these instruments created by humans are equipped with everything except birds' anima. So, the anima would have to be compensated with those of humans.

This excerpt is from a manuscript originally written in Italian by Leonardo da Vinci.

Prologue

Toward the beautiful sunset, I am now flying.

The clouds below me are sparkling in their orange colors as if they were taking electrical charges. They are immobile, while looking soft, sweet, and gentle. *Why is it that all the gentle things tend to try to stop? Why is it that all the arms that are smiling and spread open wide to welcome me are rendered motionless?*

In contrast, I am always moving.

Since I move around stealthily, I cannot help but feel strange. *Why am I flurried like this?* I always wonder. *If I stop for only a short moment, I cannot stay here and I will be falling into the clouds ... Rather, if I stop, I will be shot down ...* Such fragmented anxieties, which are as worthless as a nut that has been partially munched by a squirrel, are hiding within me. It is like a beaver lodge made of twigs. It must be accumulating inside me, just like that.

I always look around me, and I can never feel relieved. I make my eyes move the way owls do. Probably, my eyes are bloodshot. If my memory is correct, someone once said, "I curse the fact that we have only two eyes." I wonder who that one was ... Although I cannot remember it well, I can still recall the softly purple-dyed roll of the smoke that the aircraft was emitting while going down.

I squint, and try to smile a little.

The polycarbonate windshield has been vibrating noisily as if it were sulking. It is the proof that the engine is not working too well. One of the cylinders gives me an impression that it is not quite willing to work with passion. It is a nuisance to have to depend on the system in which I cannot detach such inferior parts. I think it might be the same for groups of humans. They are forced into believing that they would probably be returned the favor someday in the future. Very lukewarm friendship like bunny ears, or the slight touch of wishful thinking. I do not want to make contact with such viscous oil, if possible. I wish I could dump wastes without any hesitation. I want to stay dry and be light. Then, I want to be in the best condition possible for any occasion that I encounter. Only that is my method.

Like the way wind blows, my enemy always lunges straight at me, no matter where the one is attacking from. Once my hair trembles, I manage the first rudder.

That move is nobler than anything. The smoothness of the move decisively affects the results of everything. I am not exaggerating at all. That is exactly true. I was taught this way from the beginning, and then the habit is, by now, deeply ingrained in my nature like oil would seep into me.

However, unfortunately, I am still far from the ideal.

Fast, accurate, and sophisticated flow is what I have been dreaming.

Only that beauty, I can already understand now.

I have been pursuing it, for a long time.

In the very near future, I will probably get it.

There is no way that I will fail to get it, because I have been wishing for it this much.

Only that is my hope.

Only that is my goal.

What is sliding like a stingray a bit above the orange cushion ahead of me is not the shadow of my aircraft. I know it is the one which the Teacher is piloting. Although it is the same model as mine, the smoothness of his flight is beyond description. Even when it is flying straight, I can sense it. The wind, blown almost from the broadside, is fairly strong. My aircraft is occasionally dancing while waving its wings as if it were shaking its head to refuse to obey, but his aircraft does not show such tendencies of the movement. I can tell so clearly, even with this much distance. *Can he see the wind?*

When he is piloting, even the figure of the aircraft looks in a different way.

And then.

The smoothness stands out at a particular time.

Of course, it is while we are dancing in the sky with our enemies.

The way he ascended when he was aiming at his target was truly amazing. The only thing I could do was to barely follow him. I was probably behind him by the span of one breath. Right before he returned his aircraft to the level orientation, he rolled by 180 degrees and made a turn. The dive following it was also beautiful. The air that was sliced by his wings appeared three times, which looked like white

ribbons stretched straight. When he descended while describing flawless spirals, the canopy shone three times.

That was how far I could observe him.

After that, of course, I had to do my best for myself and did not have time to be fascinated by his aerial maneuvers. This is the first flight for us as this team. Scouting is supposed to be our main mission, but we encountered the enemies suddenly.

Even the encounter might have been caused by him.

He is as lethal as a sharp knife, and his glow naturally lures bugs to be victimized. I once heard such a story. *Who told it to me? Ah, it's Sasakura.* He is a mechanic who has been assigned to this base with me. He likes an ideological story like that. He is always that way and cannot tell a funny story at all. In short, he is a loner. Not as much as I am, though.

Anyway, I'm thinking about the knife.

I sometimes heard the rumor regarding the Teacher when I belonged to the previous team. Our base was right next to his, so we occasionally participated in the same projects. I knew the model of his aircraft and I watched his flying maneuvers from the distance several times.

Then, today is the first time for me to get to observe his flight up close like this. What is even more thrilling than this experience is that I actually met the Teacher himself just last night. Probably, this is the first time in my life to be more interested in a person inside an aircraft than in the vehicle itself. To begin with, I do not think that I have been interested in anyone other than myself even for once. Really, I do not quite recall that.

I have occasionally felt the impulse to hit others, to kill someone, or, to the lighter extent, to avoid seeing others' faces again. But, I have never had the opposite feelings that are favorable. I have thought that anything of the favor is the feeling which has nothing to do with me. I start laughing, just by thinking about it.

Here, I'm now laughing.

I don't know what makes me laugh ...

When I am on the ground, I never laugh. It might be the reason why I am now laughing as I like by letting out what makes me laugh. Or, I might be laughing out of spite against myself. *Since when have you set the rule?* That is also strangely funny.

The aircraft flying ahead of me is shaking its wings to the right and left. Then, it starts sinking into the clouds. After I look around and squint again, I have my aircraft angled obliquely, and start diving into the bright, orange clouds.

I choke the engine, and then I lean my body against the cool side of the cockpit. The vibration runs through my shoulders. Then, the vapor is gradually getting thicker around the edges of the wings.

After a while, we are shrouded in gray clouds. My aircraft is shaking irregularly. It seems as if many cushions were floating in the clouds and the aircraft was colliding with them frequently. No one has seen such things. While reading the gauge to figure out the inclination, I check the oil pressure and the fuel.

At times, the view comes back a bit. It might be an illusion.

In a momentary dull light, I see angels occasionally.

It appears to be their secret garden, hidden in the clouds.

Fountains, lawns, and benches.

Women are walking, while trailing soft-looking white dresses.

They are about to pour red blood from small pots in their hands.

It is diluted by the water in the fountain.

Only the excessive liquid that is spilling out is falling down to the Earth as rain.

No one knows that it is blood rain.

None of the people on the Earth knows that the blood is spilled in the sky.

The clouds are thinning.

We have descended to the darker world.

Rain hits the windshield, which starts making some noise.

I try to check the ground by tilting the wings, but the visibility is low.

The aft light of his aircraft is blinking, which is the only thing I can spot. At least,

I can be sure that I need not worry about getting lost. While gradually descending to the lower altitude, we fly for about 10 minutes. After we turn right at a short mountain with red blinkers of aircraft warning lights, the lines of the runway lights are entering my view. The most valuable things on the Earth are those lights.

“After you.” I hear his voice over the radio.

“Roger.” I reply.

Since the wind has shifted to the direction opposite to that when we were taking off, we have ended up going too far toward the river and we have to make a final turn. The rain is not so heavy. *It's 18:00 now.* Others are probably already done with their meals. I want to drink something hot. I want to take a hot shower, too. *Why am I craving for hot things this much ...?* Although I never even think of wanting them when I am airborne, it appears that I am enchanted in strange ways when I touch down on the ground. It might be a disease.

I have my aircraft above the axis of the runway, and keep gliding with its nose leaned a little to the side diagonally. My engine has become as quiet as someone's snoring. I can see the rotating motion of the propeller blades.

I happen to look up, and find his aircraft banking behind and above me. It is looking at me. *Is he worrying about me?* I do not quite like the idea of someone regarding me as a novice that needs to be supported by that much.

I lower the flaps, and let the landing gears out. No problem. After the final decision, I enter the landing phase.

After the aircraft is above the premises of the base, I lift the nose gently, and then land as if the aircraft is licking the runway from its edge. Suddenly, a roaring sound booms. The tires roll and rumble. Then, unpleasant vibration and creaks are encasing me.

Oh my, what a disgusting sound.

Aircrafts have to land because of us humans. Aircrafts want to fly forever. Even though they are designed to fly and want to stay airborne, they are forced to land like this. I always feel sorry for them about the matter. The friction with the ground and this rude vibration damage the aircrafts. The metal would be fatigued. They are feeling the pain ... I can hear their voices.

I slam on the brake to decelerate.

I change the direction in the middle of the runway, and taxi the aircraft toward the hangars.

The Teacher's aircraft is starting the landing procedure, which I can tell just from the navigation lights.

Of course, I do not open the canopy, because it is raining. Blurred lights are diffused into many directions, so the scenery looks prettier than usual. I mean, even the ground becomes beautiful by blurring the view by this much.

In front of a hangar, Sasakura is waiting for me while putting up an umbrella. He is in a jumpsuit that was once white in the past. I stop my aircraft in front of him, and take off my belt. I lift the canopy, stand up, and step onto the wing.

"It has taken you so long, eh?" Sasakura shouts. He seems to be talking about the flight time.

"Yeah, we shot down three enemies." I show the number with my fingers.

"What?" He widens his eyes. Then, he sees the other aircraft, which is landing on the runway at that moment.

I look toward the direction, too. It is the perfect landing with no noise.

"He shot down two of them." I explain. "I did my best to deal with the other one, so I could not quite observe what he was doing too well. Probably, the two that he was dealing with went down, I think."

"There is no doubt about that." Sasakura smiles. "And you? How is the engine?"

"It worked well in the first half, but it was not good in the latter half. I felt that something was stuck in the middle. Probably, I think one of them is dead. It is probably a spark plug, maybe ... Or, I guess a valve might have gotten stuck."

"That cannot possibly happen."

"Anyway, please check the engine." I tell him so, while taking off the gloves.

Sasakura begins the work to get the aircraft into the hangar. I borrow his umbrella, and then start walking toward the office. I stop in the middle to pick up a cigarette from my pocket and light it. By the time I exhale the smoke for the second

time, I am in the building.

No one is in the lobby. As I look up, I find Goda looking at me over the railing of the second floor.

As I do not have other options, I put out the cigarette with an ashtray in the lobby and climb up the stairs.

Goda says nothing. He seems to be in a good mood, though. He might have already gotten the information from somewhere.

I enter his brightly lit room, and sit down on a brown leather sofa. Goda offers me a cigarette. *That is a high-grade stuff.* I take just one of them, and light it immediately. I guess the one that died in the ashtray in the lobby is cursing its relatively short life.

As I am smoking without words for a while, the Teacher enters the room after a few knocks. While taking a glance at me, he walks straight toward Goda at his desk and salutes briefly.

“Over there.” Goda shows the Teacher to the sofa.

He sits on the sofa, next to me. My heartbeat becomes much faster than that during the dogfight.

The Teacher reports dispassionately in a calm tone. The route of the scouting mission, the decision in the middle, the description of the target maritime vessels, and the three enemies approaching us right after that.

“I made the wrong decision.” Goda bows slightly.

He is probably talking about just the two of us being in the mission. I do not even think about it that way. If anything, I even thought we got lucky because we encountered three enemy aircrafts.

“I shot down two of them.” The Teacher reports calmly. Then, he looks at me. Goda is looking at me, too.

“I shot down one of them.” I reply.

“Good work. Did you suffer from any damage?” Goda asks.

“Nothing in particular.” The Teacher answers. But after a breath, he continues.

“The consort plane was shot at the engine. Fortunately, the damage is slight.”

“What?” I find myself raising my voice and standing up.

Goda and the Teacher look up at me.

“Never mind that.” Goda smiles, while showing his white teeth.

“I haven’t noticed it.” While choosing words, I sigh. “Sir, could you allow me to check my aircraft?”

Goda nods.

“Excuse me.” After seeing the Teacher’s face again, I leave the room.

I am still holding the cigarette. I throw it away into the ashtray in the lobby again.

I rush out of the facility, and run to the hangar in the rain.

My aircraft has already been contained inside the hangar, whose shutter is half-closed. Sasakura, standing by a lamp stand, lifts his head and looks at me.

“What’s up?” He asks.

I move around to the other side of the aircraft.

I look up at the cowling of its nose.

I spot a hole immediately.

Sasakura is approaching.

“One of them is dead, probably because of that.”

“Can you fix it?”

Sasakura exhales the air a bit. “Of course I can.”

“By when?”

“By tomorrow morning.”

“Okay ...” I sigh.

Then, I close my eyes and look upward.

I slightly cluck my tongue.

I bite my lips.

“Damn it!” I let out the words.

“Hey, not a serious problem.” Sasakura says.

“At the first encounter ... That’s it!” I recall it. “When it came from my left, I hesitated for a moment. At that time ... Damn! How dare ...”

Sasakura is watching me while smiling.

“I should have made the kill.”

“You actually did so, didn’t you?” With his brow lifted, Sasakura tilts his head sideways.

“I mean, I should have done more thoroughly.” I exhale violently. “Bastard!”

Sasakura walks to a corner of the hangar and turns on a switch of a compressor. The motor starts whirring.

I feel the urge to kick anything around me. Instead of doing so, I softly pat the aircraft on the cowling. I think human beings possess the intricate mechanism, because we end up doing the opposite of what we actually feel like doing.

The cowling is still a bit warm.

She is shedding blood instead of me.

What a pity.

I take a deep breath to cool down my own heat. Then, I thrust my hands into the pockets, operate myself, and walk toward the shutter.

Sasakura calls out to me, and I stop. I cannot catch what he is saying.

“What?” I ask back loudly.

“Give me back the umbrella.” Sasakura shouts.

I walk out into the rain.

I head for the office to retrieve the umbrella from the lobby. On my way, I pass by the Teacher, who is getting out of the building and walking toward me. He is not putting up the umbrella, either. He gives me a cold look. I look back at him, but cannot say anything. He is walking toward the billet.

After seeing his back off, I resume walking.

It is what has just happened on my second day in this base, after the first flight mission with him.

Episode 1: Glide

But once we observe the fact that birds are ready to deal with noticeable varieties of patterns in their movements, we can deduce, based on the experience, the following theories: The most profound changes of motion have to be comprehended by the human nature. And, humans are able to prepare themselves for the destruction of those instruments that humans themselves become the anima and the leaders of.

This excerpt is from a manuscript originally written in Italian by Leonardo da Vinci.

-1-

While sitting on the bed in my room, I had been holding my head with my hands for a while.

I remembered a bridge in my hometown. I used to commute with a motor scooter while passing it by every morning. On the bridge, a big man was always standing. He was holding his head in both hands. I could not see his face. He was gazing at the surface of the river. I had the impression that he was seriously worrying about something. Day after day, he was standing there. *Probably, he is crazy*, I thought. Passers-by were walking while avoiding him.

Is he thinking about jumping off the bridge? I felt uneasy each time I passed by the spot. I wanted him not to commit such an act, at least while I was close to him. Someone had to help him. I had to call out to someone for help. I just did not want to waste my time on such worthless acts.

I got no information about him after that.

He might have already died by jumping off the bridge a long time ago.

I did not want to know the end result, and I just wished that I would remember the bridge as a different type of scenery.

I heard footsteps, and someone knocked the door.

“Yes.” I replied. I had to do so because I was just a newcomer here.

After the door was opened, the person who appeared was Kusurida. I had met him on the previous day for the first time, and talked with him a little. He was

wearing a pair of round-shaped glasses. His strangely pale face made the purple scar on his cheek conspicuous.

“Have you eaten your meal?” He asked, and squinted one of his eyes behind the glass lenses.

“Thanks.” I nodded. “I’m not in the mood.”

“If so, you should just go there to say so. They’re waiting for you.”

“Alright.”

“Are you having a health issue?”

“No, not at all.” I stood up and shook my head.

“Everyone wants to hear your story. You may have to do that in this case, while regarding this as some kind of service. It is better than being considered you are putting on airs ...”

“Right.” I nodded.

“Hey, are you really putting on airs?”

“No.”

Kusurida smiled, and exhaled the breath from his nostrils.

“I am leaving now.” I showed a nod to him.

“I want to hear your story, too.” He grinned.

After the door was closed and I heard his footsteps fading, I opened a window and inhaled the air from outside. The moist, weak air like a jellyfish dampened my feelings further.

I was still wearing the combat suit. After changing clothes, I left the room. The rain outside had almost stopped. As far as I could tell from the glow around the night-lights outside, a fog seemed to have set in. I was not sure whether it was rare or usual. I had yet to have any data about the climate in this area.

The dining hall was placed at the far end of the first floor in the office building, and the flooring was one step lower than other parts. The foundation of the control tower over the courtyard was supposed to be visible through glass doors, but outside the building was encased in complete darkness at that time of the day, of

course. I felt uneasy in the room surrounded by the windows of the nighttime because I was feeling as if I was in an aquarium.

About a dozen people gathered in the dining hall. At the front, Kusurida was sitting. I had yet to remember others' names. They were all males. And, the Teacher, the most important figure, was not there. *Is he done with telling his heroic episodes?* Goda was not there, either. Neither was Sasakura. I was not sure whether these people were all pilots or not, for they were in their plainclothes.

I entered the kitchen, and then approached an elderly woman. She was big and fat, to the extent that her apron was looking small.

"I heard that you don't feel like eating. Is that right?" She spoke first.

"Sorry about that."

"That can't be helped. Just don't complain about your hunger later. Okay?"

"I won't."

"How about having just soup?"

"No, thanks." I shook my head.

I returned to where the others were waiting. Kusurida pulled a chair with his hand for me.

I sat on it. Kusurida was next to me. Two were sitting over him. Three on the opposite side of the table. Then, four by the window beyond our table. They were all looking at me.

I sighed. I did not like this sort of thing. I was not good at dealing with such a situation. When talking to many, I felt as if I were a doll or something. Moreover, I had an urge to twist its arm or pull out its head. *If I fall flat on my back here, will my eyes shut tightly?* I thought about such a thing.

"Well ..." I looked back at the entrance. Even though no one was there, it was in the direction leading to the billet. "Are you already done with the story about his shooting down two targets?"

"We're not so much interested in that account," said an intellectual-type man in front of me. His blond hair was close-cropped. His lips were thin, and they were always forming the smiling curve. A sociable shape. His name was ... Ah, I recalled

it. He was Tsujima. “We definitely want to listen to YOUR account.”

“How come?”

“The tale about a genius making moves like this and that couldn’t serve as a reference.”

“I see.” I nodded. *In short, I’m not a genius, eh?*

“Let me tell you, briefly.” I started the explanation. “About the location. Diagonally behind me. The distance was 300. Then, about 150 higher in the altitude. When the enemy started descending to gain the better position, I had already choked the throttle all the way, and was making a slight dive. I used the flaps, too. I reckoned that he would miscalculate my velocity from his angle. Then, when he got closer behind me to within 200, I lifted my nose to pretend to ascend. Naturally, he accelerated more.”

“Did you stall then?” It was a question from over the table.

“Yes.” I nodded. By using my hands, I was showing the relative positions of the enemy and me. “Just before the stalling, I opened up the throttle completely and turned by using the propeller slipstream. He was lunging at me. He shot first.”

“A dangerous move.” Tsujima uttered.

“If we face each other, which one of us is faster doesn’t matter. Both velocities are added to each other. While my velocity lowered by 50, the rudder went back to the normal position. I held its nose to the direction and shot him.”

I opened my hands.

“Is that it?” Someone asked.

“Yeah.” I nodded briefly. “It took me so long to get to that point, though.”

Someone groaned a little. My storytelling session was over, and I let out a sigh of relief. I just wanted to get over with such a bothersome thing quickly.

“For how long have you been getting on Suiga?” A man by the window asked.

“Never done it before ...” I replied. “Today is the first time for me to pilot Suiga.”

“You mean, you have just experienced Mark 6 for the first time?”

“Well, I have never experienced any version of Suiga.”

“What have you piloted before that?”

“Sanka.”

“Sanka?” The reaction was a little louder. It sounded like someone was shocked. “They are completely different types.”

“Right. They are very different.” I nodded.

Suiga Mark 6 was the name of the fighter aircraft that I piloted on that day for the first time. An air-cooled, 21-cylinder monstrous engine was loaded in the nose. It was a heavy fighter that attained the velocity and the climbing power with the absolute authority of the engine power, and it was fortified with the abundant firepower. The shortcomings were that the flight range was slightly limited and it was not good at making low-speed turns. On the other hand, the one that I had piloted as a member of the previous team was Sanka, a new type of fighter aircraft. It was mounted with a water-cooled engine on its rear part. It was a very light fighter aircraft. Since it had been a short while since its deployment, it had yet to be known widely. Coincidentally, the previous team that I used to belong to was chosen as the test group for the first tentative deployment. My teammate once sighed, “We drew the short end of the stick.” My characteristics as a pilot had been calibrated to the default settings, for I was still new to the team. Therefore, I could accept whatever type of aircraft I was provided with. I spent one year there after that. That was my whole career as a pilot.

“May I return to my room?” I asked. I did not say it to anyone in particular, but my eyes were directed to Tsujima, right in front of me.

“Sure, of course ...” Tsujima nodded. “Are you tired?”

“No, not really.” I stood up and shook my head. “I’m okay.”

They were probably beginning to consider me to be dismal-minded. In all actuality, I myself had already recognized my gloomy characteristics. Especially, when I faced other humans, I could do nothing else. Probably, this was my specification as a human being.

After getting through a rite of passage, I felt relieved.

When I got out of the lobby, I lit the cigarette and exhaled the smoke. I was going outside to check out the condition of my aircraft in the hangar.

I could hear the radio broadcast. It was distorted music.

The cowling had been removed. Sasakura, on the lift, was facing the engine. Due to the spotlight, only the vicinity around him was bright.

“What’s the problem? Was it a cam?” I asked, while approaching him.

“No ...” He replied without looking back. “That’s okay. No malfunctioning. It will be fixed soon. Don’t worry about it.”

“It does not look that way. You seem to be having a serious problem.”

“Hey, take it easy.” Sasakura turned to me and showed his white teeth. “Take a look at my face.”

“A feigned look on your face.”

“You don’t believe other people.” He sat on the lift once, jumped off from the top, and stood in front of me. “I prepared coffee. Would you like to drink?”

“If it tastes good.” I replied.

“The more deeply it is roasted, the better it tastes. I’m not sure if you know it, though.” Saying so, Sasakura was walking to the backside of the complex.

I climbed up onto the elevated lift, and looked into the cylinder head, lit with the spotlight. Like some kind of artwork, its fins were thin and glittering sharply. No damage could be found. Recalling the position of the hole on the cowling, I carefully checked the part of the engine that was around the hole once again. However, I still found nothing in particular.

“You are not telling that you have yet to find the problem, are you?” I asked a bit loudly. Sasakura was not close by.

Since he was not responding, I examined the engine again. It looked very beautiful. Of course, it was obviously in good condition, considering that this particular aircraft had been used for only half a year. That was not what I meant. What I felt was beautiful was its design. Both its intake and exhaust pipes were winding intricately while crossing each other. It reminded me of human organs. In striking contrast to its organically curved surfaces, the fins of the heat sink are lined up like blades. When I gazed at them, I felt as if I were gravitated and absorbed into

it.

“Hey.” Sasakura called out at me from below. Looking down, I found him holding coffee cups in both hands. “Get down from there. It’s not the place for you.”

By planting a hand on the lift, I jumped off from it.

“Thanks.” I received the cup.

When I sipped, it was too hot to recognize the taste.

“You mean you have yet to find the reason?” I asked.

“Don’t think about it.” Sasakura said, while looking upward. “I mean, that’s my job. All you have to do is to sleep soundly in your bed. No problem will be left by tomorrow morning. Definitely.”

“I’m shocked because I was shot at this spot ...” I put a hand on the body of my aircraft. Its chill ran through me. “Really, I was doing bad. I won’t let this happen again. Never.”

“Okay, okay.” Sasakura opened a palm. “Anyway, that’s already over.”

“Ah ...” I sighed. “You’re right.”

“Both sides are trying to shoot down each other. I think this much of damage is within a permissive level. Am I wrong?”

“You’re not wrong.”

“More than that, it’s not Sanka.”

I clucked my tongue and looked at Sasakura.

That was what I did not want to say. But, probably, I guess Sasakura dared to say so because he understood my feelings. Living a life on the ground might have made him gentle like this. It was as if the kindness was so sublime that it was almost destined to be wasted. *He is a good person.*

“I mean, it’s better than being shot down.” Sasakura said.

That’s right. I thought so, too.

Naturally, I understood it in theory. Still, I was not sure why I could not be

convinced of it. But, there were numerous things around me which I could not understand. There were countless such things. They were the majority. It was normal. For example, even I myself was made of what I did not understand too well.

I took a deep breath.

I saw an aircraft next to mine. It was the Teacher's.

I walked toward it, and got closer to the tail assembly.

"Don't touch it!" Sasakura shouted behind me.

I looked back at him.

"If you touch it, I will be reprimanded." Sasakura said.

"I won't touch it." I opened my palm for him. It's a bit funny. "But, Sasakura, you do touch it, don't you?"

"No, I have yet to be permitted to do so." He warped his lips and shook his head. "My predecessor must have been quite reliable."

A mechanic had been transferred to somewhere else. As the replacement, Sasakura was assigned to this airbase, along with me. There had to be several other mechanics. It seemed that the mechanic who would gain the privilege of dealing with the Teacher's aircraft had not been officially announced yet. The least that I could suspect was that Sasakura was the last one on the list of the candidates.

I was walking beside the aircraft.

Small marks were on the side of the body, next to the canopy. It was like a pattern occupying the plane. Roughly speaking, I could tell there were as many as 30 marks. Which meant 30 with this aircraft alone, since he became the pilot of this particular aircraft. I heard that he had shot down enemies five times that amount in total. Anyway, an outstanding number for sure. No one could even come close to competing against him.

When I was given the assignment to this base, I was overjoyed. Because it was the very best of the elite teams. The legendary hero was in the team. He was the very hero, whom I had been admiring. I was nervous to the level that the air I had inhaled might have solidified in my chest. It was the event that happened last week.

I could meet him directly and even shake hands by that point. I could talk with him. Then, miraculously, the first flight I experienced as a member of the new team was with him. I piloted the consort plane of the ace.

I must have been angry at the fact that such a brilliant day was ruined by only a single bullet. If one thinks about it calmly, it was so childish. That's funny.

However, I did not laugh. I won't laugh on the ground.

-3-

After taking a hot shower, I stood by the window with my head covered with a towel. I was about to close the curtain, because it was left open. I felt I heard something from outside and opened the window. My room was located next to a parking lot in front of the office. Only the low trees, located below the window, were between the parking lot and my room.

The rain stopped completely and starlit dark sky occupied the upper half of my sight.

I heard a short whistle.

There were several people in the parking lot. Even though it was too dark for me to recognize them, it appeared that they could see me clearly.

"Heeeey." Someone called out.

As my eyes got accustomed to the darkness, I could tell that it was Kusurida. One of his round glasses reflected the white light. I felt the urge to shoot at it.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Oh ... Umm ... How's everything going?"

A trifle of greeting. I weakly waved my hand laterally.

"We're going to the downtown for amusement. Why don't you join us?" Kusurida asked.

"I'm not in the mood. Next time, maybe." I answered.

"That one ain't coming with us." I heard someone saying so.

"Keep the window shut. You might catch a cold," said another one.

Subdued laughter followed.

I closed the window and shut the curtain as if I tried to wipe out the reflection of my figure on the windowpane.

As I walked back to my desk, I saw the wristwatch placed on it. It was still 20:30.

How far away is the downtown?

I knew nothing about the vicinity. Only a forest, a river, and small hills could be seen, at least within my sight.

An engine sound got louder, and I heard their vehicle leaving. It faded away, and silence prevailed once again. The florescent light on the ceiling was buzzing like insects.

I wanted to revisit where Sasakura was, but I felt that it would be better for me at that point to exercise patience a little more. In terms of many aspects, I should learn to be patient. If I did things as I liked, something bad would happen. I understood that. After all, I was not a child anymore.

The footsteps of someone climbing up the stairs.

It was approaching my room along the corridor. It stopped in front of my room. Then, someone knocked.

“Yes.” I responded.

“It’s Goda. May I come in?”

“Sorry, sir. I am putting on the clothes.”

I dressed myself in haste. After putting on my trousers, I put my arms through the shirt. While buttoning it, I approached the door. I had not locked it.

“Come on in, sir.” I opened the door.

Goda was standing there.

“Sorry to visit you at such a late hour.” He said. A document was in his hands. It looked like a photocopied map. “How’s your condition?”

“Everything is fine.”

“Here.” He handed it to me. “I want you to fly at 07:00 tomorrow. Can you do

it?”

“Yes, sir.” I received the document. “With whom?”

“The Teacher.”

The word made my heart pound intensely just once. The Teacher was his codename. Everyone called him only by the codename. He was just that special.

“Will we be the two?”

“And one more, maybe. I will decide it by 05:00 tomorrow. If you or your aircraft is not in a good condition, I will change the pilot. That will be the time limit, by which you can tell me if you can be assigned the mission or not.”

“I have no problem at all.” I answered.

“How is the damaged part of the aircraft?”

“It’s already been fixed.”

“But I haven’t received the report yet.”

“There’s a reason for that, sir. He just has not put the cowling back on the body because he was not yet used to working in this factory. I have already checked it earlier.”

“I see ... Then, thanks. If nothing happens, come to the office at 06:40.”

“Roger.”

He was turning back to the corridor. I closed the door.

I was so happy that I wanted to jump up and down in the room. I swang my arm and confirmed the happiness by feeling the air resistance. *What a good luck I have got!*

I can fly again.

I can fly with him again.

Putting on a jacket in haste, I rushed out of my room.

On the way to the hangar, the Teacher was sitting on a bench in front of a warehouse.

He was smoking. He looked at me.

I made a sudden halt.

I was standing three meters away in front of him.

“I’m pleased to fly with you again.” I bowed.

“Oh, I heard that, too.” He said in a deep voice. He exhaled the smoke, squinted, and glanced sideways at me. “Is your engine all right?”

“I am on my way to check it out now.” I answered.

“Does he have the skills?”

“Do you mean Sasakura? Yes, he is the number one.”

The tip of the Teacher’s cigarette was glowing red.

He looked up at the sky.

I, too, gazed into the sky.

Many stars could be seen. No moon. The sky was deep black like the outer space. The quality of the sky tonight was so-so for the one that could be seen from the ground level.

“Umm ...”

“What is it?” While still looking into the sky, he exhaled the smoke.

“Would you mind if I sit there?”

After staring at me sideways, he softly exhaled.

“If I am disturbing you, I can go to another place.”

“Oh, umm, actually, I have something to talk with you about ...”

He nodded slightly, so I sat at the edge of the bench. We kept the distance, which could offer the space for two more persons. I thought I had once dreamed of such a situation. Although I could not recall it, I was sure that I had done so.

“I have been piloting Sanka for quite a while until recently. Compared to Sanka, Suiga has got the horsepower.”

“That’s right.”

“Also, it has got the strong firepower.”

“It’s heavy.” He uttered, while exhaling the smoke.

“Yeah ..., it has got enough dragging power. What point should I be careful of?”

The Teacher was staring at me.

“What do you mean?” He asked in a low key.

“I mean, I want to know what point is important to pilot Suiga well.”

“Have you read the manual?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Then, that’s enough.”

“Yes ..., but ..., umm, could you teach me any secret technique for handling that aircraft?”

He did not answer.

Silence.

I was waiting.

“Do not waste your life.”

“What?”

He stood up, while exhaling the smoke. I stood up, too.

“What do you mean, sir?”

“Save what you did today until the final moment.”

He trampled the cigarette on the ground, and walked to the living quarter. I was gazing at his back, seemingly forever.

He had to have meant the way of my shooting by “what you did”. I did not intend to waste my life, but it could be considered a desperate act, to some extent. If we had to categorize my maneuvers in certain ways, then it could be defined as daredevil. But, I had been doing so for a long time as a pilot.

I had battled close combats and barely attained victories.

I had dodged by a hairsbreadth, and had gotten the most out of the slight openings.

When I dive into the danger, I can find the opportunities to attain the victories.

I was thinking that way.

I picked up the cigarette he had thrown away, and walked toward the hangar while conveying it.

-4-

The hangar was still lit, of course. The light was leaking from the side window at the high position and through the frosted glass of the door. *Inside the hangar must be the brightest place within a radius of one kilometer*, I thought. Since the shutter was already closed, I got inside the hangar by opening the door.

Sasakura was sitting on the lift. He looked at me. Green goggles for welding were on his head. What he was holding appeared to be a spark plug. I approached him, and stopped beside the lift.

“Haven’t you gone out yet?” Sasakura asked.

“I wasn’t invited.” I told a lie. “Tomorrow morning, I will fly.”

“At what time?” Sasakura turned toward me. Usually, such information was not given to a mechanic until a few hours before the departure.

“Early in the morning.” I answered while lowering my voice. “Can I fly?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t want to fly an aircraft with sources of anxiety left in it.”

“I said you can fly. Didn’t you hear that?”

“I want you to report to me more properly.”

“About what?”

“Have you found it?” I asked. *Has he recognized the bullet having hit the engine and the damage caused by it? Can he fix it appropriately?* They were the matters I wanted to confirm.

“The bullet didn’t get inside the cowling.”

“What?”

“That’s the conclusion. The incidence angle was fairly small, wasn’t it?”

“Umm, right, it was. Less than 20 degrees, I think.”

“This aluminum alloy is as elastic as rubber. The impact made the part turn over inside the cowl, and that part made contact with the engine head. Here.” Sasakura pointed at the part.

“May I get on the lift to take a look at it?”

He stood up, and moved to the edge. I climbed up the lift and brought my face close to the exposed engine head. I saw three chipped parts at the edge of the fin close to the cam cover.

“Is that all?” I asked, while keeping my body steady.

“Yeah, that’s all.” I heard Sasakura’s voice from right behind me.

“Then, why is the cylinder dead?” I turned back halfway.

“That is not the reason why it is dead.” Sasakura extended his head forward to place it just beside mine. He made his lips slanted. He stretched his arm, and pointed at it to show it to me. “Those two below that.”

“What? You mean, the spark plug?” I asked, because he was holding the plug.

“No.” He shook his head. “I examined it, and it is very clean.”

“Then, what is it?”

“I guess it has to do with engine overcooling.”

“Overcooling?”

“Occasionally, the cylinders on the frontmost row suffer from the situation.”

“But ...”

“It is the destiny of this type of engine. Because cooling down the cylinders on the rear two rows is placed on the first priority, by the time the rear rows are cooled down to the proper temperature, the front row gets overcooled as the result inevitably. To a certain extent, the discrepancy can be compensated by adjusting the intake air density. However, such adjustment is not always going to match perfectly with any possible situation. It is likely to occur, especially when lowering the altitude rapidly.”

“Don’t you have a solution for that?”

“If I had such a thing, then I would have applied that a long time ago.”

“What shall I do about the issue? I am not going to feel good, if I have no measure for that.”

“Umm, the only measure is to put the load on it occasionally.”

“What? Is it that easy? Very simple. Does everyone know that?”

“Probably.”

“I should just be informed of that sort of stuff. Or else, things can get messy.”

Since we were standing on a small, square-shaped lift, each side of which was about one meter in length, the two of us were really getting close to each other. When I lost my balance, I gave up on trying to stay on the platform, and attempted to jump off. However, Sasakura kindly held my arm to support me. *I haven't expected anyone to do such a thing without any request*, I thought. I was not glad at all. I even felt a pain around the part of the arm that he was holding. I did not thank him. After sitting on the lift once, I landed on the floor.

“Do you want me to make the air intake flow to the denser side a bit?” Sasakura asked. “Or, do you like the current condition?”

“The latter, please.” I answered without seeing him.

The aircraft next to mine was also spotlighted. Although it seemed that it was in the middle of the maintenance by other mechanics, no one was around it at that point. I heard music being played at a low volume. It was distorted as if it were being performed in the water. I guessed that it was from another room.

“That is the way of air-cooled engines in general.” Sasakura said.

“Understood.” I nodded with my back directed toward him.

I got out of the hangar.

I lit the cigarette. When exhaling the smoke, I looked up at the sky. I might have thought I should have tried to make the smoke return to the sky. The starlit sky looked cold and shivering.

For some reason, I felt uneasy. I was not sure how to describe this. I felt like I was lacking the solid feeling of my belonging to this place. I felt my being was light,

to the extent that I wondered why I could actually be standing on the ground. I felt as if I were about to disperse like smoke.

I started walking a little toward the runway.

But I always live as if I am dreaming.

I could not help but feel that everything around me, including myself, was a trivial thing like a toy made of clay. If I left it alone, it would become drier and lighter. Eventually, it would crack, crumble, be pulverized, and be blown away by the wind. Those were just such things that they were.

Thinking this way makes me feel easy, and I even feel pleasant.

By thinking this way, I can live. That was what I thought.

Conversely, once I was conscious of water molecules within me, that would not work too well anymore. My body would feel heavier suddenly, and every movement would be such a bothersome drag. I felt as if each breath or each pulse were a solemn ritual.

The part that another person touched would not work as a part of my body anymore. Such a theory seemed to be binding me. I was thinking about my left arm Sasakura had grabbed. I held the part with my right hand. Only a faint, old scar remained there. It was not the only scar. Sasakura wouldn't have known that, of course. No one knew. They were the wounds I had inflicted upon myself. They were the vestiges of the fact I had wanted the parts not to belong to my body any longer.

I exhaled the smoke.

The starlit sky was blurry.

But the problem lied in my eyes. The stars themselves would not blur, definitely. The blurring had to do with the problems, such as my eyes or the clouds in front of me, that were related to the places closer to the ground. The stars would not know or give a darn about such a trivial matter.

The holes on the cowling haunted me. It was the same as the hole on my head. I thought the hole had been there since a long time ago, since I was a child.

Next morning, three Suigas took off from the airbase.

The pilots were the Teacher, I, and Kusurida. He said he was ordered six hours before the departure. He did not seem to be having a hangover. A new scratch that did not exist yesterday was placed beside his eye. Of course, I did not ask him the reason for that.

It was cloudy on the ground, and there was no wind.

We stopped ascending when we got above the clouds, and flew toward south-southeast.

Our assignment was simple. It was to join four bombers in 30 minutes and guard them for about one hour. I was somewhat expecting the risk of the mission, for there had to be a reason why we needed three, not just two escorts. The word “risk” had to be used only for the things to be expected. It was uncertain whether more ally fighter aircrafts would come to our aid. Usually, we used the relay system, under which different teams of fighters belonging to different bases escort the same group of bombers, one after another in succession. The explanation for the entire project was not given at all. If enemies appeared, judging from the geographical conditions, they should come from aircraft carriers. Additionally, it should be intercepted by other ally teams before they managed to reach this deep. My team functions as a backup, in case the enemies still manage to penetrate this deep into the multilayered protection. That was the overtone that Goda displayed during the briefing that morning. In this case, the definition of the “multilayered protection” meant the number of times the meetings were held or the number of pages for the project report documents. It did not necessarily mean the number of reliable pilots or the firepower.

In the upper-right side ahead of me, the Teacher was flying. Between me and the Teacher, Kusurida was cruising. I was flying in the rear and at the lowest altitude of the formation. The clouds below us completely covered the ground. Still, several mountain tops could be viewed in the far end of the left side. We were supposed to be above the ocean by then.

We had already stopped using the radio.

The engine was roaring in an excellent condition. At times, I raced it a bit. It might become the strange habit.

Because of the glaring sunshine, I frequently looked at the opposite direction, from which our bombardment group should be arriving. I wondered what type of aircrafts they would be. Are they Suzushiros? Or, Murasakimes, twin-boom aircrafts? I had never piloted a bomber. I imagined that it would be as boring as getting on a ship and feeling seasick (or airsick). About the bombing crews, as much as I knew, they probably had thick arms, wore tattoos, and were all crazy without any exception.

While checking the meters on the instrument panel, I looked around over and over. I could not do any better because the clouds covered the sight below us. When I flew at this altitude, I mysteriously had the illusion as if I were flying just above the ocean. I occasionally noticed the sensation, and found that to be amusing.

The Teacher's aircraft, flying at the forefront position, started ascending. Kusurida followed suit. I pulled the control stick toward myself once and opened up the throttle. I looked around the higher positions and finally found them. They were much smaller than the scratches on the canopy.

I ascended gradually. The whole picture of the clouds below us became even more visible, little by little. The far ends of the cloud formation were fragmentary. I passed through a thin cloud above me, and ascended even more. Since Suiga was the type of aircraft that could boast its awesome engine power, it did not show any sign of deceleration. I felt as if I could ascend all the way endlessly.

There were four ally bombers, and all of them were Murasakimes. The fact that four Murasakimes were making a sortie together indicated that our intended target was not a single factory or anything like that. It had to be a bigger target than that. Four engines on each bomber were groaning deeply. It was like a chorus of slow-tempo blues music. Anyway, everything about them seemed heavy. Bombers had once been called "pregnant women". But as the number of female pilots was increasing, the nickname had been out of use by then. At least, the twin booms of Murasakime were not fat. Instead, the main wings were thick and looked peculiar. When it was on the ground, no one would think that it was an airplane. If it was described as a submarine, many would believe it, I thought.

We ascended to the same altitude as the bombers, and brought our courses closer to theirs bit by bit. Our formation was staying the same. The four bombers were

flying in a lozenge-shaped formation.

No other aircraft could be found in the sight. *Does it mean that the escort fighters for another team have already returned to their bases?* Although I approached the bombers to the extent that I could see their interiors through the windows, the crews did not greet by doing things like shaking their wings. I understood that they could not execute such a maneuver even if they wanted to do so.

I slightly lowered the altitude again and had decided to fly at a slow pace. By doing so, I could save the fuel.

Fighter aircrafts hardly ascended to this altitude. I could feel, through my senses, that air was thin. Despite its velocity, the body of the aircraft did not shake a lot. The engine sound was dry. It sounded like the propeller engine was racing.

It was getting a little cold. I was wearing a scarf around my neck. I took off the goggles once and rubbed my eyes.

The white clouds were far below us now.

I could vaguely sense the curvature of the Earth.

Someone said that, even at this altitude, it would be as if we were still crawling on the ground. Heaven was placed much, much higher above this field. There could not be any tale more ridiculous than that. *What in the world can be there above this place?* I guessed that those who had not been able to reach this altitude would make comments like that to cry sour grapes.

We had flown silently for about 20 minutes.

The position of the sun was gradually approaching the direction right in front.

I saw glittering flying objects ahead of and below us on the left side.

The Teacher shook his wings, lowered his altitude, and retreated to the coordinate right beside me. He saw me through the canopies. He pointed at me first, then turned his finger to the direction of our bombers. He was commanding me to stay on course with the bombers to protect them. To intercept the enemy planes with two of us and to let me remain in the escort formation had been the original plan of the mission to start with. So, I understood well what I had to do without anyone telling me what to do. *Why did he remind me of that? Did he think that I might be thinking*

of lunging at the oncoming enemies by ignoring what the mission was about?

The two rolled over, with their bodies being oriented almost upside-down, and they were descending.

I lowered one of the wings slightly, and gazed at the direction. I could not accurately tell the exact number, but there appeared to be three or more. Obviously, it was difficult to recognize what type of aircrafts they were. They might not be all fighter aircrafts.

My duty was to check not only these aircrafts but also the entire situation around us.

It was impossible for the enemies to attack from the higher position than this, so I checked the front, rear, right, and left. The bombers flying above me were getting ready to shoot the machine guns. I saw a crew entering the tail gun unit.

In the direction to the left side below me, the dogfight seemed to have started.

However, I could not sense the sounds or lights from this position. I could only see the small spots moving quietly.

It appeared that there were four enemies.

Shall I join the fight?

It made me think.

I decelerated a bit. The bombers started sliding forward above me.

Three minutes had passed in that condition.

I was paying attention to the situation behind us.

If one more minute will have passed without any change, I will descend.

That was what my right hand, which was holding the control stick, said.

Then, I saw two enemy aircrafts ahead of me on the right side, a bit below diagonally.

“Here they come!” I shouted.

I probably sounded as if I was overjoyed.

I slightly raised the throttle, but kept the altitude.

After that, our bombers seemed to have noticed the enemy attack, too. They were trying to turn their noses toward the enemies. I passed under them transversally and flew forward ahead of them.

They were rapidly approaching. The two enemies had yet to split.

They were making the first lunge while keeping the formation. They probably had planned the tactic beforehand. But they would be flurried when they learned that one fighter aircraft, namely mine, was still staying in this position.

I unlocked the safety device.

Oil pressure gauge. *Check.*

I switched the fuel tank.

Adjusting the rudder trimming, and the elevator trimming.

I brought the goggles back to their proper position, and took a deep breath.

They were getting closer to me.

What type are they?

The edge of their wings glittered in silver. Both of them were single-engine light aircrafts.

I saw them letting go of their external drop tanks.

One enemy was leaving while ascending to the left side. The other was lunging straight at me.

I looked around. I checked the location of our four bombers. They increased their altitude, changed the formation, and were ready to fight back. The enemy aircraft that was leaving their formation was probably attempting to move around to the other side of our bombers.

The one that was lunging at me aligned its wings vertically with respect to the ground.

It will shoot at me, in three seconds.

One, two, three.

I pulled the control stick to operate the elevator to move upward, and then I

ascended rapidly.

As I expected, it started shooting at me.

The other was still below me.

Would it dodge my attack and lunge at the bombers from below? Or, would it attempt to move around to get behind me?

I choked the engine.

Flaps.

I rolled to my right with the aileron.

It's coming.

Full throttle.

While holding the head, I controlled the rudder by using my entire body.

While slipping transversally, the nose of my aircraft turned to the opponent.

“Come on!”

Fire!

Going down.

While observing the enemy's orientation, I enter the rolling maneuver immediately.

It shot at me, too.

I dove, while spiraling.

I looked at the other enemy.

Is that one first?

Full throttle.

My aircraft bounced.

I detached the drop tank. My aircraft floated, and entered the ascend phase.

I withdrew the flaps.

The enemy behind me started shooting at me.

But, I can get away. It won't catch me from the position.

I got myself inverted by rolling, and watched out for the next move of the enemy.

Good. He has failed to move smoothly.

Then, I ascended all at once.

I flew diagonally below the enemy, which was nearing our bombers. That is the blind spot.

I lowered the altitude so as not to get my friendlies in the range along the line of my attack, and looked upward.

I shot.

In two seconds, I was leaving.

While choking the engine, I turned around the idle enemy like I would do to a pylon. *Did they hit the canopy?* It was issuing no smoke. But, the aircraft was slowly leaning to the right. *It might be dead already.* With my aircraft being upside-down, I started descending.

For a moment, I entered the other enemy's sight right in front of it, which was ascending.

It shot at me.

I turned the nose of mine to it with the rudder and flaps. Then, I shot for one second.

We passed each other.

I made a loop immediately.

I pushed up the throttle.

The enemy shot a little at our bombers. It was still far away.

I saw the first enemy falling. It was not emitting smoke.

The remaining enemy turned toward me.

You want it, eh?

Just bring it on.

Take a deep breath.

Check the meter for the oil pressure and oil temperature. Also, check the gauges for the fuel system.

The engine, which Sasakura had maintained, was working well.

If the weight of this aircraft were a bit lighter, then I would have been able to defeat the enemies more quickly.

I made a turn.

After banking, the enemy started lunging at me.

A turn to the left.

Then, turning to the right immediately.

Going up.

High throttle.

While rolling, I checked the position of the enemy.

Probably, the aircraft cannot quite exert its power at this altitude.

Okay. That is the reason why it seems to be avoiding taking the vertical routes.

After twisting, I rolled to the right.

The enemy was observing how I was moving.

I started thinking about the Teacher and Kusrida.

But, I could not see anything pertaining to them.

I was getting far away from our bombers.

No one could ascend this high above the ground.

It meant that we were playing a good game.

That is quite a dance.

The remaining enemy was, as I expected, smarter than the previous one, to say the least.

It was banking while observing me carefully.

I brought the flaps to the neutral position a bit, and increased the velocity.

As expected, I was faster than it was.

This meant that it had no chance for winning.

“Yes.”

Going up.

I got inside the turning maneuver, and decelerated.

Full flaps.

I cut the rudder and ailerons to the opposite directions.

While sliding, I had my nose point to the target.

It finished the banking maneuver, and got itself straight.

He's clever. If it had attempted to escape, it would have been shot down.

It was desperately trying to get closer to me with the brute-force method.

It lowered the nose.

Going down.

It was now within my attack range.

After fine-tuning the aim, I shot at the target.

I did not need to confirm the result of the kill.

Immediately, I checked our bombers behind me. They were very far away.

While rolling over, I lowered the altitude once.

The enemy continued to fly straight while emitting smoke. *Is it trying to escape? I don't think it can do so.*

I broke away.

I made a gentle turn, and observed the space around me while rolling.

One aircraft was ascending from behind me on my left side.

I was not sure if it was the enemy or a friendly.

While having the nose of my aircraft point to the direction, I descended.

I noticed that it was a Suiga, on our side. It was Kusurida's aircraft.

An enemy was following him. It was a twin-engined aircraft, which was of a different model from the one that I had just shot down.

The enemy fired.

It was not intended for me. It was targeting Kusurida.

I started turning rapidly, and chose the course to get behind the enemy.

The enemy flipped as if it was dancing, and pointed downward.

Very fast.

Before I managed to fix the nose to the direction, he was escaping toward the coordinate far below me.

Kusurida seemed to be all right. I saw him making a turn above me.

I had the nose of my aircraft point straight down.

I raised the power.

The oil temperature was slightly high.

The fuselage started vibrating. It was the proof that the velocity was getting closer to the limit.

Into the clouds, the enemy was attempting to dive.

It was probably trying to make an escape in that way.

I made a spiraling maneuver, and checked the vicinity around me.

Kusurida was not coming.

“Go back.” I heard it through the radio. It was the Teacher's voice.

I took a breath, and slowly pulled the control stick.

I did not see the Teacher's aircraft. *From where is he seeing me?*

Did he mean to tell me not to pursue the target too far and deep? It was unusual to use the radio in this airspace, but it did not matter because we had just finished engaging in the severe battle.

The enemy aircraft was about to vanish into the clouds.

At the time, it suddenly burst into flames.

It went out of sight, just like that.

While feeling startled, I made a turn.

The deep-blue aircraft was ascending from the clouds. It was the Teacher's Suiga.

He was ascending diagonally, toward our bombers.

I brought my aircraft close to the angle of his vector, and started ascending toward the direction.

I made a gentle roll in the middle.

There was no enemy around us anymore.

Kusurida lined up in the same course, too.

I checked the fuel meter. We had to go back to the base, after flying a little more.

When I got above the higher clouds, I returned my aircraft to the horizontal level. The three of our aircrafts kept the triangle formation like a huge three-engine aircraft.

I could see four Murasakimes. They looked safe and sound.

I caught up with them and placed my aircraft a little below them.

It was turning on its light to thank us. I responded by shaking my wings.

I rolled over once, and looked downward.

I see no one.

It's quiet.

Only the engine sounded synchronously and performed a solemn music. I took off the goggles, and took a deep breath. The air in the cockpit was cold and the frame of the canopy was frosted. However, the sunshine was gentle, warm, and subtly sweet. I might have gotten airsick a little.

After we flew for about five minutes, we parted with the four bombers.

Right after that, the next group of fighter aircrafts should come up and take over

the escort role. We were all teaming up to protect the bombs. If the bombs were all so precious to that extent, then should we just keep them safe and secure for a long time? We had to go through all these troubles just to end up dropping them on the enemy territories. Wars are mysterious actions.

Bombs were a project named bombs. Both bombers and fighter aircrafts were the strategy of a mere deployment. Like solving the mathematical formula by moving symbols, someone was trying to find the answer. We were just moving according to our attributes and our instincts. We could not escape from the rule after all. Although we seemed to be moving freely along our decisions, no one was free, in reality.

However, compared to the people living on the ground, we might be a little freer up here. In any case, at least we did not have to suffer from losing the freedom of movement here.

At worst, we could just fall downward.

Falling, and colliding with the ground.

We could just be crushed, and go splat.

I mean, we should have thanked the fact that we were given the right to do so. Even if we died, we could just fall properly.

But, I would not like the situation, in which there was an ocean below me.

I did not like oceans. I did not like fish, either. If possible, I wanted to avoid diving into the body of water.

We were now flying above the sea.

I felt the clouds were spreading as if they were kindly trying to exploit the courtesy to hide from me the uncomfortable world below us.

Quietly, we were on our way to the base.

The direction of the sun was angled high behind us, and my own aircraft was occasionally casting a small shadow on the clouds below.

In the end, we were sinking into the clouds.

The moist air insistently twining around my aircraft told me that the ground was

approaching.

The world below us is dirty.

Dark, and despairingly dull.

Even as for the clouds, those which were closer to the ground level were dirtier.

I speculated that the clouds got dirty because they were being rubbed with the ground. They were like mechanics' black shoes that were being soaked with oil.

We were living in the world that was disgusting like mud.

So.

However excellently I accomplished my mission, I would end up feeling gloomy in the end just by descending to the ground. I could not understand people who could laugh in such places.

-7-

On the night, the party-like gathering was held in the dining hall. But, the Teacher did not attend it. Without him, I had no reason to join them. I showed my face to them as a duty and soon went back to my room.

I went to the hangar again to check my aircraft. I thought Sasakura was inside because the light was turned on. But, after opening the door and looking around, I found no one. Silence prevailed. No music.

There were three Sangas in the hangar.

There were my aircraft, and the Teacher's. The third one was a backup. The spots like this were placed here and there around the runway, so mechanics had to move around from time to time. Maybe, at that time, Sasakura was working at another place.

I shot down two enemies today. The Teacher got three. He finished the one, who was escaping right before diving into the clouds. It was amazing. I myself did not notice what was going on at all. I guessed that even the target itself could not understand who shot it down. It might have thought that it collided with a rock floating in the clouds. The tales pertaining to such rocks were quite famous among pilots.

I walked around my aircraft.

By gently touching the leading edge of the wing, I felt the curvature.

I wanted to consult with Sasakura about the slight widening of the flap angle.

I could do nothing but get outside at that point, and walked leisurely toward the runway. I had decided to smoke under a lighting pole. By standing there, I could see a white road in the sky. More than anything, the darkness of the place I was standing on was fascinating.

To begin with, I love nights.

I liked the night when flying, and definitely even more so when on the ground. To be honest, I wanted to stay up all night to savor it, but I could not do so because I had a lot of works to do in the daytime. During the night, the air was cool and I could hear something nostalgic in the air. I could call it “the night sound”, or something like that. It was whispering silently. I felt as if it were the operation sound of the machinery named night, and I could feel relieved as long as I could hear it. I also felt as if the stars would be falling down from the sky at once, as soon as the sound stopped. The balloon named night was probably able to keep on staying inflated, thanks to the machinery to provide air to it.

I heard footsteps.

Someone was approaching me.

I turned around, and took a look back at it. Kusurida was walking, while smoking.

“What’s up?” He asked, after stopping about five meters from me.

“Well, about what?”

“What are you doing here?”

“Nothing in particular.”

“Everyone is feeling disappointed because you left the party.”

“You’re kidding.” I slightly laughed for him on purpose. It was just a diplomatic gesture like making salutes. “I have already introduced myself and told them my stories.”

“I mean, they want to know more about you.”

Kusurida's tone was more polite than before. *How come?*

“Why?”

“Why? You know, that is the way it usually is. If you happen to like someone near you, you would naturally want to know more about him or her. Correct?”

“I think I have already talked about almost everything. About the previous team, and about my flight experiences.”

“They want to know more private stuffs.”

“Ah, I see. I have no secret in particular. If you ask something, I will answer what I can answer ... For example, what is it?”

“For example ...” Kusurida exhaled the smoke.

I also took a cigarette out of my pocket. The clear air of night was best-suited for smoking.

“Umm, you know, for example, about what your favorite thing is.”

“I love aircrafts. Piloting it allows me to experience the happiest moment in my life.”

“Anything else?”

“You mean, my favorite thing?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe, smoking.” While covering the lighter with my hands, I lit the cigarette. “Then, I love to be alone. Kusurida, do you have anything that you like to do?”

“I love drawing pictures.”

“Really ...”

I exhaled the smoke.

What a weird atmosphere this is.

Another person was standing five meters from me, and we were having a conversation in which I could not sense the coherence of. I was listening to it like I would do to a radio broadcast.

Yeah, the existences of other beings are the same as sounds.

I had to hear them, even if I did not want to do so.

But I was neither pushed nor pulled in particular.

As long as I did not touch it, it would not affect me.

It was just a vibration of the air.

By the way, this guy named Kusurida had tender-hearted characteristics, according to my evaluation. His kindness to approach a newcomer this way was unusual for our profession. Usually, pilots were dry, and considered the friends to be only as important as cakes. If you took a bite of it and it tasted good, then it was good enough. That was all there was to it. They would vanish anytime. Even if they did not exist, that would not be a problem.

Against all the people in the world, we might be having that sort of perception. There was no hostility in it. However, on the other hand, we could not have the feelings of intimacy, on the polar opposite. Humans are humans. Just a species of animals. Like we would root for the compatriotic teams while watching sport events, we prefer humans to monkeys. That is as much familiarity as we can feel.

“For example, are you in love with someone?” Kusurida asked.

I was surprised by the fact that he was still there.

I inhaled the smoke, digested it in my lungs, converted it into the different type of smoke, and then exhaled it.

“Sorry?” I asked back deliberately.

“Do you have any particular person that you are interested in?” Kusurida inquired. He threw the cigarette away, and made a few steps toward me while trampling it. The distance was now three meters or less between us.

“I’m not sure what you are asking me about.” My tone was getting somewhat colder. “Perhaps, are you asking me if I currently have a partner or anything like that?”

“Err, umm, yes ... I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“Oh, no ... I don’t feel that I am offended.” I sighed. “But I’m not so impressed with the question. If I remember correctly, it is forbidden by the rule.”

“Yeah. Of course, if you are not willing to talk about it, then I won’t ...”

“That’s not what I meant. I am feeling the sense of incongruity about the fact that you are asking me such a question.”

“I’m sorry.” Kusurida spread his arms. “I apologize. Forget about it, please.”

“I would like to say that same to you. I don’t want you to talk to others about this conversation.”

“I understand.”

“I would like to prefer a workplace without such matters.” Saying so, I stuck the cigarette in my mouth and inhaled the smoke. I might have thought that I could sterilize the disgusting topic with the smoke.

Kusurida slightly raised a hand, nodded once with a smile, and then left the place.

I resumed smoking for a while in the darkness.

I disliked having to get off the aircraft because of the experiences like this.

-8-

The following morning, I was woken up by an engine sound, and got out into the corridor. I looked at the runway, but I could not see anything taking off. The wind was cold, but the weather was fine. *Who has just taken off?*

I got up so suddenly that I forgot what dream I was having. I went back to bed, sat on it, and contemplated. It must have been a disgusting dream. Then, why was I trying to recall the dream? That was weird. Only the feeling that it was very unpleasant remained under my throat. In fact, I put my hand on it, as I slowly exhaled.

I felt Kusurida might have appeared in my dream. Ah, before I fell asleep, I had been thinking a bit about what happened last night.

I, not Kusurida, was the pilot who stayed in the escort formation for guarding the bombers. I think that Kusurida wanted to be the prime partner of the genius pilot. It was natural desire for any pilot. In the first phase, Kusurida must have thought that the one who could accompany the Teacher was the more reliable partner. I myself was dissatisfied with his command for me to stay behind, especially because

I thought I had shown my skill to him on the previous day.

But, as it turned out, two more enemy aircrafts appeared. That was a complete turnaround of our situation. If I could say it rather exaggeratedly, we had ended up being able to accomplish our mission thanks to my staying behind. I might have wanted to emphasize that Kusurida could not have dealt with the situation properly.

Of course, I did not know how skillful Kusurida was. However, if he had more piloting skills than I had, then he would not have shown that sort of demeanor. In the previous night, he was unnaturally polite in his speech.

In conclusion, the pilot whom the Teacher respected the skills of and commanded to stay behind was me, not Kusurida. No wonder Kusurida appeared to be envying me for that. I understood it was a natural feeling. If I were in his shoes and our roles were reversed, then I would have been jealous of him.

I thought I had had a dream pertaining to the issue.

I had wanted to sling words of abuse at him to my heart's content. Such a formless anger was lingering around me even after I woke up.

However, I should not have dragged the dream experience to the reality. Actually, the hostility against Kusurida was being dispersed like a melting ice cube.

He might have been a good guy, mightn't he? Yes, he probably was. He was trying to take care of me about this and that because he was worrying about me. *I should think so, just like that.*

After changing clothes, I went to the dining hall. No one was there. It was getting a little late. I asked the elderly woman about whoever had just taken off from the runway, but she just shook her head. The sense of value, which stated that whatever was being dissolved in her soup was more valuable than my question, was one of the achievements that she had attained in her life.

As I returned the dishes, lit the cigarette, and read a newspaper, someone called my name. I looked up, and found Goda, standing in the lobby. With his fingers, he beckoned me to follow him.

I stood up immediately and walked toward him. Goda climbed up the stairs and entered his own room. The door was left open. After saluting, I got inside and closed the door.

There was no rule prescribing that we had to wake up at a fixed time in particular unless we needed to make a sortie. As long as I was inside the base, no one would have the right to admonish me for it. So, Goda would not be interested in talking with me about my oversleeping.

“How may I help you, sir?” As I walked toward the front side of his desk, I asked.

“Have a seat.” Goda showed a sofa with his hand, and he himself sat in his chair with his legs crossed. “I had a report from Kusurida this morning.”

I sat in a sofa and looked straight at him. I kept silent because I could not guess what it was about.

“The report is about his having done something rude to you. His account was too abstract for me to comprehend it clearly. But I myself am quite satisfied with your works. If possible, I want you to work here for a long time to come. That is what I am thinking. But, of course, it is up to you, for I want to respect your thoughts. I would be glad if you would speak up frankly.”

I felt something like summer clouds rising in my head.

“Sir, I’m afraid I do not understand well what you are talking about.” I first replied so. “I do not remember if he did a rude thing to me. Also, I think I want to stick to my duty here for a long period to come.”

“Really.” Goda nodded a bit and took a brief look at the window once. He seemed to be squinting and viewing something in the distance, but he was probably not looking at anything. When a human being is trying to look at what it really wants to look at, then the one would not squint in general.

I just waited for a while silently.

“In short, I want to say this.” Finally, Goda turned toward me. His tone was quiet and sounded very calm. “I would like you not to feel offended.”

“I am listening, sir.”

“The flight team in this base is regarded as exclusive. You do understand the reason, don’t you?”

“Of course, sir.” I nodded.

The difference between this and other bases was clear. It was the presence of the

Teacher. There was no other reason in particular.

“Since he joined us, our team has produced splendid achievements. We have hardly made a vacant post. I understand that you must have come here because you submitted a transfer request ...”

“That’s right, sir.”

“You are not the only applicant. There have to be many. Of course, I do not know why you have been chosen from so many candidates.”

“I myself do not know the reason. I think it was just a coincidence.”

“Anyway, compared to other teams, personnel changes are overwhelmingly few, because we do not have too vacant posts and no one wants to submit the request to transfer to other teams. Therefore, a newcomer rarely joins us.”

“That is the story I heard.” While nodding, I was somewhat feeling sick of how circuitous his explanation was getting.

“Currently, in our company, about 20 percent of the pilots are females. The average values of their evaluation grades exceed those of males. Still, for some reason, there has been no female pilot in this team, until recently. Not even one, since this base was established.”

“I understand.” I responded immediately. I was astonished a little because the conversation was going to an unexpected direction.

“I myself had an experience to team up with a female pilot. Also, I had a female pilot as my subordinate in the past. But, many of the personnel here do not have any experience in other bases. How shall I put it? I mean, I think I can say that they are not familiar with this sort of thing.”

“What about him, the Teacher?” I asked.

“Well, regarding this issue, I don’t think he has any opinion. It’s just my guess, though.”

“I have the same opinion as yours. I do not think that it is the important matter. Sir, I am afraid that I do not quite understand what you are trying to emphasize. I wonder if my gender is all so important.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. Completely different.” Goda shook his head. “I

regret that there still remains the old-fashioned sense of values. However, I mean, we cannot quite say that it does not exist anymore.”

“If it still exists, I feel very unpleasant.”

“Definitely.” Goda nodded. He tried to smile, but gave up in the middle, and shut down his facial expression.

“Thank you for your understanding, sir.” I bowed. “My room is on a different floor from those of others, and it seems that only I am allocated to a single room. Could it be that it is a consideration that pertains to the gender issue?”

“Yes. We just chose the safer option. Do you dislike it?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I wanted to show my gratitude for that as well. Of course, being distinguished is not my wish, but I, well, love to be alone very much. By being alone, I can demonstrate my abilities, and I am willing to utilize the opportunity to do the job even better. So, if possible, I hope I can continue to use the single room.”

“You got it.” Goda nodded. “The Teacher uses a single room, too.”

“Oh, really.”

“I think you two might be similar to each other.”

“What? Sir, you mean, he and me?”

“As much as I can tell from the observation.”

If anything, it was a good thing for me. But, I did not smile, and kept silent.

“That’s all. I’m sorry to take up your time for a trivial issue.”

“No, sir. I believe that it is the matter that needs to take time for being explained. Thank you, sir.”

“I heard that you are really gifted. I think it is meaningful for you to learn from him.”

“Yes, sir. I think so, too.”

I stood up, gave a salute, and was about to leave the room.

“Oh, Ms. Kusanagi.” Goda stopped me.

I stopped before the door, and turned toward him.

“How do you like your aircraft?” Goda, beside the desk, asked.

“You mean Suiga, sir?”

“Yes. The one which you piloted before was, well ...”

“Sanka.”

“Yes. It is a completely different type of aircraft. You have not gotten accustomed to it, have you?”

“No problem, sir. I already have gotten used to it.”

“Ah, in fact ... We have been considering the introduction of a new type of Sanka. As a company policy, it is planning to shift our aircrafts to the pusher configuration gradually.”

“Oh, really. Does it have anything to do with the fuel efficiency?”

“Probably, something like that. Only the ratio of the running cost to the obtained results is on the table at the board meeting.”

“Do you mean that the factors such as who pilots it do not matter to them?”

“That appears to be the case. Anyway, if you make a request, I can bring a new Sanka to this base. I have received such a proposal. What do you think about that?”

“Oh, yes, of course, that sounds like an attractive proposal to me. Sir, have you already received any information regarding the new Sanka?”

“If we want it, I can order it.”

“Would it be possible for me to decide to get it or not, after checking its specifications?”

“Definitely.” Goda smiled.

“Then, I would like you to do so, sir.”

“Okay.”

I got out of the room and climbed down the stairs. The last part of Goda’s talk made me feel good, so I was feeling much better.

A new aircraft, eh?

I can't wait.

-9-

While walking toward a hangar, I was rethinking about Goda's talk. I felt I might have been able to deal with the topic more reasonably because the new type of aircraft he had told me about had reset my mind.

Talking about gender issue was old-fashioned in our field. Even though it was too obvious, I understood that there were still a lot of those who were haunted by the ghost-like values and judgment that had been rooted in the long history of our culture.

The stance of my policy was that I rejected such topics from the start without discussing or accepting them. However, of course, I was occasionally aware of the fact that I was a female. It could never be the physical matter that was generated from within. That was a trivial matter. That was not what I wanted to emphasize. I meant, I was forced to be aware of that as a reaction to the recognition of the gender issues that people around me possessed.

For example, ages ago, there had been the race discrimination because of their skin colors. To begin with, there had not been such a problem when they had lived among the community consisting only of the same race. Naturally, the inferiority complex had not been there at the beginning. Self-evaluation was literally a decision by each individual, and for us to use it to understand ourselves was good enough. If that was all there was to it, then no problem would be created.

However, on the other hand, would the way, in which someone (other than me) observing me, not affect me at all, as long as we are in the society? It was not such a simple problem. Rather, those who surrounded me would observe me more intensely than I would observe myself. Occasionally, I felt that way.

There were several contrasts like that. Man and woman. Young and old. There were different races. Blood relationships were generated. In some cases, hierarchical relationships in workplaces and adversarial relationships would be brought forth. If I were alone, there would be no relationship pertaining to gender or hierarchy. Whether someone was old or young was equivalent to the passage of time. Only the factors like health, mood, and stability as the changes of myself would exist there.

I felt the sensation that was close to that aloneness when I was floating by myself

in the sky.

Which direction was right or left did not mean anything.

I did not know whether it was leaning or straight.

In short, I did not care about that sort of stuff.

If there was someone other than me, then I had to take the relationship with the one into consideration. The humankind had been obsessed with the hardship.

So, I felt it bothersome to seek the standard of contrasts on the outside.

There were not many interesting objects outside.

I could like few things.

For some reason, things were that way for my case.

I did not know how others were like.

I did not care about that.

Still ...

In my case, only his existence was special.

The expectation was too huge for me to believe. In fact, I had not been able to believe even my own feelings until I came here. I even thought that to be interested in somebody else by this much outside me might have been a mistake.

I became convinced by such thoughts, after experiencing two flight missions with him.

The very notion of conviction might have been unusual for me.

What is this? What is this strange feeling?

The shutter of the hangar was already raised. Sasakura was smoking while sitting on a chair placed outside .

I looked inside, and found only two aircrafts there. I guessed that one of the three had already taken off this morning.

“What’s up? You look to be in a good mood.” Sasakura commented, after exhaling the smoke.

“Really?”

“Such a facial expression in the morning is quite rare. Let me guess. Did you get good news?”

“I might get the opportunity to pilot a new aircraft.” I took a cigarette out of my pocket.

“Really? What type?”

“Sanka.”

“What?” Sasakura widened his eyes. “Really? Have they already completed the production of the new model?”

“Have you heard anything about it?”

“Hmm, perhaps, the engine would be bored out, and be equipped with three-stage intake manifolds. It is just what I think. Then, according to the sources, the control surfaces are completely revised, and they have become more controllable. By shifting the center of gravity closer to the roll axis, the roll maneuver has become faster as well. Probably, the important factor is the design pertaining to the machine guns. They are now mounted on the nose. That is probably the way it has been supposed to be designed originally.”

“Where did you get the information from?” I found myself chuckling. “If you were suspected of being a spy, you wouldn’t have the right to complain about it.”

“Well, you know, I have various friends and sources. You know, I have been working in this field for a long time. Forget what I have just told you, okay?”

“When it comes to the previous model of Sanka that I used to pilot, I wasn’t dissatisfied with the engine-related issues. But, about the roll maneuver, yes, it is accompanied with responsive delays. That, I think, is the point that I was most dissatisfied with.”

“Without machine guns on the main wings, any aircraft can do well to a certain extent. Armor plating, firepower, and spare fuel pods are excessive.”

“It can’t be helped. We don’t fly for hobbies.”

“As far as I can tell by watching from the ground, you pilots look like you are going to the party.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“But, you know, none of you takes off from the base unwillingly, correct? Although you might not come back again, you are willing to leave for the mission. Am I not right?”

“I’m not sure. I guess we are a bit nervous.”

“After you return to the base, you look somewhat absent-minded, as if you are saying, ‘Is that all that we get?’, ‘I’m not satisfied yet.’, or something like that.”

“I admit it.” I nodded. “If possible, I don’t want to get down to the ground again. But, I cannot sleep or take a shower, while flying.”

Sasakura stood up. He stretched up on his tiptoes, and took a deep breath.

“So, Sanka will come again ...”

“Ah, it has not officially been decided yet. I’m not sure when it will. Keep it secret, please.” I asked him.

I felt that my body was becoming dull, as if it were transformed into a dry dustcloth. So, I decided to jog around the runway. The air was chilly, but the sunshine was gentle. Withered weeds were still standing straight, and they were yet to notice that they had already been dead. They were like human adults.

I sometimes looked up at the sky due to my occupational habit. With no clouds, I could see very far. Nothing was up there except for the bright sunshine.

While looking at my own shadow, I ran for a while. At the edge of the runway, I turned to the opposite direction and climbed up the bank along a river. Trees were lined up over the bank, and my guess was that they were parts of a windbreak forest planted by humans. *Most of the nature is made by humans for the sake of their conveniences. Although deserts are parts of the nature, for some reason, only lush green fields are adored by people. This ground is filled with such disgusting things. Probably, such filth is sunk in the oceans, too. The nasty things pour into the sea, and must have been accumulated without disappearing.*

In the way, I felt that the sky had yet to be ruined.

I mean, almost all the things created by humans are not floating in the sky. Like the clear layer above dirty muddy water, only the part is transparent. Since only the light things can exist in the sky, the dirty things become heavier and sink below. I

suppose.

After running on the bank for a while, I was getting somewhat short of breath. I was breaking out into a sweat. As I bent down my body and looked downward, drops of sweat were dripping straight to the ground like bombs.

I could look out over the river. The amount of the running water was little, though. Sandy soil and plants could be seen here and there. No bridge nearby. The distance to the opposite bank was no less than a few hundred meters and both banks on the sides of the river were running straight like a runway.

I was walking toward the lower reaches of the river.

A person was lying down on the sloping surface of the bank. I quickly noticed that it was the Teacher. I kept walking at the same pace without stopping, but the rhythm of my breathing was already shifting. Consciously, I was trying to stay calm. I thought it was the same type of feeling that I would experience right before I encountered the oncoming enemies. In this case, I was properly fine-tuning the course on which I was walking, as I was imagining the handling of the control stick.

My finger was releasing the safety lock.

My left hand was conscious of the feeling of the throttle.

The person who was enjoying such an imaginative association was another one within me.

I stepped into the weeds on the bank, and went down the slope.

He was putting a cap on his face, and laying one of his arms beneath his head. He was raising one of the knees, and was placing the other leg above the makeshift platform of his bent knee.

I was approaching the point that was about three meters from him.

He was not moving.

Is he sleeping?

I kept silent because I thought I might end up disturbing him.

I looked up at the blindingly bright sky once.

I saw a bird at a very high altitude.

Without moving its wings, it was gliding and turning. It was probably watching us two from that height.

“Did you hear anything about Sanka from Goda?” Suddenly, he spoke to me. It was a calm tone.

“I did.” I replied quickly. “A moment ago.”

“How did you answer to the question?” He asked without moving the cap. I could not see his face.

“My answer was ‘Yes’.”

“You did. You used to pilot Sanka, didn’t you?”

“That is correct.”

“Do you like it?”

“Definitely. I like it.”

“What part of it do you like?”

“It’s light.” I answered in a moment. “That’s all that matters. More than anything, it is light and agile. Still, because heavy machine guns are loaded on the main wings, the movement of the roll system was not very sharp. I expect the upcoming upgraded version to overcome the weak point.”

“It will be improved. Originally, the machine guns were designed to be on the fuselage. In order to achieve the armament design, the mounting position of the engine was later shifted to the tail, as a stretch.”

Sanka had its engine at the rear. Its propellers were revolving at the tail end of the fuselage. Thus, neither engine nor propellers were placed in front of the cockpit. Only the canard wings were attached to the long and narrow fuselage that was protruding to the front.

“Umm ...” I took a step forward. “Perhaps I shouldn’t say so, but I’m afraid that I do not quite think so. Mounting the engine at the rear is for the flight efficiency and the balance. Loading the machine guns is not the main purpose.”

He lifted his hand to adjust the cap to the proper position. Then, he slowly raised his upper body to assume a sitting posture. He continued to look forward. He did

not even bother to look at me.

“Yeah, of course. You’re right.” He said in a low tone.

“Have you ever piloted Sanka?” I asked.

He turned his face toward me halfway, and stared at me sideways.

“I have.”

“How did you feel about the experience?”

“When it was first developed, I flew it a few times as a test pilot. So, I gave them my opinions about this and that. I think it is a wonderful aircraft.”

“Oh, really. I’m sorry, but I did not know that you once flew Sanka.”

“Goda talked to me about the new model, but I declined the offer of piloting it. Then, he decided to talk to you about it.”

“What?”

“In short, you are already the number two pilot here.”

I was at a loss for words.

The question about the reason why the Teacher had declined to fly the new model of Sanka, and the evaluation according to which I was placed next to him, jumped into my thoughts simultaneously.

It's complicated.

It was as if I had just encountered two fighter aircrafts of different types in front of me.

He picked up a cigarette from a chest pocket and put it in his mouth.

“Take a seat.” While exhaling the smoke, he commanded me while looking up obliquely at me.

I sat on the grass.

I was positioned behind him, and located higher than he was. The distance between us was about two and a half meters. I did not understand why the distance between us ended up being by that much. I wondered if the instinct was telling me that the closer range would be dangerous.

For a while, I was observing the shape-shifting of the smoke he was exhaling.

There was no meaning to it.

However, a habit to stare at such a thing was necessary for my occupation.

It was a short span of time, but I thought hard about it.

At first, I had vaguely come to the realization that I possessed the skill next to the Teacher's in this base. I had the confidence to that extent. Rather, I even had doubted the Teacher's aviation skills before I was assigned to this base. His reputation had been around since a long time ago, and I once thought that he had already retired ... Even if he might not have retired, his ability as a pilot had to be deteriorating. I have told it to myself, so that I would not feel disappointed with him or lose any respect for him when I saw him in such a sad state.

I paid no attention to other people from the beginning, for they were out of my sight. I knew my skill level. There could not be too many of those who could shoot me down. I had already felt it when I held the control stick for the very first time. *This is the place I belong to.* I even thought that the place existed for me.

Therefore, it was natural that I was number two.

I felt the feeling of astonishment or a slight sense of conquest from the fact I heard such a comment coming out from his mouth.

Still, there was another question.

Why had the Teacher declined to pilot the new model of Sanka?

About it, I had considered various possibilities, but none of them could convince me. The species named pilots always wanted to fly the most advanced, state-of-the-art aircraft. The new aircrafts would always be more sophisticated with higher specifications than the older models. If they were not more advanced than the predecessors, then they would not even be produced. Getting on the newer models of aircrafts was accompanied with the feeling of the pilot's body getting renewed. After getting the sensation of being reborn, I could move my new, faster, and stronger body. Nothing else could bring more pleasure than that. Nothing else would make me feel happier than that.

Probably, the aircraft was the one which was going to be deployed tentatively, as a

part of the test flight sessions. Naturally, Goda consulted with the Teacher about it. Because he declined the proposal of piloting the new model of Sanka, he then talked to me about it after that. It was like receiving a hand-me-down from him.

Then, why did he decline it?

If he was involved in the developing phase of Sanka earlier, he should have normally wanted to play a role in piloting the aircraft. He would definitely think so if it was the aircraft that was designed based on his opinions as the test pilot. *Does this mean that his opinions were rejected?*

I was hesitant to ask him about it.

Meaningless? Or, reckless?

I realized that I was at a loss, and I decided to look for the reason.

Even that, I could not find.

“Look at that.” He stretched one of his hands, and pointed at the sky.

I looked at it. I squinted at the bright sky.

Nothing there.

One bird was turning.

I did not get what he was talking about. So, I looked at his face.

“It will soon start diving.” He said.

I looked up at the sky again.

He seemed to be talking about the bird.

I was not sure why he could tell so, from what signs. As he just told me so, the black silhouette of the bird was suddenly falling straight. It was lunging into the grass in the middle of the shores of the river. While folding its wings and accelerating at the same time, it was occasionally adjusting its flying course definitely. Just when I thought it was about to crash into the ground, it widened its wingspan and pointed its body upward. Then, it glided horizontally by applying the velocity it had gained. It vanished into the grass in a moment.

It was so instantaneous, and I could hear nothing.

When it appeared again, it beat its wings swiftly and continued to ascend. It was acting heavier. Its talons were grabbing something big. It was flying at a low altitude to the opposite side of the river, probably because it could not fly any higher.

“Wow.” I uttered. Honestly, that was how I felt. I did not like living creatures in general. So, I had hardly observed them. But, I thought the movement I had just witnessed could serve as a reference for my job as a pilot.

“When you are diving, being heavier is better.” He said so, and stood up. “The attacker does not have to be light. Agility is the function that escapers want.”

He seemed to be smiling, while curving his lips diagonally.

I stood up, too.

But, he was already walking to the upper part of the bank.

I took a look at the river again. The black bird was nowhere to be found.

Episode 2: Loop

The flight of bats depends on their necessity, and their wings are completely covered with taut membranes. Bats' prey, which are nocturnal, seek to escape by means of extremely complicated revolutions, whose confusion is enhanced by their various twists, rolls, spirals, and turns. So, the bats must chase their targets by flying upside down, while keeping the attitude diagonally angled or employing various other methods of orientations. They could not execute such maneuvers without causing their own destruction, if the bats had feathered wings that could let air pass through them.

This excerpt is from a manuscript originally written in Italian by Leonardo da Vinci.

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It was about one month later when Sanka Mark A2 was brought to the airbase. Until then, I had piloted Suiga to fly in the sky six times. However, I had not encountered enemies at all during the sorties. Four times out of all the six flights, I flew with the Teacher. Although I wanted to learn more from him, I was not favored with a good opportunity.

Still, on the ground, I could converse with him several times. His aircraft and mine were moored in the same hangar, so we often met there. To my surprise, Sasakura was selected as the mechanic in charge of the Teacher's aircraft. I did not know the details of what went down in making the deal. Sasakura was so full of spirit, to the extent that I was worried if he would not be able to focus on maintaining my aircraft properly.

On the other hand, I could not quite establish enough emotional attachment to Suiga. It was because I knew a new Sanka was coming to the base soon. Sadly though, it could not be helped. I just thought I would at least try to pilot Suiga as carefully as possible. Usually, a pilot would try to customize the aircraft as he or she would like after several initial flights. Even though I should have requested Sasakura to modify this and that of my aircraft, I had decided to hold back on that occasion.

The cockpit of Suiga was a bit too spacious for me. Such an oversized coffin could not possibly allow me to die in peace. It was because the body of this model was designed to be thick to be able to load a huge engine in the nacelle on its nose. Compared to this, Sanka was small. I felt they were completely distinct types of

aircrafts, like they were weapons as different from each other as a knife and a blunt weapon were.

But I also thought piloting Suiga was a very good experience for me. The mechanism, in which the plane flew while being pulled, not pushed, by the engine power, gave me the sense of absolute stability when ascending to the higher altitude. Also, the rudder would receive the wind from the propellers, and it could shorten the time lag from the loss of control due to a stalling to the recovery. In this respect, I could gain the advantage in one-on-one dogfight, and that would allow me to add a wide variety of aviation.

However, I had been getting the impression that the current capabilities were reaching the limits. I could easily tell from my experience in piloting it that the engine and the fuselage were pushed to the edges. I might have pointed out that neither the vibration of the engine nor the sound of the wings cutting the wind had room for allowance or play to spare. It was similar to a case in which someone wearing a heavy suit of armor was trying to brandish a heavy sword. The condition would not allow any notion of adding anything else. In short, it was exhausting.

In the trend of the evolution of fighter aircrafts, I could say Sanka was a new derivative breed that emerged from a point that was far from the main stream. The Teacher said he had participated in the development project as a test pilot. *What opinions and comments did he give them?* I was quite curious about it.

This airplane had a moderate softness which pilots craved for. I knew that for sure.

Frequently, I flew an aircraft even in my dream. As expected, I would later recall that I had been in a cockpit of Sanka in many of the dreams.

I did not have an interesting dream so often. I was sure that my real life was much more interesting than my dream. As for my dreams, in most cases, they were scenes, such as something wrong happening, and my aircraft becoming uncontrollable. I had never experienced a fatal trouble like that in an actual flight. So, I tried to think that I had managed to consume my bad luck by having nightmares. In fact, it had been that way.

On the night when I heard from Goda that the new Sanka would arrive in the afternoon of the next day, I was so excited with joy and anticipation that I could

not stay still in my room. I ran to the hangar to see Sasakura, when he was repairing a motorbike in front of the shutter. He had been given from someone a junk and was overhauling it. Although it had been dismantled in the last few days, it had regained the complete motorbike form. I was a bit surprised by that.

“What’s up? You are looking happy.” Sasakura greeted, while looking at me.

“Sanka will be coming tomorrow.”

“Oh, congratulations on that. I surely would like to take a look at it.” He put a wrench back into a toolbox. “I want to see its three-stage intake manifold more than anything else. I want to know how they could fit that into such a limited space.”

“My guess is that they made something smaller by casting magic spells.”

At the time, I noticed that Sasakura was not in his jumpsuit as usual. He was wearing a leather jacket instead. It was a normal attire for somebody else, but rare as his fashion.

“Are you going somewhere?” I asked.

“Yeah, I will just make a test run.”

“What? Are you testing this?” I looked at the motorbike.

“There is nothing else that I can get on.”

“To where?”

“Ah, to the downtown area.”

“Where is the downtown located? How far away is it?”

“Haven’t you visited there?” Sasakura opened his mouth.

“Not even once.” I shook my head.

“Really ... Then, will you come with me?”

“What? How?”

“Unlike a fighter aircraft, we can share the ride on this one.”

“You lie.” I laughed.

“It’s true. Here, there is the seat, right?” Sasakura tapped on the rear part of the

motorbike. “The seats are tandemly arranged.”

Come to think of it, I had seen a photograph in which two people were riding on a motorbike. But the motorbike in the photograph was a larger, genuine type than the one Sasakura had been fixing.

“What is out there in the downtown area?”

“Nothing in particular. We will drink coffee, eat pies or something, and get back.”

It was 18:30. I had yet to have the day’s dinner. If I would not go to the dining hall, I would be summoned to the office to be reprimanded again.

“I’m coming with you.” I said.

“What?” Sasakura widened his eyes. “Are you kidding me?” He frowned and showed an unwilling look.

“You have just invited me, haven’t you?”

“Ah, well ... I did, just for the heck of it.”

“Let me ride the motorbike.”

“What? Have you ever gotten on a motorbike?”

“I have ridden a scooter before.”

“No, you cannot ride this.” Sasakura shook his head.

“It seems to be easier than piloting an aircraft.”

“No.”

“All right, then. I will get on the rear seat.” I tapped the seat.

-2-

By the time I recalled the face of the elderly woman in the dining hall, we were already away from the airbase by one kilometer in the forest. The road was bluntly straight and dark. Only the vicinity in front of us was lit with the headlight. I was right behind Sasakura on the motorbike. Even though it was very comfortable in the initial phase, it was starting to get colder and colder.

“How are you feeling?” Sasakura shouted loudly.

“It’s cold!” I replied.

After a while, the motorbike slowed down and stopped by a roadside.

We were in the forest, surrounded by the trees.

It seemed that a more spacious place was a little ahead of us, but there was no shop or house as much as we could see. There was no car. The surrounding atmosphere was eerie enough to make me imagine that wolves would appear at any moment. *I should have brought a gun here*, I regretted for the first time in this ride.

“What’s out here?” Without getting off the motorbike, I asked Sasakura.

“Can you get off for a moment?”

I distanced myself from the motorbike by a bit, Sasakura could not get off the bike unless I did so. He flipped down the motorbike kickstand. The engine was still emitting the low explosive putt-putt sounds intermittently.

He lowered the zipper of his jacket. As I wondered what he was about to do, he took it off. Then, he threw it to me. In a haste, I caught it.

I did not get it. I just looked at him, while inclining my head sideways.

“Put it on.” Sasakura said, grabbed the handle bars, and sat astride the seat again.

“Why? I’m okay.” I laughed. “Not too cold to that extent.”

Sasakura was keeping silent, and flipped his wrist to make the engine race once.

“Hey, I don’t like this sort of thing.” I told him so, while approaching him. “You know that. I don’t want you to do this.”

Sasakura glared at me sideways.

“You’re a pilot.” Sasakura said. “If someone happens to catch a cold, then it would be better if that one is a mechanic than a pilot. It is the factor of safety. Just a part of engineering.”

After considering it for about three seconds, I put my arms through the sleeves of the jacket. Then, I took the seat behind him again.

“Okay, let’s go.” Sasakura shouted and the motorbike started running again. It sped up rapidly in a moment.

The speed was not very high. I felt the engine was tired a bit, and its gears seemed to be in a fairly bad condition. I was subtly starting to worry if we would be able to return to the airbase. Anyway, at least it was not that cold anymore thanks to his jacket I was wearing.

A meadowland appeared after the forest. Then, we got onto an embankment along a river and kept going. Although it was completely dark within the vicinity, small lights could be seen around an iron bridge, which we were approaching.

Over the bridge were red and orange lights. I was finally reminded of the word “bustling”. However, after crossing the bridge, I could see only three buildings. Nothing else was there. Another one could be seen a little far away from us. It looked like a warehouse or a ruin.

“What’s that?”

“That’s a train station.”

“A train station?”

If a “train station” was there, then a railway had to be running close by. But I could not see anything that would look like a railway. A vaguely bright section was in the distance, which made the building appear silhouetted.

Among the three buildings near us, the one standing to the left side of the road was a gas station. It was just a small shack. The light was turned on. A red truck was parked in a vacant lot beside it. The closest building to our right looked like a store, but the door was shut. The light of the sign was turned off. Only the utility pole in front of it was shedding light on it. I was not sure what items the store sold. Probably, it was one of those stores which would brag about everything being available and then actually have nothing in stock. The other building was a flat structure standing far away from the road. It was the largest in the vicinity. Its sign included orange neon lights that partially lit the characters. The name of the shop seemed to be Ride On “something”. I just could not make out the “something”, latter part of the name.

At the open space in front of the shop, three cars were parked. Sasakura brought the motorbike near the entrance of the shop, and stopped its engine.

“You call this a downtown?” I asked.

“No, this is the edge of the downtown.”

“I guess so. Where is everyone?”

“Everyone? Who?”

“I mean, Kusurida and his companions.”

“I’m not sure.” Sasakura shook his head. “I don’t know that well about this area.”

Blackish music echoed in the place, and it provided the oily impression to the vicinity. A nostalgic jukebox was placed near the entrance. That was the source of the music. It might have been out of order. There were about 10 tables. A few customers were on the other end of the shop. No one was sitting at the bar counter. Sasakura walked toward the counter. After checking the interior of the jukebox, I followed him.

The bartender was a fat old man with gray hair. He seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. One of his eyes could not move. We ordered coffee and pie.

“You want the strong one, right?” The bartender confirmed, while tipping his head one way. He might have been showing the expression on his face, as if in wondering why we were not ordering alcohol.

“The stronger, the better.” Sasakura uttered.

“Same for her, eh?”

I nodded.

What he meant by coffee was the name of liquid which had been prepared a long time ago. The elderly one took out two white cups, turned them over, poured the liquid into them, and put them in front of each of us with his wrinkled hands.

“How did you get here? I heard a weird noise.” He asked Sasakura.

“By motorbike.”

“Motorbike? Got on together?” He looked at me sideways.

At the time, I noticed the jacket I was wearing and thought if I should have returned it to Sasakura. However, it was not cold here, and I imagined that Sasakura would not want me to do that in front of another person. So, I decided not to do so. The old man was still staring at me. There might be something rare about me.

Bake the pies first, I wanted to say to him.

“This one is a pilot.” Sasakura said.

“Oh, hey, really.” The elderly bartender widened his eyes. “When you are flying, are you sober? I mean, not drunk?”

I nodded, while exhaling from my nose.

Sasakura brought his face close to mine to have a secret conversation. I turned my ear toward him.

“If you are offended, we can leave here.” He said.

I shook my head.

The coffee was bitter. I could hardly smell the aroma of coffee. It was like a drink only with the residue of settled bitterness. Not a bad taste, though. I could evaluate it as something that is stimulating.

“How have you gotten here in the past?” I asked. Sasakura seemed to have visited this place before.

“I have come to this place once by car only with my mechanic companions. The Teacher was here at the time.”

“Oh? Did he come here with you?”

“No. We entered this shop and found him,” Sasakura pointed at the far end of the bar counter. “He was occupying the innermost seat.”

“I wonder how he got here? By motorbike, or anything of the sort?”

“I’m not sure.” Sasakura shook his head. “He was with a woman. He might have come here by her car.”

“Really. What type of woman?”

“What type ...” Sasakura was showing a troubled look.

“Was she young?”

“Oh, that is what you meant. You know, umm, yes.” Sasakura curved his lips obliquely. “Heavy makeup. Short skirt. To say the least ...”

She was not a pilot. He seemed to have come close to saying so. He noticed what he

was about to do before he actually mentioned it, and sipped his coffee to evade his remark.

Finally, our pies on the plates were brought to us. I immediately tried to eat it, which was too hot to handle. I could do nothing but bring it close to my mouth with the plate. Such way of eating was probably against manners, but I did not think that this bar cared about such refined rules.

What pie is it? It was hot, and had an elusive taste. It was peppery. It might have been deemed tasty. It was not the kind of taste that I could appreciate. It was probably not quite worth driving tens of kilometers just for eating it. That was what I could be sure of. On the other hand, we were in no better position of making such remarks, for our job was about flying for hundreds of kilometers for things that might not be worth that much.

I felt something about the account related to the Teacher. I looked back at the entrance several times. I felt as if he was about to come in at the very moment. *If he enters this bar now, what shall I do?* I wish I could talk about this and that with him at the same table. But I would not be able to do so if he was with a woman. I wondered if he would do such a thing, to bring a woman to a place like this. The Teacher might have happened to meet her at this bar and sat next to each other coincidentally.

The number of the customers increased by four. The jukebox squeezed out music one after another, which made the cloudy atmosphere inside greasier and more viscous.

I could not eat up the whole pie. It was not because of the taste. I explained it to Sasakura.

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“Shall we go back to the base now?” Sasakura asked. For some reason, his face was looking like laundry that was smoothed out.

“Do as you like.” I answered. It was still 20:00.

“We have the schedule to deal with tomorrow.”

“We always do.”

Sasakura stood up and took out the wallet from the hip pocket. He paid the bill. I heard the price and picked up half that amount from my pocket. I handed it after leaving the bar. He received it without words, and tried to put it into the chest pocket, which he could not locate.

“Ah, I have forgotten about that.” Sasakura pointed at me.

He was indicating that I was wearing his jacket.

He put the money into the pocket of the jacket I was wearing.

“I have a favor to ask you.” I said.

“What is it?” Sasakura looked back with a blank look. I just loved such a defenseless side of him.

“Let me drive on our way back.”

He clucked his tongue, and showed a solemn look, as I expected.

“I will drive slowly.” I said.

“With me on the back seat?”

“Ah, yes, it is inevitable.”

“Give me a break.” He exhaled the breath vigorously.

But he threw the key toward me. I caught it and smiled. It was unusual. Frankly, I felt happy. It was worth coming here.

Sasakura gave me a lecture for about one minute. *This is a throttle, that is a clutch lever. You can shift the gear with that. Then, here is the braggart brake.*

That's it, eh?

There are just two meters mounted on it.

I sat astride the motorbike and started the engine. The starter screamed and the roar that could shake my gut followed. Before I knew it, the old bartender was standing at the entrance and gazing at us. He seemed to be smiling. He would be lucky if he could go to heaven with that face.

Sasakura occupied the rear seat.

“Are you ready?” I asked him behind me.

“Drive slowly, please.”

“Hold on tight.” I shouted.

I released the clutch, and opened the throttle.

The motorbike started running smoothly.

We got on the road, and headed for the bridge.

I managed to shift the gear twice.

I was so happy that I screamed. It might have sounded weird.

I was laughing, and was not sure what words I gave off. They were probably not words. Such a hilarious excitement to this extent was normal in the sky. In the cockpit, I could cry or laugh loudly. However, it was difficult to do so on the ground. *I wonder why?* It might have been the first time ever for me to do so at the ground level. Without Sasakura behind my back, I might have given off much louder cries. If I had alcohol instead of coffee in my system, I might have been laughing more extravagantly. It was not necessarily about which was better or worse than the other, though ...

Both the vibration running through my body and the wind pressure on my face were excellent. It was completely different from the earlier experience. I would never get on the rear seat of a motorbike again.

We went straight on the bank, got off the bank by running down the slope diagonally in the middle, and were cruising on a road in a meadow. The engine sound changed its rhythm several times, but it never stopped.

On the ground, I don't need to check what is behind me.

No one will shoot at me.

Instead, I'm gazing at the road ahead of me.

If I did not see where the road was leading to, we would end up plunging into bushes. It meant that there were shrubs on the ground. The ground was filled with such obstacles.

I was reminded of the experience in which I played a video game like this when I was a kid. In the game, various things were strewn about on the road. The character

in the game could step on some of them, but could not do so on others. Such hazardous items could hardly be found on an actual road in real life.

We are going through the forest. Nice and smooth. My body was getting colder to quite a bit of extent. But, the airbase was getting closer. Sasakura behind me was quiet. He was probably feeling cold. The engine was so noisy that we could not have any conversation.

I recognized something on the road.

“What’s that?” I shouted.

It was lost in the engine sound, and Sasakura probably did not catch it. I put on the brake and avoided it. The rear wheel slipped, and the motorbike lost the balance. It veered off the road, crossed the shoulder, and ran over a curb. Although the velocity had gone down by quite a bit, the tires bounced off the ground. The body of the motorbike was too leaned to one side to maintain its balance. I was thrown away and plunged into the bushes. That happened so quickly. Literally, within a moment. I had no time to think anything. If this kind of accident occurred while piloting an aircraft, it would have taken more time to fall to and crash against the ground. I understood that it could not be helped because the ground was already too close to me.

“Hey! Are you okay?” Sasakura shouted loudly.

At about three meters from me, the wheels of the motorbike were still spinning. Right beside my head were weeds. I was feeling no pain on any part of my body. It seemed that I was not injured. I noticed that the night sky was spreading in front of me, and I was viewing it, when Sasakura’s face entered the sight.

“Kusanagi, are you all right?”

I looked at him and smiled. His face was looking worried.

“I’m okay. Nothing, really.”

I held his hand that was extended toward me, and he pulled me up to assist my standing up. First, I saw the motorbike. Its light shone on the weeds and made them look white. The engine had stopped. The tire fender was deformed. It seemed to be the only damage being inflicted.

“Did I trip in a relatively good way?” I asked.

Sasakura looked at the road. With no light nearby, that direction was much darker.

“Yes, I saw something.” I was walking toward that, too.

An object that was lying down in the middle of the road was a human.

He rushed to it. A woman was lying on her back.

“Who? Is she alive?” I asked, while behind Sasakura.

He picked up the woman in his arms. I approached her, and sensed the smell of alcohol. A small groaning sound.

“She seems to be sleeping. Thank goodness that I did not run over her.”

“This is weird. Why is she sleeping in such a place?” Sasakura mumbled.

-4-

I walked to the base while pushing the motorbike. Sasakura had the woman stand up and walk with his support. At least, it looked harder to do than pushing the motorbike. The lights of the office building were already turned off. I was not sure where Goda was. Silence prevailed. Many seemed to have gone out. We briefly told the gatekeeper what had happened. We also talked about whether we should take her to the medical room or call an ambulance. The medical room was far away. The woman looked just drunk and seemed to be doing fine otherwise. We walked toward a hangar with her.

There was a bench before the building. Sasakura had the woman sit on it, and left the place to get some water. I parked the motorbike inside the hangar and went back to the bench.

The woman was not sleeping anymore. She was sitting straight on the bench. Her blackish one-piece dress was barely long enough to reach the thighs a little above her knees. She was also wearing a see-through cardigan. Even though I could not tell exactly what color her long hair was, it was whitish. As I stood up in front of her, she looked at me.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah.” She nodded. “I have to go back.”

I heard her voice for the first time. It was guttural as if she had caught a cold.

“Where to?”

“The place where my companions are.” She made a quick sigh. “But, I don’t know where it is. Oh, I cannot go back. What shall I do?”

“How did you get here?”

Before she answered, the slide door of the hangar was opened and Sasakura appeared. He was holding a cup.

He handed it to her, who put it to her mouth with both hands.

“Oh, thanks. It has soaked straight into my stomach.” She smiled. “Well, what time is it?”

“It’s 21:00.” Sasakura replied.

“Twenty-one?”

“Ah, I mean, it’s nine.”

“Wow, is it still such an early time? I thought it’s already in the morning.”

“If it’s in the morning, you would have been dead already.” I dared to say. “You are crazy to sleep at that place. I was about to run over you. Don’t you understand?”

“Oh, are you a female?”

I clucked my tongue and got away from her. *I leave, keep my distance from her a bit, make a turn, and shoot at her when she gets in front of me next time*, I thought with my imagination.

Sasakura was approaching me.

“Leave it to me.” He whispered. “I will handle this.”

I nodded. After taking about five steps toward the billet, I recalled one thing and stopped. I took off the jacket and walked back to return it to him. His money was in it.

“Sorry about your motorbike.” I apologized to Sasakura.

“Huh?” He leaned his head sideways.

“Some of the parts might be broken. So, I apologize. I cannot fix it. Thanks for letting me drive it.”

“You’re welcome.” He showed his white teeth.

“Heeey.” The woman on the bench raised her voice. “Let’s drink more with me!”

I walked to the billet. I climbed up the stairs, and went back to my room. I met no one on the way. I opened the curtain and the window to take a look outside. The front side of the office building was quiet as well.

I took a shower. By dashing hot water over me, I expected my memory to gradually melt away, probably because my head was getting heated. I could see inside the jukebox at the bar. I could see the Teacher sitting at near one end of the bar counter. I was impressed by the fact that even what I had not seen with my eyes were memorized neatly.

Driving the motorbike was hugely enjoyable. It would be heavenly, if I could drive it to the sky above the clouds. The experience would be chilling. I thought it would be impossible even if I was wearing the jacket.

Then, the white legs of that woman came to mind. *Stupid idiot.* I clucked my tongue. *Hokey hussy. She believes alcohol is her blood. Even she is an adult. Grown-up woman. Filthy. Disgusting adult. When I am with her, I feel nauseated. Really, I want to shoot and kill her. I want to send her to hell.*

But, those who belong to such breed don’t get on aircrafts I have shot down. Everyone is a child. Everyone must have been a good kid. Neither filthy nor disgusting. Therefore, they can ascend to the sky. Falling with the aircraft was much more honorable than being drunk and dying by the roadside. Probably, that is so ... They are completely different.

I was recalling what I remembered about my mother.

I shook my head.

Over and over again.

Don’t.

Don’t think about that.

I should think about tomorrow. About Sanka.

About its beautiful body line. The elegant curves of the wings.

About the nostalgic tranquility that I feel when I take the seat in the cockpit.

I want to fly.

I don't want to recall the things that have happened in the past.

I want to fly ASAP, I thought.

The ground is filled with disgusting things.

Too many filthy things are here.

Really ...

"Not so bad." I murmured to myself.

I had a joyful time, right?

Sasakura is a good man. Driving the motorbike was really fun. The pie wasn't so bad. The ground is the only place where I can talk to the Teacher.

I don't live in the sky.

I'm sinking to the bottom of the sky.

I'm here, on the ground, to live.

There's no escape. If I tried to run away, I would end up coming back here in the end. Dead people would sink in the water or be buried in the ground. No one can keep floating in the air. After all, we are not angels ...

I got out of the bathroom, sat down on the bed, and searched for cigarettes. I found the pack inside a pocket of my jacket. It was the last one. I lit it. The curtains were swinging near the windows. Comfortable night wind. *To go through the gap between the curtains, I need to have the wings oriented vertically to let the aircraft fly on its side to execute the knife-edge maneuver. After getting outside, I would make a turn while looking down obliquely at the courtyard. Then, I could climb to the sky above the roof of the office building and make a loop there. Even at the highest altitude, I would still have enough velocity. Pretending to roll over, I would maintain the attitude. My body is pressed against the seat. Unless I thrust my arms and legs forward, I wouldn't be able to use them. I descend to the low altitude near the limit and roll over 180 degrees. I would pull the control stick to deflect the elevators steadily. A*

transparent course would loom up ahead of me. I would lunge with a bank between the roofs. Slide the aircraft in front of the hangar. Lower the flaps. Close the throttle. Lean the fuselage with the rudders. Ailerons to the opposite way. Here, its nose is turning to the direction. I find the woman on the bench. Wait a little bit more. I'm entering the shooting range. Then, I shoot. Shoot. Shoot. I open the throttle fully. Bring all the control surfaces to the neutral positions. After regaining the velocity, I retract the flaps back to where they were. Climbing. Rolling over. I look at the bench. What do I want to see? The woman bleeding and falling down? Or, her completely cleaned dress after everything has disappeared?

I heard something outside the window. It seemed that a vehicle was coming.

I stood up, and walked to the window to see outside, while keeping the cigarette in my mouth. The car was parked in front of the office building, and its headlights were turned off. The one who was getting out from the driver's seat was Goda. He must have been going out. I stepped back and hid behind the curtain so as not to be seen by him. But, without looking back, Goda was entering the office building. After a while, his office room on the second floor was lit.

Has Sasakura turned away the woman? If not, I should report it to Goda.

I put on the clothes and left the room.

My hair was still wet. As I was walking toward the hangar, Sasakura was coming from it at that moment.

"How is she?" I asked.

"Ah, she's already gone back."

"What? How?"

"Umm." Sasakura twisted his head a little.

"Did someone pick her up?"

"Something like that."

"Who did?"

"Hey, don't worry about it."

"I want to know." After saying so, I myself was surprised. I was not sure why I wanted to know such a thing. "But, okay. Too bad." I sighed. I held the eagerness

to know it in my mind. *I want to squeeze it hard and crush it.* “Goda is back, I am thinking that I should report that to him.”

“It gets complicating. You shouldn’t bother doing so.”

“If we keep it secret, wouldn’t it be even more complicating?”

“That’s no problem. That is just a daily event.” Sasakura made a dry cough and smiled. “Then, good night.”

He was moving toward the office building.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Oh, well, I am going to the hangar over there to pick up parts.”

There were quite a few hangars over the office building, and it also meant that there were just as many mechanics on duty. It was quite a distance by foot. *He should use his motorbike in such a case as this,* I thought.

-5-

On the following day, I woke up early. I was excited. I could feel that well. When I was washing my face, I felt that my chest was being squeezed just by looking toward the runway. I looked at my wristwatch over and over again. I was in a condition in which I could not eat or drink anything. Still, I managed to kill time by doing exercise or by reading books in the morning. By noon, I was already wearing a flight suit. I went out, sat on a bench where I could see a runway, and was waiting.

About at 14:00, the Teacher, Kusurida, and Tsujima took off. It was a scouting mission. I could say that Tsujima was my substitute. Until I came here, he had been the regular pilot in the first place. About 20 minutes had passed after the three Suigas vanished into the sky, when other two aircrafts were coming from the opposite direction. One was Sanka. The other was Senryu. I stood up and watched the blue Sanka. By the time it was landing on the runway, I was already running.

The Sanka was landing first. The new, blue painting did not differ from other Sankas at all. That one was taxiing toward the hangar, which Sasakura was in charge of. I followed it by running beside it. The difference in appearance was that the new Sanka had no machine gun on the wings. New small bulges, from which the muzzles of the guns were sticking out slightly, were mounted on the nose of the

fuselage. It changed its route in front of the hangar, and the canopy was opened. The pilot raised his hand.

I heard the other one, the Senryu, landing behind me. I looked back just once. I wanted to get my hands on the Sanka as soon as possible, and I got closer to it. The engine stopped running, and then the propeller blades also stopped after a while.

“Kusanagi, how’s it going?” The pilot in the cockpit who was taking off his helmet was Akaza. He had been my coworker in the previous base for about half a year.

Sasakura was getting out while pulling the wire. He was going to drag it into the hangar soon. I looked up at the sky, because I started worrying if someone, or the enemy, would target this state-of-the-art aircraft and drop a bomb. However, this base was not located in such a danger zone. Our being in the safe zone was the reason why they had managed to fly the Sanka openly. I meant, *we are blessed with the advantage of the geographical location.*

Akaza got off the aircraft and was standing in front of me.

“How is she?” I asked. I just wanted to know all about the Sanka.

“It’s good. It’s light. Especially, the rolling maneuver is light. Makes me feel dizzy.”

I found myself smiling.

“And then?”

“Umm, nothing else. Everything else is the same. This one allows a broader field of view backward.” He looked back. “There, the canopy is bulged, right?”

“Oh, you’re right.” I visually confirmed the change. “How could they mold it into this form?”

“Seemingly, an expensive part, eh?”

“How does the engine work?”

“About it.” Akaza showed a slightly difficult look in his face. “I don’t think it works properly.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the engine breathes.”

“How often?”

“I’m not sure. Depends on the engine load. Around 6,000. Probably, between the first and the second stages. That is where it switches the intake route. I guess it’s the matter of that setting. Regarding this issue, they will probably modify Sanka after they get your flight data. Anyway, you may want to be careful. It sometimes becomes sluggish.”

“That’s okay as long as it does not stop.”

“Maybe. You should consult with Sasakura about it.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“Umm, you would know the rest of the matter, once you actually fly this baby. The rudders are a bit lighter on the right side. The flaps are already effective enough, only with using half of them. You can consider the other remaining half of the flaps as the spoilers. In short, more than anything else, it’s light.”

“Understood. I want to get on it.” I nodded. “How are the machine guns?”

“Um, I have yet to shoot the machine guns.” Akaza leaned his head, which gave off a sound. “I suspect that the trajectories might not be clearly visible.”

By moving the machine guns from the wings to the fuselage, they had managed to reduce the weight drastically. As the result, the thickness of the main wings was made thinner by about 20 millimeters. The most notable feature was that concentrating the weight on its central axis could make it roll faster than carrying the heavy weights on its both sides. The moment of inertia that accompanies the aircraft when it rolls to the left or right by controlling the ailerons is reduced drastically. It was arguably the biggest advantage that any fighter aircraft could boast. It was considered the most important specification, especially for a lighter aircraft like Sanka.

“When using the flaps, it would be better for you to know that you wouldn’t stall anymore.” Akaza commented. “The flaps are just that much more effective. On the other hand, if you raise the flaps, the stall follows quickly.”

“Is it because its wings are thinner?” I asked.

“Probably.”

“That’s nice.” I could not help but smile.

“It depends on your preference. Some pilots like the stalling, but another do not.”

“I love stalling.”

“Yeah, there are not too many of those who love it as much as you do.”

“I wonder if it is the reason why I am chosen to be assigned here.”

“I don’t know.” Akaza smiled. “Do not tell me that such trivial things are written in the confidential report document. Who would report that sort of thing?”

The Sanka was being pulled into the hangar with a winch. Sasakura and another mechanic were doing the work. The Senryu was approaching from the runway. It was an aircraft for scouting mission without the tail assembly. The seats are in tandem for two crew members, including a pilot. In short, Akaza would get on it when he would leave here.

“Which section do you now belong to?” I asked Akaza.

“It’s a secret.” He answered. “I mean, I am now in such a division.”

I guess, he was working as a test pilot for the development division. Its location was secret. The rumor had it that the division was always moving from one place to another.

Goda was coming.

Akaza walked to him and made a salute. Then, he handed to Goda the envelope he had been holding. I went to the hangar and touched the blue body of the aircraft.

I wanted to get into the cockpit as soon as possible, but I could not do so because Sasakura and others were now moving it. While putting my hand on the Sanka, I was slowly walking along with it.

-6-

Inside the hangar. Around the ceiling was dim.

I was sitting in the cockpit of the Sanka. Although it was a little dark, I managed

to read the manual. Almost all the items were the same as before, the last time I flew Sanka. I still looked at switches and meters each time, and put my hands on the lever to confirm whatever was written in the manual. Apparently, mechanics were working on the maintenance of the aircraft under the fuselage of the aircraft, by using spotlights. They were probably focusing on the radar and the weaponry. I heard Sasakura's voice several times. Even though there were a few of them on duty, I did not greet them. Everyone must have forgotten that I was here. Outside the building was already dark. About an hour ago, I heard the sound of the Teacher and others coming back from the mission. But the Teacher's aircraft would not come here today, because the new Sanka has just been brought into this hangar, and his aircraft was forced to move to elsewhere. I thought I might be appearing to act audacious to him, but it was not my responsibility, since it was Goda's order.

Some of the pilots except the Teacher came to see the Sanka. I heard their voices. "It's small." was the common denominator of their opinions. But, no one even bothered to take a look inside the cockpit. For one thing, the lift was not nearby. Those who were allowed to get on the wings were only two: The mechanic and the pilot, both of which were assigned to the aircraft exclusively.

When will I be able to fly?

I am always ready.

I can fly at any moment, right now.

Nighttime is also acceptable. I want them to let me engage in the test flight.

I wonder if it is tomorrow. Probably, tomorrow.

I want to fly ASAP.

I sat deep in the seat, and stretched my legs forward while avoiding the rudder pedals. Sanka's seat was reclined slightly deeper than those of usual fighter aircrafts. So, it could almost function as a bed without farther reclining. *Shall I sleep here tonight?* I thought. *It's a good idea.*

"Kusanagi." I heard it suddenly.

I opened my eyes. Sasakura's face was right in front of me.

"Is it all right for you to get off a bit?" He asked. A small headlight, similar to

what doctors would use for their professions, was attached to his forehead. Of course, it was not lit at that point.

“Roger.” I got up.

“I will check the meters and the mechanical linkages. Do you have any request? Do you want it as light as possible?”

“Yeah. To the limit.” I answered.

“I will adjust the trim tab alignment. Is it okay if I do it as usual?”

“That sounds fine to me. There is no growth recently.”

“It’s time for supper. Why don’t you go and get it?” Sasakura suggested.

I was surprised that it was already that time of the day.

“Yeah, why not?”

“We will be done with the maintenance by the time you get back here. If you want to sleep here, you should bring a blanket with you.”

How can he read my mind? While thinking so, I got out of the cockpit. Sasakura got down from the wing once. Three other mechanics were looking up at me from below. It seemed that a few more were on the opposite side of the fuselage. I was just noticing that there had been so many personnel gathering here. It was more like a surgical table than a bed. It might not have been suitable for sound sleep.

I walked to the back, where the cowling had been removed. I was looking up at the naked engine. It’s the aluminum with graceful curves. It looked like a mold to make chocolate. *Sweet shape.*

“Great job.” Sasakura commented beside me. I looked at him, who was grinning. He appeared to be in a good mood. “By increasing the number of valves, it has increased the total cross-sectional areas of the intake routes. It is like magic. I wonder how they could create such stuff. The engineering designer who drew the plan must be a genius.”

“The ‘genius’ didn’t need to draw the design plan, I guess.” I dared to say so.

I thought such intricate figures could not be drawn on paper. It was equivalent to no one being able to draw a blueprint for a human face.

I left the hangar, and walked toward the dining hall. Unusually, I was feeling hungry. Lately, I had not eaten a lot. I felt my body was getting lighter and lighter.

“For once, I want you to eat all the way to the end.” The elderly woman at the dining hall said, while laughing. “Hey, I wonder, is there any food in particular that is your favorite?”

“Well, your meals are delicious. I cannot eat a lot, for my appetite is not that big.” I replied.

However, for that occasion, I emptied the soup and completed 80 percent of the salad. Then, about one third of the main dish. The dining hall was not crowded. Almost all of them seemed to have finished their meals. But when I was about to end my dinner, Kusurida and Tsujima were entering the room. A little after that, the Teacher also appeared. Probably, they had just completed the reporting session of their scouting duty by then.

The Teacher put the container, which the elderly woman placed on the counter, on his tray, and walked to a table at the back of the room without words. Kusurida and Tsujima sat side by side across the table, while facing me.

“How rare that is.” Kusurida smirked while sitting. I supposed that he was indicating the rarity of my presence in the current location. “How is the new aircraft?”

“It has come.” I replied. I was smoking at the time.

“I will come take a look at it later.” Tsujima said. His eyes were bloodshot behind the glasses. He was looking tired.

“How was your mission today?” I asked.

“Well, there was nothing special in particular.” Kusurida shook his head. “But ...”

Tsujima looked at Kusurida’s face. Kusurida noticed the look, and shut his mouth. He appeared to have decided not to say anything. That was a little awkward. But it’s a matter of a personal decision, and nothing more. I looked down and gazed at the coffee cup. More than half still remained. I squinted in the cigarette smoke, and looked toward the table at the back of the room. The Teacher was not looking at me. I checked his image that was reflected on the windowpane, but his reflected image was not doing any better.

“How do you like this base? Have you gotten used to it?” Kusurida asked.

“What?” I looked up. I thought it was a weird question, for more than one month had already passed since I was assigned to the current location. “Umm, I don’t have any special feeling.” A bit jokingly, I shook my head. “I came here with Sasakura. Nothing has changed in particular. More than that, I have just gotten the aircraft whose type is the same as the one I once piloted in the previous base.”

“I heard it is amazingly light.” Tsujima said while making his lips obliquely angled. It was a tone of speech as if he were making his voice from the deepest part of his throat. He was probably thinking that it would make him sound intellectual. “Even the pilot’s weight is restricted, right?”

“No way.” I snorted.

“But, our current aircrafts will also be replaced with that type in the future, won’t they?” Kusurida lowered his voice. I did not understand why he was doing so. Is he being considerate of the Teacher?

“That cannot be.” Tsujima shook his head. “There will be strong objections. I am telling you.”

What Kusurida meant by “that type” was Sanka, of course. In short, he was indicating that our fighter aircrafts would be shifted to the pusher type like Sanka, which had its engine mounted on the rear part of the fuselage and the engine was designed to drive the propellers attached behind it. Theoretically, this configuration made sense. If the engineers and the designers calculated with numerical values rationally, the aircraft configuration would just come down to this type. However, on the other hand, I did not think that the traditional form would be out of use so easily. Old traditions die hard. Most pilots had gotten used to and become familiar with the current style of aircraft. So, as Tsujima said, it was obvious that there would be fierce objections. If I remembered correctly, the Teacher was also speaking of a similar issue. Being light was good for the pilot executing an escape maneuver, but there was no advantage for the pilot making the attack move. I think he was speaking of such an argument like that.

It was easier for me to fly with Sanka. I had been flying with it from the beginning and had only one-month experience with the tractor configuration. Perhaps, my having to deal with such a partially different condition from what others were

experiencing might have something to do with the reason for my feeling the comfort with Sanka. Honestly speaking, I was not sure which type was superior. Sasakura also did not seem to have any specific thoughts about the matter. He was probably content with any situation, as long as the engine would function as he expected.

“By the way, it’s a different topic ...” Kusurida started speaking with his hand holding a fork. “I heard you met Fuko yesterday. Is that true?”

“Fuko? Who is it?” I asked back. “I don’t know such a person.”

“That woman with long hair and fair skin.” Tsujima explained. His eyes appeared to be grinning a bit.

“Ah ... That woman.” I nodded. “I didn’t ask her what her name was. Yeah, I came close to running over, and almost killed her in front of this base. It was dangerous. No thanks to her, Sasakura’s motorbike was dented. She was such a nuisance. I mean, she was drunk and sleeping on a road.” I went on with a barrage of what I remembered about her.

“Oh.” Kusurida showed a slightly surprised look, hastily smiled, and nodded after a moment. “Yeah, yeah. She is such a type of woman, definitely.”

“Do you know who she is?” I asked.

“Just a playmate.”

“How did she get here? And, how could she manage to get back home?” I wanted to ask these questions on the night before.

“She came here with others by car. But, apparently, she was left alone. You know, they were all drunk.”

“I don’t understand well what you mean, but, that’s okay, I suppose.” I nodded briefly.

I wonder if they drank inside the airbase? I guess there is a place for the purpose. It is against the rules. However, such a case of loopholes can be found everywhere.

Tsujima was also grinning with an asymmetric face, as if he was chewing a gum in his mouth. I thought he was a conscientious person, but I might have been wrong. In many cases, someone’s nature differed from his or her first impression. I could

say that it was the point in which people differed from dolls. I could not find the difference between them, except for that part, though.

I walked to the counter to return the tray. The elderly woman appeared, looked at my container, and sighed.

“Thanks for the good meal.” I smiled. “I ate as much as possible. So, would it be possible for you to lessen the amount next time?”

“But, it is the rule, you know?” She frowned.

The amount of our meals were measured and recorded individually. We would not be blamed if we did not eat as much as we were recommended to eat, but we would be pointed out at the medical checkup. *Why do they do that with that much of enthusiasm? I do not understand the company's policy.* Could they not find any other things to measure? For example, the numbers of the cigarette we smoked, the amount of alcohol we consumed, or the hours of sleep we got. Of course, if such things were actually measured, then we would feel like running away from such a suffocating environment. As of now, the management was loose enough to the level that we would not think about deserting the airbase. It might have been the strategy of the company only to show that it was managing the base and the personnel.

I went back to my room, took a shower, and read books until my hair dried, in order to keep myself in suspense. Then, I left my room with a blanket. I headed for the hangar.

The light was still lit. As I opened the door, I saw Sasakura standing on the lift. The cowling was still removed from my aircraft. The chocolate-shaped engine was exposed.

It seemed that no one was here except for him. It's tranquil. Music was turned off. He noticed me, and looked back.

I walked toward him, and looked up without words.

“Are you really going to sleep here?” Sasakura asked.

“Am I bothering you?”

“No, I've already taken care of the cockpit. But, I think it's still noisy. I need two or three more hours to assemble this.”

“No problem. Clanging sounds don’t bother me.”

Sasakura sat down on the lift. He unbuttoned his chest pocket and picked up a cigarette.

“Oh? Is that okay?” I asked, because smoking was prohibited in the place.

“Ah, that’s okay. I’m sure because I’m saying so.”

“Then, I’ll smoke, too.”

Sasakura lit the cigarette, and gave me the fire of the same lighter.

“I wonder why I’m feeling so good to this extent with a new aircraft.” I spoke, while exhaling the smoke.

“If I’m happy, without getting on it, then I can tell how much happier you are feeling.”

“This might be my last ride, though.”

“You should not say such an inauspicious thing.”

“You think so?” I leaned my head. “I have the opposite thought. By saying an inauspicious thing, I might be able to consume my bad luck.”

“I know that there are some of those who say such a thing.”

“Which one is true? I wonder.”

“I don’t know. Maybe, they both die at the same rate.”

I looked up at the engine room. Two spotlights were shining on the aluminum engine and the red frame.

“They have changed the radiator.” While looking at it upward, Sasakura said. “They do what they are assigned to do. They are surely something. Still, they are humans, who cannot do it completely from the start.”

“You know, we are all humans.”

“Right. We don’t know the answers until we actually fly them. We don’t know the answers unless we use them for a long period of time. Occasionally, we learn of a new phenomenon for the first time, when certain parts go under stress, heat is conducted to them, vibration is transmitted to them, and they suffer from

unexpected deformation.” Sasakura exhaled the smoke. “I mean, this new intake switching may turn out to be affected in some ways when you reach the high altitude ... Of course, they have conducted many tests on that. However, depending on the conditions, there are countless ways in which the aircraft is exposed to the external stress.”

“I want to try this aircraft soon.”

When my cigarette became short, Sasakura brought in a bucket full of water. Both of us threw the cigarettes into it.

“Good night.” I said, got on the main wing, and entered the cockpit. Although I did not lock it, I closed the canopy just for the formality.

Then, I wrapped myself in the blanket and looked sideways.

Surrounded by the cold metal, I felt happy.

I feel so relaxed and settled.

For a moment, I could feel as if I were flying.

Like the control stick was moving automatically.

Swerving from right to left.

I guessed that it was how I felt when I was born.

Occasionally, small vibrations and clanking sounds.

I knew Sasakura was still working. It was heartwarming like little birds chirping. Now I understood. *If my aircraft is destroyed to the extent that I am left with no choice but to be destined to fall from the sky, then falling asleep like this may turn out to be the best option.*

Like a cradle.

Probably.

I believe God will rock the cradle divinely.

-7-

The following day, we did not receive any order to make a sortie.

Instead, a rumor about a large-scale project to be implemented, spread throughout the airbase in the morning. All the pilots were gathered in the

conference room in the early evening. I entered the room for the first time. That was when I learned that there were 14 pilots in total stationed in the base. Goda and another commander were explaining something. He was a tall man with a beard, and his name was Mohri.

The announcement was about having all the available fighter aircrafts make sorties at once the next morning. Silence was prevailing in the conference room, and it was a completely different atmosphere from usual. We recognized the change of mood from the expressions of our bosses. The map and the formation figure that were projected on the screen were indicating the tension. It seemed to be a large-scale operation. Come to think of it, the Teacher, Kusurida, and so on went out on a scouting mission yesterday. It must have been related to this large-scale operation. Although I heard the rumor from Sasakura, I do suspect that those who were involved in the sortie could be the sources of the rumor.

I had experienced such major operations twice in the previous base. The bigger the operation became, the bigger the damages would be. It was natural because each side of the battle would fight all out to destroy each other. If 20 aircrafts confronted 20 enemy aircrafts, at least 10 of them would be shot down. Such calculation must have been done a long time ago. Each pilot had a certain probability factor to be taken into the calculation, and certain numbers were added to and multiplied with such factors to churn out the results that would lead to the estimation of “how many aircrafts will survive” and “how many aircrafts will go down”.

But, this was my job. I had absolutely no complaint about it. I always thought I was completely rewarded, just by piloting an aircraft that I loved.

I shot down enemies. The first reason was to make sure not to be shot down. The second reason was to get to fly again on the following day. The third reason was that it was my job, and I did not know how to earn money with other works. *It's simple, right? Probably, that is the way it is for everyone.*

After the whole explanation, we were divided into three groups, and each group held a meeting separately. I belonged to the flight team with the Teacher. So did Kusurida and Tsujima. It was the same, old lineup. We had to set the codes, which we used with devices such as signal lights, for cases in which we could not use the radio. The chart was photocopied and distributed. In the end, we had only two options: fight, or flight. I did not understand why it had become so complicated like

this. I had no choice but to accept the fact that the increase of the crew members would inevitably result in the increase in possible combinations of the codes.

Barring any alteration, we would take off at 07:00 tomorrow morning. Our flight team would be the first one to make a sortie. When we were getting out of the room after the meeting, Goda was waiting for me at the corridor.

“Do you want Suiga? Or, Sanka?” He asked me.

“Sanka, of course.” I replied immediately.

“Okay. More power to you.”

After I got back to my room, I received a report, according to which the flight team might have to depart from the base earlier than the scheduled time. We might have had to take off before dawn.

I headed for the hangar, just in case. I was suspecting that other pilots were also checking their respective aircrafts to fly.

Sasakura was examining the machine guns of my Sanka, with the front cover being removed. He took a glance at me, but said nothing. It was a very serious-looking facial expression. He was looking busy. I hesitated to speak to him. Obviously, I could not just tell him that I wanted to sleep in the hangar tonight.

For about twenty minutes, I was standing in the hangar absent-mindedly. Sasakura stood in front of me just once, and coldly asked, “What are you doing?”. No other words. I had nothing to say, either. I couldn’t answer his question, because I myself did not know what I was doing in the hangar.

Still, I just wanted to look at the Sanka for a while.

I did not have many opportunities to look at it from outside.

I might not get the next opportunity again.

I will be the content of this, tomorrow morning.

Then.

I might not be able to get out of it again.

But, I don’t feel any anxiety.

Rather, I’m looking forward to it.

As I managed to somehow solidify my resolve, I went back to my room, took a shower, smoked, and read a book by the window while drinking tea. I started feeling sleepy by the time I was reading the second page, so I went to bed.

I opened my hand, clenched the fist, and moved the fingers.

That is the hand to hold the control stick.

As I closed my eyes, I could see an enemy aircraft making a turn in the distance. Like a fish that was swimming, it wiggled to try to change its direction. I leaned my body and headed toward the direction. To the location beyond the point the enemy was approaching, I was lunging at the target as if I was attempting to ram into it.

My body remembers the acceleration.

My eyes are following the trajectory.

My fingers know when to do that.

My arm is waiting for the estrangement.

A hit.

And a run.

My heart kindly waits for me while I am shooting.

I hold my breath. The brief moment of death releases the bullets.

Then, I dance.

Jump.

Dance.

Turn over.

At the limit of the acceleration, I regain the breath from the regeneration.

I resurrect my life, and look back in a moment.

I see the next smoke.

Then, I make sure of the next flame.

I ascend endlessly.

Endlessly.

To somewhere far, far away.

Same for those who have been shot down.

Everyone climbs endlessly.

Everybody is dancing.

There is no difference.

There is, none but air.

Nothing.

No life. No death.

The flame runs away.

Or, the flame follows you.

The difference is only by that much.

-8-

Things happened as I had dreamed.

It was at 06:00 in the morning, when we took off. The sun had already risen.

Our squadron, consisting of 14 aircraft, flew to the south, was joined by other teams twice. We became a part of the wing consisting of about 60 aircraft.

We were flying above the ocean. All of the enemies were ascending from the aircraft carriers. No bomber. No attack aircraft, either. Fighter aircrafts only. It was like a members-only dance party.

The use of radio was now granted. The scale of the wing of this many aircrafts could not possibly hide in the sky. The number of enemies was reported so often that I could not remember it.

The wing was divided into two groups: One going to the east and the other to the west. I was in the west group. Then, we were separated into two more subgroups, or squadrons: The upper and the lower. I was in the upper squadron. Of course, the enemies were also expected to be separated.

Sanka is light.

It was in a good condition. Immediately, it was fusing with my body.

Indeed, the engine breathed momentarily. At the very timing, I had to close the throttle a bit. Any pilot had such level of affection. The cold-hearted mechanics just did not seem to understand that, though.

When I put the control stick down, the roll maneuver was so light that it could keep on rolling endlessly. In addition, it could stop quickly. The effectiveness of the elevators would jump up in the middle of the maneuver processes. It was a distinctive feature of pusher aircrafts.

In any case, it was very nostalgic. Since other aircrafts around me were all Suigas, I felt I was the only one who was fluttering to fly silently. I could go farther than they could. I was sure I could fly for a very long time. Even if the time was up for all of the friendly pilots and they had to return to the base, I would still have the luxury of staying airborne and enjoying playing around. Just that very thought made me feel good.

The expansion of the canopy was better than expected. When I looked backward, the improved visibility was obviously better, while showing the striking difference. I could not believe that I could actually recognize the spinner behind me. Aircrafts were designed so that they could yaw to the right or left, and pitch upward or downward quickly, to any of these directions. However, it was impossible for them to face backward instantaneously. Therefore, it was no wonder that pilots just wanted to get right behind the enemies.

Someone once spoke of his idea. *Don't you think we should mount machine guns that are capable of shooting backward?* But, under normal circumstances, we could not see backward. No one could hit the targets, if they were invisible. But, this Sanka could claim to have almost no blind spot. *Marvelous.*

The enemies appeared at the exact coordinates that we had expected.

It was as if we had an appointment to meet them there. Not even students could gather at a morning assembly of a school in such an orderly manner. “Only in the first phase, we will lunge with A3.” The Teacher commanded through the radio. “Then, B5. Do not shoot at friendlies.”

Nothing special. A3 was a code for the formation, in which we formed a single file. B5 was the final code, which meant, “Do as you like.” In short, we could act on

our own freely.

While gradually increasing the altitude, the four of us flew in a single file. I was the last one.

They were getting closer.

I was shivering with intensity.

Let's dance!

The Teacher had his wings standing and began descending.

Kusurida and Tujima started banking.

I started leaning the aircraft to the left.

I descended smoothly.

I am feeling the air friction.

Six enemies were flying nearby. The two of them flying a little below us were twin-boom aircrafts. The other four were the type that was similar to Suiga, and had gull wings. Their figures were more like carrier-based fighters. Their colors were green. Surely, they looked like Suiga, and I should be careful not to shoot the friendlies by accident. In this respect, only Sanka, my aircraft, did not look similar to others. I could just fly around freely.

The four enemies also formed a single file, and started banking. As if we were whipping each other, about the time we were merging with the opponents, we all scattered in a moment.

I dared to descend. Heavier aircrafts tend to prefer ascending. So, I decided to leave the ascending targets to the Teacher, and to attack the two flying below us first.

Of course, they soon noticed my move. The two twin-boom aircrafts split, and then went to the separate ways to the right and left. I followed the one which got behind by a moment of delay.

Check the meters.

Unlock the safety lock.

I looked back. The other one was trying to get behind me. I still had enough time.

I rolled over. I fainted once.

The enemy was turning to the right.

At the moment, I made a roll to the opposite direction, and pulled up the control stick to deflect the elevators.

Immediately, I made a steep turn and approached the target.

Within the shooting distance.

Shoot.

No, too fast.

The other was coming from behind.

Down.

Swiftly, I went around to the left. I lowered the flaps.

How amazing this new brake is!

It really doesn't stall.

I saw the smoke at a far higher altitude than I was at.

I looked backward.

I pushed up the throttle and ascended.

While shaking the wings, I checked the space around me.

It was coming from the left.

Throttle down.

Then, throttle up immediately. The aircraft leaned to the right due to the propeller torque.

Where is the other one?

It's flying below me.

It started shooting at me. *Too far away.*

Now I am getting the good idea of the skill of the opposing pilot, to a certain extent.

I looked at the trajectory of the one flying below me.

I climbed again. Then, I started banking gently.

I pulled up the aircraft, and then gradually reduced the radius of the following loop maneuver.

I get behind the back of the target.

I look upward. No one is coming.

The one in front of me was zigzagging from right to left.

While drawing a graceful curve, I was chasing it.

I rolled over, and looked downward. One enemy was ascending.

I finally caught up with the one ahead of me.

It was pulling up the aircraft, trying to ascend. It was attempting to enter the loop maneuver.

I shot before the execution of the move. The tail assembly of the target was blown away.

I broke away immediately.

I let the aircraft lean to the left, and made a turn.

It was coming from below. I evaded by sliding to the right.

Fire!

It passed right by me. The wing almost collided.

I made a turn, and then checked the rear side.

I saw flames being belched from its nose.

Climb. The engine was running more smoothly, getting more revved up. The pre-conditioning interim operation might not have been completed yet.

The meters for oil pressure, oil temperature, and oil level were all showing normal values.

I was yet to jettison the drop tank. *It's easy.*

The other one, whose tail assembly was torn apart, was flying far below me. I

guessed that it would not ascend again. *I just leave it alone.*

An aircraft was fiercely lunging at me, from the direction obliquely above me. It was emitting smoke, going straight down, and out of control. I moved around it to make sure of its identity. It was an enemy aircraft.

I wondered whether the battle above me was over.

I saw two aircrafts. I could not tell which side they were on.

I had the aircraft inverted just in case, and looked toward the ground.

Several enemy aircrafts were to the lower rear. They were coming toward me.

I rolled the aircraft back to the upright flight again, and I decided to pretend not to have noticed them.

What shall I do?

Think. Which direction to escape to?

It seemed that there were one opponent and one friendly above me.

I was not sure, but it was not the Teacher.

Again, I looked behind me.

I made the count. *Six aircrafts.* They were all enemies.

The cloud was far below me.

My left hand pushed the throttle a bit. It seemed to want to escape.

Not all of them were coming toward me. I expected that they would split.

I decided to stay put as much as I could.

I saw two aircrafts in front of me to the right, at approximately the same altitude as I was.

They were dancing.

I rolled over, and took a look at the space below me.

I could not see the surface of the sea at all.

I could see only the slender streaks of black smoke above the clouds.

Some of them must have already fallen to the ocean.

The three behind me positioned themselves between me and the sun. It appeared that they were going elsewhere.

The remaining three were lunging toward the space a bit above me.

It couldn't be helped.

High throttle.

Control the elevator for the pull-up maneuver.

My aircraft started diving while flying inverted.

I looked backward, while stretching my body.

They were following me.

Two aircrafts?

One of them went around to the left.

Can I catch up on it?

The distance was still 300 or more.

I prepared myself for disengaging the drop tank. *No, not yet.*

I was approaching the maximum velocity.

My aircraft was vibrating.

I held my breath, lowered my head, and braced myself.

I pushed the control stick.

I entered the outside loop.

The negative g-force pushed my body up toward the canopy, and I felt the pain from the strain.

Just when my aircraft was pointing toward the zenith, I deflected the ailerons.

Lower the flaps halfway.

Check the situation around me. The one behind me was still pursuing me.

Another enemy went to the right.

Is the other one coming from above?

Is it intending to observe us?

Or, is it keeping the distance to make sure not to shoot their friendlies?

Throttle down.

I side-slipped, and had the nose of my aircraft turn sideways.

The speed dropped.

Entering the stall eventually.

The enemy was approaching very swiftly from behind.

High throttle.

As if it was receiving the snap motion, the wing was swung toward the left.

It started shooting at me.

I knew it. It was going too fast, and it could not point toward me.

The one above me was also lunging at me. It was completely out of the line and off the timing.

I moved to the right, and let it go.

While glaring at the one that was observing the battle, I made a turn.

Shall I shoot it down first?

One of them was having trouble making a turn.

As I pretended to move toward the enemy aircraft, I leaned to the opposite way.

The one above was now facing me. *Fairly fast.*

It was not a good time to show them my stall turn.

I was still holding onto my drop tank.

Is it my pride?

Check the fuel meter.

Where have the other three moved to?

I looked around me, over and over again.

One was closing in on me from above.

That's it.

Wait.

I will show you this.

“Are you still flying?” I heard Kusurida’s voice through the radio.

Where is he?

Full flaps.

The throttle is high, halfway to the max.

Okay, come on. I will show you, my stall turn.

The one above was getting closer to me. *Entering the shooting range?*

Up.

While pretending to ascend, I held the throttle down.

I found myself retracting my neck, even though such a gesture would not make any difference.

Another one, which was getting behind the game, was banking, and was coming toward me.

That one would be the first.

Stalling.

Full throttle.

I deflected the rudders with my foot.

The nose of my aircraft leaned sideways, then faced downward quickly.

The one above seemed to be shooting. But its trajectory was too high.

I slipped through it, and then dove downward at once.

The rudders had already been brought back to the neutral position.

Awesome!

I retracted the flaps.

I banked, and then turned rapidly.

It's coming.

Just like that, the pilot is shocked. No shot was fired.

I fired the shot in a span as short as my blinking.

The projectiles were sucked into the enemy.

I deflected the ailerons to the opposite directions, and then broke away.

I heard the sound of the explosion.

Above me, another one was turning.

Yet another one was positioned even higher than the turning aircraft.

Just watch me. I am going up to reach that high.

I jettisoned the drop tank.

Full throttle.

I flew inverted once in the middle.

I saw the one being shot down. Its orange flame was fascinating.

I rolled again.

I saw the aircraft that had been observing from a distance orienting its wings vertically.

Finally, do you feel like dancing with me?

Come on!

I pulled the stick back to deflect the elevators once, and pretended to make a loop.

The one behind me nervously turned to the side.

I kept ascending straight up.

Thanks to the release of the drop tank, the aircraft was very light.

I rolled a few times to look around. I saw several aircrafts in the distance above me. Toward the west, far away, the clouds were turning black.

Only two aircrafts were flying close by.

“Boomerang, are you still there?” Kusurida’s voice, again.

Boomerang was my codename. His question indicated that he was where he could not see me.

“No one is coming to help me.” I uttered, as if I were reciting a lyric of a song.

The microphone of the radio was turned off.

That was the way to make them worry about me a little.

The same trick would not work again.

This time, I will show them my turn radius.

The one, who had been a spectator, was now banking.

It was trying to get behind me. It was so orthodox that it made me sigh.

The other was in the middle of climbing. It might be getting fatigued.

I am banking, too.

I saw the opponent above me.

I lowered the flaps gradually.

If I lowered them too much, the velocity would be canceled.

My body was pushed down against the seat due to the centrifugal force.

The other one had finally climbed up to my level. *How annoying. Get out of the way.*

I let the nose pitch up once, then tilted the nose to the side.

Yet, I got the aircraft back to the curvature of the loop immediately.

The enemy aircraft slid to the left. It was tricked by my feint maneuver.

Since its colleague had already been shot down, it must have been getting deliberate.

Or, it might be noticing that this Sanka was not an average aircraft.

I rolled the aircraft to the left and right, to check the space around me.

No one was coming.

I checked the meters. The oil temperature was slightly getting higher.

Just a little bit of patience.

Push the throttle lever.

Control the elevator to pull the aircraft up.

More and more, the acceleration was kicking in.

I can't breathe.

I gritted my teeth, and pulled the control stick to deflect the elevators even more.

While describing a small loop, I entered the center of the curve.

A shortcut.

The opponent noticed it, and broke away.

It was escaping to the left.

Too slow.

I controlled the rudders, to slip to the direction.

It was now within my shooting range.

Fire.

The main wing.

Throttle down.

I pitched the nose upward, and started stalling.

The other one was coming.

It shot at me.

This one is slow, too.

It was not recognizing my down throttle.

While banking to the left, I pitched the nose downward.

The ailerons were brought back to the neutral position.

I rolled over, and checked the one that I just shot at.

It was going down, while spinning. It was like a large snow crystal. It appeared that the linkage of the rudder was hit. The pilot was opening the canopy to escape

from the aircraft.

Well, one more to go.

I put my aircraft back to the horizontal flight again, and checked the next target.

Take a deep breath.

Is it running away? Or, is it attacking me?

Making a turn.

It's coming.

Okay, good boy.

I raced the engine. The three-stage variable mechanism sounded comfortable to me.

Getting warmed up.

Check the rear view.

Read the meters.

The altitude was almost the same as that during the first phase of the combat.

Flying straight for a while, I changed the location. I thought someone might have been in another area. I saw smoke here and there. Aircrafts were moving around, while looking like dots. I could confirm only a few of them.

The clouds were all below me.

In any event, this is spacious.

There was no place to hide.

No escape route to use.

I could not go back to the airbase until I shot them down or was shot by them.

“Hey, where are you?” I heard Kusurida’s voice.

“Above you. Climb to this level.” It was the Teacher.

Where are they?

The enemy was approaching me from behind.

I leaned the control stick, and entered the turning maneuver.

The opponent was making a shortcut.

Tilting to the opposite direction, and then to the opposite of that.

Then, I tilted it to the direction opposite of that.

This nimble maneuver could not be copied or duplicated.

Execute a pull-up maneuver, and then enter a loop.

I held my breath, and then rolled over while flying inverted.

Down, immediately.

I dove, and then slipped obliquely.

The target was climbing up.

Just before we passed by each other, it shot at me.

Making a turn.

Changing the direction with the rapid snapping. But, the velocity still remained to a certain extent.

The air was thin.

I expected the enemy's turn.

Rolling over.

I pushed up the throttle.

Then, this is it.

While making a gentle roll, I was turning.

I controlled the ailerons, rudders, and elevators with the rapid, discrete movements.

My head was facing the opposite direction.

The opponent was not stupid, of course. *Is it trying to escape?*

Half-rolling, and going up.

I raised the flaps to gain the velocity.

The acceleration was on a straight line.

It was trying to escape.

I got above it. I held the nose down.

To the right.

Then, to the left.

I moved to the opposite side once, and then dove toward the inner side on the right.

I could see its belly.

It was turning to the far side.

Entering the dead angle.

Down.

Rapidly diving toward the clouds. Then, let the nose pitch up quickly.

I went around below the target, and adjusted the distance.

It's coming.

It's right in front.

Fire.

I skidded with the rudders.

Fire.

I deflected the ailerons to the opposite ways.

The rudders were neutral.

Throttle up.

I banked to the right, to see the enemy.

“Yahoo!” I shouted.

I confirmed that it was a hit.

How many aircrafts have I shot down so far?

Five?

Because it's Sanka. This is an amazing aircraft.

I brought myself back to the horizontal flight.

I looked around.

Making sure of the direction.

I directed the nose to the space, which the streaks of smoke were rising from.

“Boomerang, where are you?” It was Kusurida.

“Sky.” I turned on the microphone, and replied.

“Get back.” I heard the calm voice of the Teacher.

The trails of black smoke were describing arcs like gigantic springs.

They were streaking obliquely into the clouds below.

I was watching the scenery, while flying upside down for a while.

From the clouds, two aircrafts were climbing. They were those twin-boom aircrafts. They were probably looking at me. But, they could not possibly catch up on me from those coordinates.

I rolled over, and observed the bright sky.

Nothing was above me. Except for the sun.

I slowly took a deep breath.

Calm down.

We don't need to worry about anything now.

No one can shoot you down, I spoke to myself.

It was a bit cold.

Still, I was sweating.

I should have brought the blanket here, I thought.

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The two twin-boomed enemies changed the course and retreated in the middle. I was really considering if I should have followed them, but having shot down five

was already enough. My Sanka still had enough fuel to spare, but other aircrafts were probably reaching their limits at that point. The dogfights were over in almost all airspaces. Other friendlies were gathering at the lower altitude, closer to the clouds. I recognized the Teacher's Suiga. Kusurida's was very close by. I let my aircraft approach them. Kusurida's aircraft had holes punched on its tail assembly. But, it looked to be doing okay. Tsujima was not around the vicinity. I wondered where he was. There was about ten more Suigas nearby.

I had just received the code that ordered us not to use the radio, so I could not just inquire them about anything. It seemed that every team was checking the surviving members.

The oil pressure was normal. The oil temperature was back to the normal level, too. The engine was in excellent condition. It had become much quieter than it was when I was coming to this combat airspace. However, it was probably due to my ears getting used to it. While maintaining the altitude, we started heading northward.

The sun was getting higher. It was a little before 08:00 a.m.

I felt like eating something for the first time in quite a while. *I want to eat roasted chicken.* I was thinking such a thing.

At a school festival, I roasted chicken and ate it. I slaughtered the chicken provided by a farm nearby, and roasted it. My classmates were dancing around a maypole. I preferred eating to dancing. I preferred holding a fork to my friends' hands. The fat was dripping, the orange flame was making the sizzling noise, and its skin was swollen with heat. Then, what was once a living fowl would become a chicken dish. I was observing the process of what had been living just a little while ago having been transformed into a delicious-looking dish before I knew it. I just wanted to know exactly at what moment of the cooking process I had started feeling like eating it.

As the dance music became audible, the flame of the gas burner occasionally shifted its colors. It turned to orange, and then blue. It was a pleasant smell. A savory, appetizing aroma. I poured soda into a big glass, and drank it. Countless small bubbles. It was too hard for me to drink it up all the way. There was a spiral straw, but I had to work hard to suck the liquid into my mouth. Ridiculous. Why did I have to drink it by using the force of suction? Although I forgot his name, a

boy pulled me toward himself and tried to kiss me. After giving him a warning, I hit him with a fire hook that I happened to be holding. He seemed to be getting drunk. His ear started bleeding, and he crouched down. He might be crying. Someone brought him to the nurse's office. But, I stayed there, because I wanted to eat the chicken. I put the fire hook into the flame to sterilize it. Then, a girl who was a member of the class committee came by and glared at me. She lacked the intelligence slightly. It appeared that she wanted to say something.

“What's the matter?” I dared to ask her with courtesy.

“You're cruel.” She commented.

“Is it because I roast chicken?” I asked.

She went somewhere, and left me.

Maybe, she was in love with him.

Perhaps, she wanted this fire hook.

Am I cruel?

She might be right.

Even so, it was not that I always carried a fire hook.

That boy, who came to me to be beaten up, might have been a nicer guy.

I wonder what happened to the girl after that.

I do not remember.

When I graduated from the school, she was no longer around me.

Well ..., I once happened to encounter her on a street. When was it?

She was with a man, who was far older than she was. At first, I thought he was her father. But if he was her father, she would not have been surprised by that much. She saw me, widened her eyes, and after a few seconds, smiled while exhaling an unnatural breath. It was as if she realized she could do nothing but smile. Or, it was as if something inside her fell and was shattered. It was not my fault. It had been destined to be broken eventually, anyway. I was going to leave, without doing anything. I heard her shouting at me from behind. She was calling my name. I stopped, and kindly looked back at her.

“If you are envying me, try to grow up.” She said, with a distorted face.

I felt I saw something mysterious.

I was not envying her.

I did not think it was funny.

But, I slightly felt like laughing.

Then, gradually, I started feeling lonely.

Not for myself.

I thought she was a little funny and a bit lonely.

That’s all.

It’s strange.

I still think that way, to this day.

The Teacher shook the wings of his aircraft.

Lowering the altitude even more, and sinking into the clouds.

Kusurida was descending. I followed suit.

We cruised northward along the coastline, and then flew above the river toward the direction opposite of the water current. The base was appearing to our right. Several aircrafts had already landed. It seemed that we were the last.

I was the first one to go for the touchdown. I deployed the landing gear, and lowered the flaps. The wind was blowing slightly sideways.

Landing.

The wheels of my aircraft were revolving and rubbing the ground.

The touch of asphalt was traveling through my body.

I put on the brake, and changed the direction of my aircraft.

Kusurida was descending behind me.

I was taxiing toward the hangars. A mechanic was driving a car just beside me. He was waving his hand.

As for me, I was just feeling unbearably hungry.

When I was getting close to the hangar, I saw the Teacher touching down.

In front of me, Sasakura was waiting for me while raising his both hands.

I turned off the engine in the middle, and let the inertia move the aircraft toward the hangar.

I unlocked and pushed up the canopy.

A warm wind caressed my face.

The ground level was humid.

It was the weather that was showing signs of raining.

Before I got off my aircraft, Sasakura stepped on the wing. He helped me release the seat belt.

“Welcome back.” He greeted. “How is it going?”

“I shot down five targets.” I answered. I recognized that I was slurring. Perhaps, I was getting airsick. I made a short sigh. “I’m hungry now.”

“How did the engine go?”

“Splendid. There is not an aircraft as great as this.”

“Five of our Suigas haven’t come back.”

“Five?” I was surprised. “We may see some of them coming back soon, mayn’t we?”

“Ah, of course.” Sasakura nodded and looked at the sky.

I looked at the sky, too.

It was cloudy, and I could not see anything in the distance.

Suigas could not fly over a long distance.

They might have been transformed into chicken dishes somewhere.

I was thinking that way because I was getting hungry. I knew I was cruel, without anyone telling me so.

Episode 3: Stall

Coarse people of little power of reason and despicable habits do not deserve such fine organic instruments or such a great variety of machinement as those of humans who possess the marvelous theories with great ideas. They are merely sacks that take in and evacuate food.

This excerpt is from a manuscript originally written in Italian by Leonardo da Vinci.

-1-

As it turned out, five Suigas could not make it to the airbase. In other words, five out of 13 aircrafts were shot down. Among the pilots I knew the names of, Tsujima was missing. He was the one with the intelligent look on his face. He had asked me about this and that, but all of the answers that I had given him were wasted for nothing. Once someone went down, the information that the one had collected came to nothing in a moment. Even though similar phenomena were more or less evident among animals and plants, I could not but think only human beings needed a lot of garbage information.

On the following day, the whole base was enveloped in the dismal mood. There were probably those who might say, *I don't like that sort of thing*. But, we had solidified the determination to prepare for such an event since we were assigned to this duty. Moreover, it was not really an unexpected accident.

Goda and Mohri gathered all the pilots in the morning and held a briefing session. According to the information given by the headquarters, the latest operation could accomplish only the smallest outcome that they had expected. We were not informed of the specific data of our substantial damages. *Still, our team's achievements are far better than those of other teams*, Goda asserted. In reality, our nine aircrafts that had managed to return shot down 13 enemy aircrafts in total. Judging only from the numbers, the ratio was 13 to 5. We attained an overwhelming victory. However, one of our teams got all the aircrafts shot down, and even our team lost one as well. The commander told us that we could not feel too good about the overall results. *To begin with, have we been doing this just to feel good?* Even though I was having that doubt in my mind, I kept myself silent, of course.

No matter how the results were reported, and no matter how they were

interpreted, they had nothing to do with the aircrafts that went down and the pilots in them.

Additionally, even for the pilots who shot them down, including me for example, the numerical figures sounded as if they were the stories from another dimension.

I just climb up the sky.

And, then, lunge at the enemy in front of me.

Why is it my enemy? I did not try to have such a thought, because, before that contemplation, I had to think about why I myself was standing on my own side.

I would end up having to explain why I would not shoot myself down.

How can I do such a thing?

It could be that, with no specific reason, as a matter of course, I was keeping myself alive. I did not believe that I had any particular reason.

Likewise, there was no reason.

Without any reason, nothing was right, and nothing was wrong, either.

Thinking about something this way might indeed be a cruel act. However, it was not anything dishonest, in my opinion. I had never thought for once that I was dishonest.

I had heard someone's opinion, insisting that we should be more considerate of those who had been shot down. Of course, this was what I was told from a civilian outside the base, not an insider of our industry.

It was about half a year ago, when I was hospitalized. It was not that I was wounded by enemy shots. I was hurt from an accident caused by a mechanical failure. The heater in the cockpit went out of order while I was flying, and my extremities were frostbitten. Although I myself only felt that they were getting cold just a bit, the doctor stationed at the airbase directed me to go to hospital. So, I went to the hospital by foot. Because I could walk, it was no big deal. But, I ended up being confined in the hospital for more than a week, and I was shocked. I could not understand for what purpose that much of time was needed. In short, I was hospitalized just for the examination. I did not think that I received any treatment.

I could definitely state that the place called sick room was the most boring space I

had ever experienced in my whole life. It was difficult to explain what was the difference between the sick room and my own room. What could I say? The patients around me were boring. We could regard the sick room as the place in which boredom of humanity was congregated. Boring folks were talking about boring things. I couldn't stand that. Tranquility was far more interesting. I desperately tried to keep myself quiet in order to escape from the tedium. Then, nurses or someone would speak to me, thinking that I was depressed. The ennui that came from my having to engage in conversation with them to a certain extent would dominate me again. If I stayed there a little longer, I would have gotten actually sick.

Anyway, one of the nurses working in the hospital spoke to me persistently. She always concluded her talk, by saying, "You have to consider those who were shot down." I was just listening to her and feeling dumbfounded, while thinking that she was worshipping such a religion.

According to her, human society seemed to consist of "kindness" and "consideration". She insisted that the society had managed to prevent itself from being taken apart thanks to such qualities. Nurses might have to end up having such a philosophy, after taking care of too many injured patients and sick people. Or, they might not be able to do their jobs without thinking that way. I did not object to the philosophy, of course. If my nod could satisfy her, then it was my act of subtle consideration or perhaps my kindness. In conclusion, for me, consideration and kindness were what could separate me from others. In other words, they were what could set me and others free from restrictions or obstructions against each other. They were like ball bearings. Even though the parts were connected with each other to form a structure, the mechanism is thought to be designed to have the components separated from each other almost entirely.

What connected people in the society was not that sort of thing. Could it be the motivation with which we wanted to share the benefits and work together to defeat the common foes?

If our society was made only with affection, why were there so many disputes in the world?

Even though they could give to others for free what they had made, why did they get the money?

Why would they try to study hard to be at the top and be above all others, even at the expense of others, by beating the competitors?

Everyone wanted to satisfy oneself. They would promote their egos. Still, such thoughts would be too ugly to survive in the society. At the same time, if they hid the ugliness a little, it would become the virtue. Objectively speaking, there was no big difference between the ugliness and the virtue. However, beyond a certain point, it would turn into the virtue. That sort of thing was the common sense in this society of grownups.

Even so, the nurse was very kind and talked about such a topic like that with anybody. I guessed she believed in that kind of ideology, and it really was the virtue in her mind. I did not want to overturn her belief upside down. I just did not think such belief was correct. That was all there was to it.

If you took the exam, worked hard, and aced it to get the highest score in the classroom, then it would also mean that someone else had to be forced to drop out and I had to think about the one's feeling. I had to be kind to the one. Was that what she meant? If I were in the situation in which I was dropping out, I would never want to get the sympathy like that. Never.

At least all of the pilots who flew high and fought in the sky would think so without any exception.

When our aircrafts were going down, or when we realized that our deaths were coming, we would never have such a miserable feeling.

We would probably not curse the ones who had just shot us down.

We might rather respect the opponents. If we were to curse anything, it would be our inexpertness or lack of skills. We would die, while wishing that we would become a more formidable pilot and shoot down more targets, if we were given the second chance and we could restart our lives. That was the nature and the way of pilots.

When we study, do we think about trying to make our rivals drop out? Do business people think that they want to make others become poor?

That is not supposed to be the way it is. Do we not just simply think that we want to polish ourselves to get better?

However, they would not be able to know if they have managed to polish themselves and if they have become better, without comparing themselves with others. It is just that such method of measurement would prove to be problematic. We can conclude that it is all about the problem of the system, in which shooting down an aircraft will result in the death of the pilots with the very high probability.

Indeed, pilots need not die.

As long as the winner is decided in each battle, that should be enough.

Still, this logic lacks one important factor.

It is the act of putting the pilots' lives at stake. It is the absolute dynamics and a major premise of aerial combats. It is the only difference between aerial battles and games such as chess and sports.

Everyone puts his or her own life on the aircraft, and fly high into the sky. Because of that point of argument, I respect all the pilots, regardless of whether they are my friendlies or enemies. Some of the pilots, who may be able to become more and more skillful or still possess the potential for the future, may suffer from bad luck and be shot down. In reality, we cannot practice for aerial combats. Once we fail, everything will come to nothing. This is the most notable feature of our job. I do not find any similar case in modern times. It is likely to be rare.

We are blamed for killing human beings. They denounce that it is a brutal act. I know that. I understand it well. But when we study the human history, we notice that similar mentality can be found in any parts of the world and in any civilization. Then, in any era or any parts of the history, such concepts have been deemed worthy of being respected as dignified deeds.

Why?

Is fighting valuable?

It is not a technique.

It is not a logic.

It is the awe for the people fighting at the risk of their lives.

Then.

As for us, those concerned, it is not a big deal. Just a job. Just the way of our

lives.

There are no such things as gods for us.

What we believe are our mechanics and our own hands that hold the control sticks.

-2-

One week after the sortie, two newcomers were assigned to our base. Although they were new to the airbase, they were allocated from another base and had made almost the same career as mine. One of them was a male, whose name was Kurita. The other was a female, whose name was Higasawa. As for Higasawa, she was given a room adjacent to mine.

A simple welcome party was held for them. It was over in a short time and I went back to my room. Higasawa caught up with me in the corridor, and asked me if she could visit my room to talk. My reply was that I could do that in 30 minutes for I was taking a shower.

As I sat by the window and was smoking as usual, I heard the door of the room beside mine opening, footsteps on the corridor, and a knock at the door of my room. Following my response, Higasawa entered my room. She had changed clothes and was wearing a casual outfit. She was also wearing glasses.

“Do you have a bad eyesight?” I asked.

“No. These are windshields.” She answered.

“Oh, you may have a seat there.” I showed her to my bed. My room had only one chair, on which I was already sitting. A cover was put on the bed. So, she should not complain about anything.

“I have frequently heard your rumor, Ms. Kusanagi.”

“Are you flattering me?” I loosened my lips to smile.

“In the mission last week, I heard you shot down five enemies with Sanka. In the same operation, I was flying a Sanka, too.”

“Oh, really.” I nodded.

Speaking of Sanka, both Higasawa and Kurita flew to this base with Sanka. The

number of Sanka in our base was now three in total. Still, only my Sanka was of the latest model.

“Our flight team consisted of eight aircrafts. It was a tough battle. I was the only pilot who managed to return to the base.” Higasawa was talking, while showing a matter-of-fact expression on her face.

“So, that is the reason why you are assigned here. I see.”

“Correct. Same for Mr. Kurita, I heard. He told me that he was the sole survivor of the previous flight team.”

“Are you telling me that you have been screened and chosen?”

“Oh, that’s not what I meant ...” Higasawa smiled.

“What do you want to talk about?” I asked, while exhaling the smoke.

“About the Teacher.” She was looking into me.

The Teacher did not attend the welcome party that night. Come to think of it, I had not made a sortie with him since the previous week. Although he had to be somewhere in the base, I had not seen him this week.

I was smoking without saying anything. A cool breeze was blowing into the room through the window. By lowering my head a bit, I could see a clear night sky. *The temperature seems to be going down tonight.*

“What type of person is he?” Higasawa asked.

“Umm, what type ...? How can I describe ...?”

“Ms. Kusanagi, how many times have you flown with him?”

“Well, I have been teaming up with him since right after I was assigned here.”

“Is he as great as he is known to be?”

“Umm.” I was thinking. “Yeah, I can say he is great.”

“What part of him is great and how is he great? His aircraft is nothing special, is it?”

She might be implying to me that it was my aircraft that was “special”. Perhaps, I was being paranoid, and decided not to take it too sensitively.

“At least, nothing special on the surface.” I nodded while exhaling the smoke.

“I don’t understand that. Ohh, I wanna see him as soon as possible. If he is just that great, he has to have secret techniques, right? I am thinking why he does not share them with all other pilots.”

“I guess, it might be something that he cannot explain with words. I think he has mastered the techniques with his body.”

“But, have we not employed the technologies and insights to somehow convert such skills into the forms of engineering hardware as a way of mechanization? Don’t you think that the system, in which the victory or defeat is decided by the human’s personal capabilities, is the indication of the immaturity of engineering, in a way?”

“Yeah, I think so, too.” I nodded. “I actually think so. In a way, this is the transition period. We might see in the near future a new age, in which anyone can be a fighter pilot.”

“If things go that way, we may lose the purpose of our existences here.”

“Uh, it wouldn’t be very fun.”

“No, it isn’t the matter of whether it is fun or not. I think we would lose our human rights, or shall I say, the reason for our existences.”

“I’m not sure, though.” I smiled wryly. I had never thought of such a thing. “Human rights ... I don’t care, as long as I can stay in the airbase.”

“I’m talking about the case in which we can no longer stay here.”

“Oh, I see.”

“The reason why the Teacher is paid attention to is the fact that he is a normal person, isn’t it?”

“Umm, I wonder if it is true.”

I was not sure who was paying attention to whom. I did not feel right about the expression, “a normal person”. But, I nodded anyway. I stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray on the desk.

“The case of a normal person becoming a pilot is unusual. It is, rather, special.”

Higasawa said. "I wonder what type of person he is."

"I think he is not so much special in particular." I smiled. "I mean, normal persons have worked as pilots in the past, right? Such pilots had gotten depleted, and the number of them had decreased. That's what happened."

"I might dislike the fact they got depleted." She frowned.

"I agree." I nodded. "Well, then, it was actually depletion."

"I wonder how we should call anything that do not get depleted."

"What?"

"I mean, I wonder what the parts that do not get depleted are called, when they are broken."

"I'm not sure. I think you don't have to think that way. It has nothing to do with you. Additionally, dying is your own depletion, isn't it?"

"Well, I guess so."

"Is that all you want to talk with me about?" I asked. I thought of smoking another cigarette. Then, I looked at the clock. Time was precious for me. Reading a book would be far more meaningful to me than talking with someone.

"How is Sanka Mark 7?" Higasawa changed the topic.

"Not Mark 7. That's Mark A2."

"Oh, it means that it is a completely different model, isn't it?"

"It is loaded with a different engine. Machine guns are not mounted on the main wings."

"Is it all right for you to show me your Sanka Mark A2?"

"Is it okay, if I do that tomorrow?" I asked with a bland expression.

"Oh, yes ..." Higasawa showed a little bit of disappointment on her face. I guessed she expected me to show her the latest Sanka that night. "See you tomorrow, then." She stood up.

"Sorry. I am just one of those who go to bed relatively early." I said.

"Sorry to bother you. And thank you for your kindness."

She opened the door and left my room. I locked the door, got back to the chair by the window again, and lit the cigarette. I reached for a book on the table, but for some reason, I no longer felt like reading it by then.

It was not that I was feeling sleepy, anyway.

In fact, I started thinking about going to the hangar after smoking a cigarette. I could not do so anymore. Higasawa in the next room would hear me going out of my room. This situation was what might be defined as inconvenience, in a way. I could say that my kindness created this inconvenience. I was irritated just a little, but I let the smoke absorb the feeling and managed to disperse it.

And then ...

She said the words, “normal person”.

It was a creepy expression.

Why do people define whether something is normal or not? By deciding what is normal, abnormal things are automatically defined, as a consequence. That defies logic. How can they define being normal? There is no meaning to it. The attitude with which fabrication of the borders with no concrete reasoning is attempted is the identity of the idiocy named normalcy.

Are we not normal persons?

At least, we are not normal adults.

We are not grownups, I thought.

We are children, the same as normal kids.

But we don't grow up to become adults. That's all.

Am I wrong?

It is not a big deal, is it?

We can live without becoming what we don't want to be.

Exactly.

That is the reason.

Those who have become what they don't want to be.

They are probably the ones who envy us.

Originally, they all wanted to remain as children forever.

However, they have been able to do nothing but become adults.

So, they envy us.

I have no choice but to think that way. I have actually heard such remarks several times.

But, no one thinks that way.

Instead of envying us, they see us as just foreign substances.

How can I describe the looks in their eyes?

Are children so rare to them?

That is really mysterious.

I had always been growing up in the mystery.

But, they were trivial things. No kid worried about that sort of thing. We felt more comfortable by climbing to and flying in the sky than by fretting over the matter. If we felt good, that was all that mattered.

So, when we finish playing around, it is time to have to return.

That is when I am reminded of boredom again.

Every time I descended from the sky, I always remembered the fact that life was trifle, small, and absurd. Then, I felt depressed by thinking I had to go back to the thick of human community. If it were the society consisting only of children, we would not have to feel disgusted like this. Adults were wrong. Adults had transformed everything into such a trifle matter. They were thinking that they were going to die sooner or later anyway, and seeing no point of giving a darn about anything, to the level that they had brought the changes to the world in this way just for the heck of it. They were thinking of making everything desolate because life was sad to them. That was likely to be the evil intention behind it.

Whatever it may be. The very action of forcing children to have anything to do with it.

That is not what I can forgive.

It is the only thing that I want to resist.

However, in the end, that is the resistance.

It might be the proof that I still have the regretful affection of some sort toward human beings.

It might be the proof that I still cannot believe the absence of salvation.

Shall I talk with Sasakura?

It would be difficult to find the one who could provide me with frank answers to this question straightforwardly. To begin with, I did not like to ask anyone a question. Because I myself did not want to be asked questions. This imagination of mine might be my version of kindness. *Am I wrong?*

-3-

In the following week, I was scheduled to fly with the two newcomers.

For some reason, I, not the Teacher, was assigned the duty to lead the two. Although it was the first time for me to experience such a thing, I was somewhat glad to do so. I speculated that my having shot down five enemy aircrafts in the large-scale operation received the recognition. Even the Teacher shot down just three.

It was only a scouting duty, and we could return to the base without any trouble. We did not even have to make a single loop maneuver.

I went back to the hangar, and talked to Sasakura about a small improvement related to the air intake system. Then, Higasawa came to the hangar. Her hangar was located to the west, next to mine. It was the same hangar that Tsujima's aircraft had been moored in the past. Now, the two Sankas of Kurita's and Higasawa's were stationed in the hangar. Sasakura, who knew Sanka best, occasionally visited the hangar to instruct the mechanics in charge.

"If you are looking for the Teacher, he isn't here." Sasakura told Higasawa first.

"Hello." Higasawa bowed to me, and walked through the entrance.

The Teacher had been absent as of late. There was the possibility that he was in a special mission. Higasawa had been looking for him every day, but to no avail, it seemed. I was getting the impression that I did not want her to meet the Teacher. I myself did not know why I felt so.

"I heard that Sanka will be updated, one after another." Higasawa said. "They told me that my aircraft is scheduled for the upgrade in three weeks."

“Oh, how long does it take?” Sasakura asked.

“Three days.”

“Rather than doing so, we should replace it with another one completely and scrap the old one.” He uttered, while curving his lips obliquely. “I’m not so sure if they should modify it with the old engine. The aluminum used for the cylinder blocks are different.”

“What of aluminum is different?” Higasawa leaned her head to one side.

“Well ...” Sasakura raised his hand. “Nothing major. They will handle it properly, I suppose.”

Probably, the composition of aluminum alloy is different, I interpreted it that way. For one thing, I had once heard of it from Sasakura before. Sasakura stopped his explanation in the middle, perhaps because he noticed that it was not the topic that he should talk to pilots about.

“I just hear that the Teacher is scheduled to come back tonight.” Higasawa said happily.

“Oh? But, from where?”

“Umm, that’s a secret.” She smiled. “I must not talk to you about that.”

“Then, who told you about that?” I asked.

“I cannot tell you about it, either.”

“Hmm.” I did not feel amused, and nodded while sighing. *That’s none of my business.*

“How is that guy? I mean, the one named Kurita.” I decided to change the topic of the conversation.

“What do you mean by ‘how’?”

“You know, he has this somber atmosphere.” Although I made such a comment, I also noticed that I was the one with even gloomier character. I looked sideways at Sasakura. He was just about to go back to the aircraft, and was already looking toward a direction opposite of us. But, he was still within the hearing distance.

“Umm, I do not know what to say ...” Higasawa shook her head. “He hardly talks

to me.”

“Really.” I thought that this woman would talk to anyone. Actually, that was not apparently to be the case.

I thought we were done with the conversation. I showed my hand to say goodbye to leave.

“Oh, aren’t you supposed to be reporting to the office?” Higasawa leaned her head to one side. She meant the report to Goda.

“I will do that later. I do not think that I have to hurry up in particular.”

“Do you want me to do that instead?”

“No, that is not necessary.” I shook my head. *That’s my duty.*

“Understood. Then, I’ll see you later.” Higasawa made a fabricated smile, and started walking toward the office building.

I got closer to the aircraft. Sasakura was applying grease to a brake cylinder of the landing gear.

“Getting very edgy.” He uttered, without raising his head.

“You mean the brake is edgy?”

“No. I mean you, Kusanagi.”

“Me?” I was surprised a little. “I’m not edgy. I’m now getting the edge on my good condition. I am also in a good mood, and in shape, too ... I feel a little hungry, though.”

“Is it because you have not experienced another dogfight since then?” Sasakura raised his head, and asked.

“What do you mean by ‘since then’? It has been only a little bit over one week.”

“That’s right.”

“Hey ..., I’m not a vampire or anything like that.”

Sasakura looked sideways at me. He curved his lips and nodded. I was not sure what he was indicating. Probably, he was misunderstanding something.

I entered Goda's office and reported the outcome of the duty. In case of a scouting duty like this time, only the team leader had the responsibility to report. So, the other two did not visit the office. My explanation ended in a moment.

"All right. Thanks." Goda said.

I stood up and made a salute.

"Your performance is paid attention to at the headquarters as well." He said. "It seems to have been decided that the production of new Sankas will be increased."

"Oh, really."

"This is quite sudden. I just got a notice that a staff from a personnel relation department at the headquarters is scheduled to come here tomorrow. She seems to want to talk to you."

"Personnel relation?"

"Not a bad thing for you, is it?" Goda smiled.

I could not imagine at all what he was implying, but I nodded anyway.

"Umm, sir, I have a question."

"What is it?"

"I have not seen the Teacher lately. Is he okay?"

"It is our rule not to ask about such an issue." Goda answered in a tone as if he was laughing slightly. "Well, but, I can understand you are wondering about him. There is no problem in particular. He should be coming back tonight."

"Right." I nodded. "In fact, I heard the rumor about it."

"Rumor? What do you mean?" Goda raised his chin.

"According to the rumor, the Teacher is coming back tonight."

"From whom did you hear the rumor?"

"Higasawa, sir."

"Higasawa?" While looking at me, Goda squinted.

"Understood. I'll excuse myself."

I walked to the door, opened it, and looked back at Goda only for a moment. A pilot of a fighter aircraft could not miss and overlook a moment like this. Goda did not see me. He seemed to be reading a document on the desk.

Since I failed to land the bullets on the target, I got out of the room to the corridor and sighed. I felt strange that I was thinking about a weird thing like this. It was as if I could not accept myself for my thinking about such a thing. I felt a sense of incongruity, when I touched myself, like a blotch on the skin. It was a sense of discomfort, which indicated that whatever I was touching was not mine. Still, I could do nothing but touch it. It was so close to me that I could not just ignore it.

At the night, when I went to the dining hall, I found the Teacher having a meal at the innermost table. Then, on the opposite seat over the table, Higasawa was sitting. Several others were in the dining room, but all of them were keeping the distance from the two. When I saw the Teacher, his eyes were turned to me only for a moment. A little later, Higasawa looked at me. She smiled at me. I ignored her, and walked toward the food-serving counter.

I put a fork and spoon on a tray, and waited for my meal. The elderly woman approached me, and then glared at me.

“A small amount, eh?”

“Yes.” I nodded with no expression.

The main dish of the day was stew. I brought my tray to a table by the windows and started eating while looking outside. I tried not to look at the people in the reflection of the glass as much as I could avoid it. I realized that I just hated seeing human beings. *That's right*. Probably, I had felt quite happy, when I had been criticized, “You’re cruel,” by the female classmate. Then, at the very moment, I might have decided to be a more and more cold-hearted person.

While I was still eating, the Teacher stood up and left the dining room. Since I had already finished eating my meal, I was about to leave. However, since I did not want anyone to think that I was stalking the Teacher, I decided to kill time by smoking a cigarette. Then, Higasawa came to the table and took a seat in front of me.

“Fascinating individual, isn’t he?” She brought her face close to mine and whispered.

“Whom are you talking about?” I squinted, to pretend that I was avoiding the smoke.

“I knew he was different from others.” She looked at the exit of the dining hall. Of course, the Teacher was not there anymore.

A group of pilots, who were the closest to us, stood up and left the dinning room. Beside them, three others were a little away from us and seemed to be talking enthusiastically while opening a book on the table. Within the vicinity around us, the two of us were alone.

“Shall we talk outside?” I asked. I did not have any intention to talk with her, at the time. It was as if I was trying to corner myself by asking the question.

Higasawa widened her eyes a little and showed a surprised look. She was keeping quiet. I stood up and brought the tray back to the counter. About half of my meal was still left untouched. I was leaving the dining room in haste, before the elderly woman would see the uneaten food on my tray.

As expected, Higasawa was following me.

We were walking on a dark path leading to where the hangars were located. Suddenly, I started feeling uneasy, while wondering if we were going to walk forever. *To the base of a lighting pole? Or, are we walking across the runway?* I felt that something tremendously dangerous would happen to us, if we went so far away. I did not know at all what was dangerous. It was not a specific image. More abstract ... I was beginning to wonder if I was the dangerous one.

In the end, when we reached the space under a lighting pole, we stopped.

The sky was so cloudy that I could not see the stars.

The air was humid.

Both the ground and the ground crawlers were all wet.

“What shall we talk about?” She asked in a low voice.

“Hey, do you notice that?” I spoke slowly, while picking up a cigarette.

“What do I notice?” Higasawa showed a worried look.

“You know, they often ...” While saying so, I desperately tried to organize what

were jumbled in my mind. “Guys, I mean, males often go to the downtown area and play with women, right? Are they normal women? Or, are they women like us?”

“I’m not sure about such a thing. Which type are they?”

“Well, I have not confirmed the fact. To begin with, I don’t have any interest in this kind of topic at all. But, as long as I can tell from a few samples, they are normal women.”

“Oh.” Higasawa nodded. She was looking at me with the eyes, which seemed to want to say, “So what?”

“In short, young boys are chasing normal adult women. What do you think about it?”

“I think it is ridiculous.” She replied immediately. “Frankly, I want them to stop it. As a pilot that they also are, I urge them to refrain from doing such vulgar deeds.”

“Right.” I smiled a little. *What a righteous reply of a model student she has just given me!* I still completely agreed with that. “Then, what do you think about the case in which the boys are following the girls like us?”

“It is even more unforgivable.”

“Really ...” I nodded again. I was getting depressed because it was as if I was asking her leading questions. “That is what you say. It means that it would be better if the male pilots go out of the airbase. Am I wrong? I don’t understand why they need to do such ridiculous things, though. But, what shall I say? That’s okay. We can leave them the way they are ... They don’t do harm to us directly. That is the way I feel.”

Higasawa nodded without words. She widened her eyes. She appeared to be trying to see to what direction our conversation had gone to.

Good eyes.

The same eyes as those that are targeting the prey.

They are the eyes of fighter pilots, I thought.

“I guess, it is a characteristic of children. Every aircraft has its own quirkiness. It won’t disappear by implementing just a little bit of improvements.” I finally put a

cigarette in my mouth and lit it with a lighter. After exhaling the smoke, I exhaled words as well. “We aren’t interested in them, the children, at all. To put it more precisely, we possess the characteristics, according to which children do not get attracted to each other.”

“Umm, sorry, I don’t quite understand what you’re talking about ...”

“So, when a person who is not a child is among such a group, the one would end up looking like standing out, naturally. No, usually, we think adults are not great. Probably, that should be the common thoughts among us. For one thing, great adults cannot be found around us. Therefore, if there is an exception to the rule, we can do nothing but be attracted to the one.”

“Do you mean the Teacher?”

I waited until I finished exhaling the smoke, and then nodded.

Higasawa looked up at the sky and sighed. Then, she closed her eyes once, curved her lips a little, and then stared at me with squinted eyes.

“I don’t want to believe that I am being considered as the one to be involved with that sort of thing.” She said.

“You don’t like to believe it, eh?” I smiled a little and nodded. It might have been an unnatural smile. “As for myself, I can’t believe that, either.”

“I ...”

“Ah, I mean, I think you may want to somehow maintain your calmness and have the opportunity to reevaluate yourself. That’s all.”

“Umm, perhaps ... Ms. Kusanagi, are you the one who is doing what I think you are doing? Are you trying to keep me in check because of that? If so, you need not worry about it. I don’t have such an intention ...”

“You seem to be misunderstanding the whole issue completely. But that’s none of my business, even if you misunderstand me in any way. It’s your own business. Do as you like.”

“I don’t want to have such a relationship with you.”

“What type of relationship do you mean by that?”

“Adversarial relationship.”

“Then, what is a relationship that is not adversarial?”

“Do not twist my words to make a mockery out of me, please.” Higasawa warned, while getting her voice raspy. She looked down and, after taking a deep breath, raised her head. “Sorry. I am afraid that I have just said too much.”

It's a calm and good control, I thought. Only from her reaction, I could evaluate her aptness as a pilot. *I might have misunderstood her a little*, I regretted.

I explained, “Sorry. It wasn’t what I meant. As a good pilot, as a good rival, I want to respect you. So, I am hoping that you would not take a step in the strange way ... Perhaps, I have worried about it more than I should. What shall I say? You know, I am the person who cannot keep these things within oneself.”

“Oh, I appreciate your advice.” As she kept looking down, she bowed a little. “And then, come to think of it, I thought, to some extent, you might be right. As you said, it might be a good idea to maintain my calmness a bit more.” She raised her head and tried to smile. “Yes, but, why have I come to feel this way? Oh, yes, you might be correct to the core. I might have been carried away before I knew it ...”

“Everyone has the admiration for the Teacher. I myself still admire him. It is my honest feeling.”

“I think I understand what you mean.”

“Would you like to smoke?” I picked up a box of cigarette from my pocket.

“Ah, no, I don’t smoke. But thank you for your kindness anyway.” She held out her hand.

I did not understand what the gesture meant.

“Let’s shake hands.” Higasawa smiled.

“Oh ..., I see.” I held her hand.

It was a warm, tiny hand.

My hand was far bonier and colder than hers.

Even my hand itself might be cold-hearted.

“May I return to the building?”

“Of course, you may.”

“If you have time, please tell me about Sanka next time.” Higasawa raised her hand and made a salute. “I’ll excuse myself.”

“Sorry about bothering you with the unnecessary talk.” I said.

That’s not good.

In any way, it was an unnecessary talk.

All talks are generally unnecessary.

Higasawa disappeared into the darkness.

I stayed near the lighting pole alone for a while, and kept on smoking.

I wondered if what I had just talked with her about was true. It was not what I should have talked to her about. It might have been the advice to myself. The Teacher was a grownup. Sasakura was a grownup, too.

But, I’m a child.

I will be a child forever.

-5-

The woman who was dispatched from the headquarters introduced herself as Kai. We met at a reception room in the office building. I entered the room for the first time. Goda was with us at first, but he left the room in the middle.

“Let me move on to the main subject ...” Kai raised her shoulder once slightly, and started talking. “It is a social demand, and at the same time, a self-motivated defense as a way of staying ahead for our future. There is the movement to promote female Kildren to leading positions.”

I noticed that the way she could use the word “Kildren” without any hesitation was the proof of her unshakably firm career.

“Once upon a time, our society actively prepared and offered positions for women. We have such a history. Even though it was criticized as a reckless trend for the sake of the unnatural and unreasonable goal, we believe that, in the long run,

it would be praised as the good starting point of our quest for allowing the society to settle down to the natural state. Of course, I wonder if we have to fortify ourselves with such a justification. Anyway, we have long been preparing a proposition to assign a Kildren to a leading position someday. In reality, we already have selected several good candidates. People usually want to work under the supervision of someone who can understand their feelings. Don't you think so?"

"Well ..., I have no opinion of that sort." I leaned my head to one side. "I have never been dissatisfied with my bosses, and I have never thought that way before ..."

"Okay. You have been blessed with good fortune. But, it would be too late when the environment that you are in deteriorates. We should make the first move for what can be expected. You know, it's so-called 'business effort'. Well, anyway, we have held such discussions, and talked about who the candidates might be. Then, your name popped up."

"Umm ..., what is your bottom line?"

"In short, I want to ask you if you are interested in getting such a position in the future."

"You mean, becoming a commander?"

"It would be difficult for you to become a commander in one leap immediately. Well, perhaps, you might end up confronting with strong oppositions. But we will purge them, one by one. Anyway, now, we would like you to forget about such trivial matters, and think about the important issue."

"Oh ..."

"Your performance has been really outstanding."

"Has it been? I believe there are those who have overwhelmingly better skills than I do."

"I'm not sure how to explain this. It is not about the overall evaluation. We have noticed your recent momentum. In other words, the rate of acceleration is noticeable."

"But, if I am promoted to a position like that, will I no longer be able to fly

anymore in the future?”

“Umm, that may well be the case. I do not think you will not be able to fly anymore. But the number of your flights will likely to decrease.”

“I am not too crazy about that ...” I put the annoyed look on my face. “It is difficult for me to imagine my not being able to fly.”

“I understand, of course. We have expected that you would say so. Same for everyone. Every pilot says so. However, consider this carefully. I am offering what you will be dealing with in the distant future. Do you know the average period of pilots’ services?”

“Is it about five years or so?”

“Our company’s average is two years and eight months.” Kai said, while gazing at me. “Of course, it is not quite that they quit because they dislike the job. You know what I mean, don’t you? Even pilots who have always performed very well for a long period of time eventually disappear in the end. Why? According to our analytical studies, they are not likely to be able to maintain their concentration forever. What do you think the reason is?”

“I have yet to know it.”

“Well, sure ... You do not know that as of now. It is unlikely that you can expect the situation, because it is what will happen only in the distant future ... In short, I think you will end up being able to get along with aircrafts for longer period of time by retiring from the pilot job at one point. Don’t you think we have to let the younger generations succeed the special talent and remarkable know-hows? Even if you manage to get yourself depleted, you will be replaced with someone else. If that happens to you, it will be equivalent to being depleted.”

“Well, sorry ma’am. What shall I decide, and how? I’m not sure what decision you want me to make.”

“You need not understand that. It would be okay if you keep it vague. We just want you to be prepared for that. We want you to always keep in mind that you will be in the position in the future. I think it is very important. Many of you do not think about the future, do you?”

“No, I do not think about that. I only dream that I will keep improving and

getting better.”

“You might do so physiologically. However, if that remains to be the way you are, don’t you think Kildren can do nothing but literally stay as children? Don’t you want to win your human rights?”

“Human rights?”

“I have long worked at this job. I think I can understand Kildren like you more than the general public does.” Kai smiled like a mother. What I mean is that a mother like her could be somewhere. “We do not demand any immediate answer from you. We just want you to keep that at the corner of your mind. I would like to see you again and talk about that issue several times.”

“Yes, ma’am. I understand.” I nodded tentatively.

She stood up, so I stood up as well and made a salute. Then, she extended her hand. *A handshake, again.* Kai’s hand was larger than mine. It was a dry hand of a grownup.

-6-

The foursome of the Teacher, I, Higasawa, and Kurita were scheduled to fly in the afternoon of the following day.

We took off at a little past 03:00 p.m. Our duty was to scout the shore to the west-southwest. But we hardly flew with the flight of four just for a scouting mission.

While flying, I remembered the event that I experienced last night. Higasawa came to my room and we drank some tea together. We talked this and that about Sanka. I noticed that I was being unnatural when having such a conversation. Like a doll manipulated with strings, I could do nothing but think about myself at times. It was probably because of the talk with Kai in the afternoon on the day before. If that was not the reason, it might be because of the topic that I gave Higasawa under the lighting pole at the night before the previous day. I could not help but think that one of the handshaking moments changed me.

Still, it was at least a better situation than Higasawa talking to the Teacher ... For everyone concerned. I mean, for some reason, I was convinced that it was better for

Higasawa, for me, and probably, for the Teacher, as well.

“I want to have my Sanka improved as soon as possible.” Higasawa was mentioning.

I understood why she felt that way.

Once Higasawa got on this Sanka, she would come to appreciate the real greatness of Sanka. *The hand that is holding a control stick is eager for moving sideways with a swift motion. It wants to roll. It cannot handle its instability and swiftness with which it can tilt to any direction at any time.* That was the way of the aircraft.

The Teacher’s Suiga took the lead. Higasawa and Kurita’s Sankas were flanking both sides. I was flying at the higher altitude, while staying on the tail end of the flight formation.

We encountered a group of enemy aircrafts at the point, which was located 10 kilometers to the destination.

We were about to descend for the scouting duty. So, when we noticed their presences, they were flying almost exactly above us.

“How many enemies?” The Teacher asked.

“Five?” Kurita’s voice.

“No, six.” I corrected.

“They are descending.” Higasawa said.

“Take the course to the north.” The Teacher commanded. “After we fly for two kilometers, we will disperse. Our rendezvous point will be above that coordinate.”

“Roger.”

“Roger.”

“Roger.”

“Over and out.”

It was the situation in which we could just get away. However, considering the difference of the altitudes, we could not avoid being caught up by them. We had enough fuel left in the tank. Above all, we had confidence.

Without changing our formation, we turned to the north. We climbed up to increase our altitudes little by little. Below us were clouds. We sometimes could see the mountaintops. I felt a bit glad, just because it was not the ocean.

We were flying while checking behind us.

As expected, there were six, all of which were twin-boomed aircrafts.

After the Teacher shook his wings, he made a turn to the right.

Kurita was flying straight.

Higasawa turned to the left.

While increasing the angle of climb, I waited for only a little while.

I checked what directions the six enemies behind us were taking.

I hope that two of them will come toward me.

I checked the oil system with the meters and gauges. I checked the control of the flaps with the feeling of my hands.

I tightened my seat belt a little.

I was climbing obliquely.

One enemy was approaching behind me.

Making a gentle turn to the right.

I saw two of the enemies lunging at the Teacher. *What a pity.*

A reverse turn to the left. I deflected the elevators for the pull-up maneuver.

At first, I deliberately made the move look dull.

I turned back in the middle, and made the evasive maneuver swiftly.

The one was turning to the opposite way. The aircraft was the type, which was not designed for slowing down easily.

It had two propellers and two engines. Although it had enough horsepower, the fuselage was destined to be heavy as the result. Its roll-related maneuvers were especially dull. *If it fails to hit me with the first shots, then it should fly while maintaining more distance between it and me.* In my mind, I was formulating the tactics for the enemy. I wondered if the enemy pilot did not know anything about the lightness of Sanka.

As if that was not enough, my Sanka was not a normal, just another Sanka.

Suddenly, something exploded to my right.

A bit later, the blast shook my aircraft. The canopy creaked.

I looked toward the rear side, and saw streaks of white and black smoke intertwining with each other.

Anti-aircraft artilleries.

“Now, what?” I uttered.

Which side?

I wondered if they were shooting indiscriminately, without any regard for difference between the enemies and allies. *That's insane.*

Another one exploded in the airspace at far higher altitude.

Really, I cannot believe this at all.

It was as if some kind of rich person was warning us not to trespass into the space above the garden. It was all that I could think of.

It was meaningless for me to worry too much about that sort of thing.

I don't want to stay long in such a dangerous area. I will take care of business as quickly as possible.

The one was getting behind me again, and lunging obliquely at me while describing a large curve. *It is always the same, old way.*

I pretended to turn to the right, and snapped toward the left. I pretended to fly toward the left direction, and then turned to the right again.

I choked the throttle.

Flaps down.

The enemy was passing by me.

High throttle.

Climbing up.

I rolled several times to check the views around me.

All aircrafts were already looking tiny, but all of them were still moving.

I see no streak of smoke.

Who were dealing with the two enemy aircrafts? *The Teacher and who ...?*

Anyway, I am taking care of mine immediately.

When the one comes back next time, I will bring it down.

I was flying straight while climbing up. As expected, the enemy aircraft was following me from behind, ascending toward me.

The gap between our respective altitudes were now different from that in the previous round.

This time, I was turning to the right from the beginning.

Then, going up.

The opponent would probably pitch itself upward.

I was ascending almost vertically.

Roll, stop, and roll again.

I bow my body backward to check the rear view.

Yeah, come on up here!

I gradually bring my aircraft back to the horizontal flight, and get it inverted.

According to the normal convention, this is what is considered to be the time to control the ailerons.

Lowering the flaps.

The elevators are controlled for the pull-up maneuver.

My aircraft was turning over with a snap.

No stalling.

The enemy hastily rolled over ahead of me.

Too late.

It entered within my shooting range.

Fire.

A flash of light at the nose of the aircraft.

I flew through to the left side. I saw a streak of smoke to my right.

Turning around.

It appeared that the bullets landed on its canopy as well.

The windshield was fogging up in red.

One down.

I rolled over, and dove while being inverted.

I tilted the fuselage to various angles, to check the situation around me.

I headed toward the right.

I saw a Sanka, ahead of which a twin-boomer was flying.

Who? Is it Kurita?

I decided to leave it to him, and made a turn.

I had my aircraft oriented obliquely, and maintained the altitude.

At a low altitude and far away, a streak of black smoke was rising.

The one who was bringing the dogfight to the low altitude was probably the Teacher. His aircraft was equipped with an air-cooled engine, so he preferred the low altitude. I did not see his aircraft clearly.

I flew to the coordinate, from which I was intending to approach the battle theater.

The engine was groaning silently.

Checking the meters.

From the cloud below me to the right side, an aircraft was ascending. It was not a Sanka.

It was a twin-boom aircraft. Then, another one appeared.

It was a Sanka. *Is it Higasawa's?*

I revved up the engine. While rolling to the right, I descended.

Someone shot the bullets.

An aircraft was coming from above.

Where has it been?

Roll over to the left.

While making sure of the opponent sideways, I dragged the enemy aircraft by going full throttle.

Control the rudders.

Unfortunately, it was not slow enough for me to point the nose of my aircraft toward the direction.

The enemy shot at me again.

Before that offensive move, I evaded it by moving downward.

We passed by each other.

That was close. I had a narrow escape.

Without changing its course, the enemy lunged at Higasawa's aircraft.

Has it been the intended target from the start?

Okay. I am on my way.

Turning to the right.

I jettisoned the drop tank.

I retracted the flaps, and accelerated to the maximum.

The engine picked up, and roared.

One enemy was turning around above me.

Higasawa got inside a cloud.

That enemy was now out of sight again.

I do not like the space like this, where the visibility becomes limited.

I started ascending while turning. I had decided to target the one above me.

The opponent started banking, too.

I pushed up the throttle.

I controlled the rudders to slightly yaw my aircraft obliquely, to make sure of the situation.

I brought the attitude of the aircraft back to what it had been right away.

Another enemy was flying below me. I could not tell if it was Sanka or a twin-boom aircraft.

My engine breathed once.

Check the oil pressure with the gauge.

Gradually, I closed the throttle.

The enemy's velocity was faster than mine.

But, the faster velocity would also mean that it had to deal with the stronger centrifugal force.

I pulled the control stick to deflect the elevators a bit as well for the pull-up maneuver. I needed more strength to do so.

My body started feeling the pain.

Still, I was banking even more widely.

My wings became almost vertical with respect to the ground.

Elevator up.

I can't breathe.

Up, even more.

I was entering inside the curvature of the enemy maneuver.

I passed the point at which the enemy could run away to outside the curve.

My Sanka was behind its tail.

It was now within my shooting range.

I'm not shooting yet.

It would try to escape to the right or left.

Its rolling maneuver was very slow.

I closed the distance even more.

Good bye.

Fire.

Break away.

While rolling over, I pointed downward.

One aircraft was climbing. It's a Sanka.

I could not see the other one.

The one which had been shot by me was emitting fire with loud bangs, and lowering its altitude.

It was flying straight for a while, and then could no longer hold it. It started rolling to its side.

Like a flying flounder, it was fluttering and falling downward.

The ascending aircraft was Higasawa's.

I checked above.

I increased the altitude.

I flied inverted a few times to check below.

I could see nothing that was flying around.

Is it over?

I shot down two targets, and the Teacher got two. Kurita and Higasawa took care of two combined, one for each. Now we shot down all of the six enemies in total.

Does it not mean that we have attained a complete victory?

"Boomerang, are you still up there flying?" I heard the Teacher's voice through the radio.

"The Teacher, the two of us are standing by." My voice was full of excitement.

"I got two as well. Any damage?"

"None." I replied.

"This is Christmas. B5. It's raining in Florida." Higasawa's voice cut in.

Christmas was her codename. I did not know what B5 meant, so I took a look at a copied reference sheet attached with a tape on the side of the cockpit. It meant, “I was hit partially.” Then, “It’s raining in Florida” was a code to request an emergency landing.

I was shocked, and approached Higasawa’s Sanka. I had thought that she was doing okay because it was executing a horizontal flight ordinarily.

When I got closer to her, I could surely recognize the traces of its being shot at its front part and the main wing.

“Boomerang, get down to the coordinate, at X2.31, Y0.57. We are C77.”

It seemed to be indicating the nearest airbase. The Teacher and Kurita appeared to be going back to our airbase. Probably, they could not gain the distance to detour with Suigas, after jettisoning their drop tanks.

Hastily, I spread a map to confirm the location.

“Christmas. Tune it to the frequency of Z8.”

“Roger.” Higasawa replied.

I tuned my radio to the frequency used at the base that we were heading for.

I approached her Sanka, and took a look at its canopy.

She looked back at me and waved. She was appearing to be doing okay.

I pointed downward with my finger, and started descending.

She followed me.

I wondered exactly which part of her aircraft was shot. Probably, the oil pressure was going down. Or, it might have been the fuel system. I was hoping that she could make it.

We were sinking into the clouds.

-7-

The climate below the clouds was not bad.

The clouds ahead of us were red.

The lower half of my field of vision was dominated by a deep black forest.

At times, rivers and narrow paths appeared in sight, but disappeared in a moment.

After flying for about 20 minutes, we had entered a safety zone. We could contact with the base and confirm our coordinates. Both the climate and the direction of the wind were good. We were about 10 minutes of flight away from the airbase.

“What parts of your aircraft were shot?” Since we were released from the restrictions of the radio, I turned down the volume to the lowest level and asked her the question immediately.

She did not respond immediately. I guessed that she was adjusting the radio, too.

“After being shot from behind, I got the bullets on the main wing and a part of the fuselage.” I started hearing Higasawa’s voice. “Ah, I was not being myself, really.” She clucked her tongue. “Shame on me. How could I fail this way?”

“How is the control?”

“The flaps are in the asymmetric split situation, and they are not working. And then, umm, I’m not sure. The oil pressure seems to be okay. It might be doing fine, as of now.”

“Okay, okay.” I said. “You don’t need flaps. I mean, it is not that your aircraft is loaded with bombs. Show me your smooth landing.”

“I wonder if the landing gears will come out properly.”

“You will do fine.”

We lowered the altitude gradually. The runway was not visible yet. A small town was located at a short distance away from us. Vehicles were running on the road. From the point of view of people living on the ground, we would look like we were playing around. In fact, they might be right.

I kept watching Higasawa’s Sanka.

The canopy was reflecting the orange color of the setting sun.

Its main wings were bent around the both edges. The wing configuration was similar to that of birds.

A beautiful aircraft, indeed.

“Ms. Kusanagi ... how much more do we have to fly?”

I was taken by surprise, for my real name was called.

“Just a little bit more.”

“Oh ... This may be it.”

“What?”

I accelerated forward a bit, and positioned my aircraft beside hers.

The canopy was so glary with reflection that I could not see what was inside.

“What’s wrong? What may be what, you said?”

When I thought of moving to the opposite side, Higasawa’s Sanka slightly banked to the left. As if it was slipping, it was descending in that direction.

“Hey! What are you doing? You are heading to the wrong way.”

But, she was not coming back.

I checked the forward view. I recognized the runway lights that were as small as dots.

We had two or three kilometers to go.

The altitude was 500 meters.

Higasawa had already descended by at least 100.

“Christmas! Christmas!”

I controlled the wings to lean toward the direction.

I was following her aircraft.

“What’s happening?”

No reply.

She had descended to 300, the dangerous altitude.

“Mayday. Mayday.” I raised the volume. “This is Boomerang. About two kilometers from the base. One of us is going down.”

“Roger. We see you. Christmas, do you hear us?”

It was going down even more.

Pastoral fields spread widely below us.

I saw a straight, narrow road.

Several small, white buildings could be seen.

I was flying right beside her.

“Higasawa!” I shouted.

The ground was approaching.

Her aircraft was still leaning to one side.

“Pull it up!”

Her Sanka was pulled toward the ground.

Its main wing touched the ground first and then the aircraft was spinning around.

Its nose was slammed against the ground, and it was spinning around even more.

The wing snapped.

In a moment, it was behind me.

I made a turn at a low altitude.

“Higasawa! Do you hear me?”

Dust was rising from the crash site.

The fuselage, which was upside down, was buried in the mud.

The smoke was not emitting.

“It has touched the ground now.” I reported. “Dispatch the personnel immediately!”

“Roger. We are already on our way.”

“It is doing all right. It is not that terrible.” I added. “It is not burning. The ground looks soft. But, hurry up!”

“Boomerang, are you still continuing the landing procedure?”

“Have you confirmed the crash-landing point?”

“We have. Boomerang, are you still continuing the landing procedure?”

“I am landing.”

“Then, confirm the approach course.”

I made a final turn, while centering the curve on the crashed Sanka on the pastoral field, and headed for the airbase.

-8-

I landed on the runway and was taxiing toward a standby area, when a light 4-wheel-drive vehicle was coming toward me. I pushed open the canopy and stopped the engine. I put on the brakes to make a sudden stop. I took off the belt in haste, and then got out of the aircraft. I jumped off from the main wing.

The one driving the 4x4 was a man who was wearing a dirty blue jumpsuit and a pair of glasses. Once I got on a passenger's seat, the vehicle started running again.

The 4x4 kept running, while the view of the runway was to the side. Hangars with low domes could be seen here and there. I had not been to this airbase before. I was not sure how many fighter aircrafts were stationed at the base. We had the rule, according to which we were not allowed to ask about such matters. I said nothing.

The one who was driving also said nothing. I was fortunate not to have to hear someone's words in a situation like this, for a bit of consolation. Of course, we would feel it over and over, if we survived in this industry for a long time. Anybody would become taciturn.

At the edge of the runway, irrigation water was running. We crossed a small bridge above it. Meadowland continued for a while, and then we were getting closer to iron fences. There were three 4x4s being parked. There was a truck, too. A gatekeeper opened the gate for us. The 4x4 accelerated and got on a road that crossed the pastoral field straight. A small private house could be seen in the vicinity. Although the sun had set already, it was not too dark to the level that we needed to turn on the light. Still, the lights of utility poles beside the road were starting to glow dimly.

Another road was in the far distance. Occasionally, large vehicles were running on it. It was the road that I could see from the sky. Several buildings were standing beyond the road. Some of their neon signboards were already lit. At both sides of the road that we were now going along, the fields stretched all the way. We crossed

over narrow waterways a couple of times. I saw a water gate, too. No one was working. The harvest season was already over.

While driving on the ground, I realized that we had to cover quite a long distance. The destination was still not in our sight yet.

I had already calmed myself down. I was thinking of the worst-case scenario as well. After checking the crash-landing site, I would have to go back to the runway and return to my home airbase. There, I had to report the situation to Goda and the Teacher.

I decided not to think too much about Higasawa. But, only for a brief moment, her face that I saw at the previous night flashed back. I thought that she was more honest, more serious, and more talented than the first impression that I had on her. *Why do I try to fix my evaluation on her like that?* I myself felt that to be strange.

Finally, the crash-landing site appeared in my sight.

About five cars were parked on the road. Their yellow lights were blinking. Around 30 people seemed to be gathering there. There were even more vehicles that were lined up along the road to the other side. It meant that general people were gathering to see the crash site as bystanders.

The aircraft pieces of the crash wreckage were scattered at the lower parts of the pastoral field. Just the part around the nose was located at the point closest to me. The main wings and the engine parts were slightly farther away. Each of them was half-buried in the earth. Due to white fire extinguishant, I could say the vicinity was almost completely covered with white. Only that part in the field looked hollow compared to the surrounding, the earth of which was elevated.

The situation was much worse than what I expected when I saw it from the sky. This Sanka would not need to be upgraded. It was going to be scrapped.

When the 4x4 stopped, I jumped off and was running on the footpath between the fields.

I ran down the lower part of the ground, and kept on moving on the soft earth surface.

On the footpath, a crowd of people was gathering.

The number of those who were near the aircraft was approximately 10.

Of course, I looked for her.

She was already on a stretcher.

She was tightly fastened to the stretcher with belts.

She was not moving.

A thin blue sheet was placed on her face.

I saw her hand.

It appeared to be charred black.

I pulled off the sheet, and saw her face.

Her hair was dyed in white with the fire extinguishing agent.

She looked as if she were sleeping.

I sighed.

One man was approaching me. He was the only person who was wearing a uniform. I stood up and made a salute to him.

“Sir, my name is Kusanagi.” I introduced myself.

“I know. I’m Honda.”

“It is just unfortunate.”

“She did not die from the crash itself.” He uttered quietly.

If she had died during her flight, at least I could find solace in the way she lost her life, for a bit of consolation.

I covered her face with the blue sheet again.

“She was splendid, because she got back all the way to this location.” Honda uttered.

“Certainly.” I nodded.

I thought she was splendid.

Sincerely.

She had been splendid, because she did not complain to me about her injury.

How crazy!

You tried to look cool ...

An ambulance was backing up into the closest road.

The personnel in the jumpsuits were approaching the scene to carry the stretcher. I stepped back. She was lifted up effortlessly, and they climbed up the footpath.

Onlookers were surrounding and observing it.

I looked up at the sky.

It was still in crimson.

But, half of the sky was painted in the color of night.

“What a pity ...” Someone said.

I looked at my shoes once. I was standing on mud.

Higasawa’s face was not smudged.

There was nothing pitiful about her.

She looked beautiful.

She was more beautiful than my shoes and than anybody else’s shoes.

I climbed up the footpath, and approached the ambulance.

I stood at the point between her and the onlookers, to make sure that I could avoid seeing her as much as possible.

“What a pity.” Another one said again.

I made a sigh once.

“There is no pity!” I turned around, and shouted loudly.

I closed in on them. All of them stepped back.

“Stupid idiots! Go home! Get out of here right now!”

Honda was standing in front of me.

He was glaring at me.

I nodded slightly, and closed my eyes.

Approximately three seconds.

Then, I was breaking away.

Breathing slowly, I walked down straight into the muddy part without seeing the ambulance.

I wanted to leave the vicinity, by continuing to walk just like that.

From the vicinity.

I wish I could fly.

To the sky, where no one is.

-9-

By the time I returned to my aircraft, I had already switched my mindset. I had the fuel tank filled up, and had taken off. Although it was completely dark on the ground, dim light still remained above the clouds and the large moon was rising.

Losing a coworker was a daily occurrence, of course. Being shot down, and moving to a distant place after being transferred to a different department did not make any difference in the sense that the teammate would just disappear from my sight either way. They were both the same things for me. There was no difference. There were many of those whom I met only once and never after that.

However, I just occasionally thought that it was such a waste.

To lose such great talent and such impressive pool of resource accumulation.

At least, there was no pity.

That's just completely different.

The notion of pity was completely wrong.

Absolutely wrong.

I believe she did not want others to sympathize with her.

Should we not praise her more?

Was she not the center of our envy?

I wonder what point of the argument is wrong.

When I landed on our airbase, it was totally dark like the bottom of the sea. I made a U-turn and was taxiing with the rumbling sound toward the hangar. In front of the shutter, Sasakura was waiting.

I was watching his mooring the aircraft, while smoking a cigarette.

“Have you eaten a meal?” Sasakura asked me in the middle of the process.

“Not yet.” I replied.

“I thought you had already eaten somewhere.”

“It wasn’t served at the other base.” I told him.

I trampled the cigarette and started walking. I was heading for the office building. The dining hall was lit, but no one could be seen from the lobby. Climbing up the stairs, I knocked at the door of Goda’s office.

“Oh, I have been expecting you.” Goda stood up from his desk.

I sat in a sofa and reported the situation of the crash landing to him. Straightforwardly, I explained what happened sequentially. It was as if I was dreaming. *Am I talking about the dream? Or, is this very moment a dream?* I was not sure.

The desk behind Goda. The window frames behind the desk. And the lighting reflected on the windowpanes. I was feeling my existence, which was vaguely seeing them. Like a telescope to observe the heavenly bodies, I was feeling myself distant.

“Thank you for your report.” Goda said at the end. “The Teacher said he wanted to talk to you.”

“Oh?” I was surprised. I focused on his face.

“So, visit his room later.”

“Yes, sir.”

I will probably be scolded by him, I felt instinctively.

For some reason, I felt that way.

Goda did not get angry. Thinking about it carefully, I did not have any responsibility for her death. So, it was natural ... Then, I wondered why I thought

so.

I might have had to give Higasawa advice about how to handle Sanka. Had my instruction to her not been enough? No, I did not think that it was not enough. I gave her all of what I could tell her by words and I did not have anything to hide from her.

Before leaving the building, I checked the dining hall. Inside the food-serving counter was still lit. I walked toward that part of the dining hall, and saw the elderly woman sitting alone.

“Oh, hey.” After she saw my face, she came closer to me. “Would you like something to eat?”

“No. Sorry about that.” I smiled as much as possible.

“Well, well. How modest.” The elderly smiled, too. I did not dislike the smile. It cheered me up a little. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing in particular.”

“Cheer up.”

I walked to the billet and climbed up the stairs. It was the first time for me to climb up that stairway. My destination was the innermost room on the second floor. Any of the rooms on the second floor seemed to be vacant. No name plate. The lights were out. I knocked on the door at the far end of the corridor, and waited.

The door was opened inside. The Teacher was standing there. He made one step back and invited me inside.

The room was smaller than mine. By the windows was a bed. On the desk were several books. On the floor were many books being piled up. He sat on the bed and showed a chair at the desk for me.

I told him about what had happened after I and Higasawa separated from the Teacher and Kurita. It was the same report as what I had told Goda. We were yet to get the official report about Higasawa. So, I gave the Teacher exactly what I heard from Honda.

He picked up a cigarette and lit it.

He stood up, and picked up a small table from the space by the windows, carried

it, and put it in front of me. Then, he dug out an ashtray under the pile of books on the desk and placed it on the table, too. It was already filled with cigarette butts. It looked as if it was full of human carcasses.

“Have a smoke, if you want to,” he said quietly. He stretched his arm backward, looked toward the ceiling on the bed, and exhaled the smoke. He looked as if he was trying to conceal with the smoke the florescent light that was hung from the ceiling.

“The fuselage of her aircraft was so damaged that I could not easily tell what part had been shot and how. By the time I reached there, they had already been covered with fire extinguishant.”

“There will be a report pertaining to that.”

“After that, I went back to my aircraft and took off immediately. That’s all.” I finished my report.

“Thank you.”

I took out a cigarette from my pocket and lit it.

“Do you think that I am the one who is responsible for that?” He asked.

“What?” I leaned my head to one side. “No, how could I think so?”

“If I started going to the airspace to support her a little earlier, I could have made it on time.”

“That was the case for me as well.”

“You were flying far away from her. I was closer to her.”

“I should have made the decision, when two enemies were heading for and targeting her. Teacher, you confronted two enemies from the start. But, I was facing just one. Therefore, if someone had to hold the responsibility for Higasawa’s death, I am that person.”

“It is not about the matter of numbers. To begin with ..., if someone admits the responsibility, it cannot change whatever have happened.”

“You are exactly correct.”

“Why do you fight?”

“Sorry?”

“Why don’t you quit?”

“Well, sir ...” I pulled my chin in, and looked into him. “I do not quit, because I love to fly.”

“If you just want to fly, you can choose many other career options.”

“I want to fly freely.”

“Can you fly freely?”

“Yes, sir.” I nodded. “I’m free when I am fighting. I can fly anywhere. I can fly as I wish.”

“Do you think so? Do you not just dodge the bullets? To shoot at the targets, you push yourself hard, only to live on the edge by barely squeezing your way through the attacks.”

“Umm ...” I sat up straight. “Then, Teacher, may I ask you why you fight?”

“I have no idea.” He shook his head slightly.

“No idea?”

“No, I’m not sure. Even if I try to quit, I cannot do so for some reason. Probably, I have such a disease.”

“What do you mean by ‘disease’ ...?”

“It’s not normal. It’s abnormal.”

“I do not think so, sir.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Since we have the reasons to fight for, so many people put so much energy to prepare, make efforts, and devote their lives to fight.”

“That is correct. There are people who accept it tacitly.”

“If there is no reason to fight for, then those who have fallen to their demise are indeed pitiful.”

“Yes.” The Teacher nodded.

Silence.

The streaks of cigarette smoke were hovering between us.

“You are the number-one pilot among those whom I know. You will probably surpass me in not-so-distant future.” The Teacher said. “Don’t waste your life. If you have any hesitation, even if it is subtle, do not fly. You should quit this job immediately.”

“I don’t have any hesitation. I ...” I stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray on the table. “I respect you. So, I beg you ... I would like you not to talk to me about such a subject.”

“What kind of subject are you speaking of?”

“I mean, umm, you know, something passive ... Or ..., something negative ...”

“Do you think it is negative? I’m not the type of person whom you think that I am. I suspect that you are fabricating something in your mind with your imagination, embellishing your dream, and fantasizing things.”

Then, he smiled with his lips curved.

“For example, right now, I’m thinking of going to the downtown and getting laid with a woman. Even though I have just lost my coworker, that is what I do.” He snorted. “Now, we should call it a day.”

I stood up silently, bowed, and left the room.

While walking on the corridor, I felt as if my body were floating.

My shoulder touched the wall. I put my hand on the wall to support my body.

I was staggering.

I was like an aircraft whose tail assembly was blown away.

I went outside. I looked for a place to sit at.

I cannot stand anymore.

I sat down on a curb at the edge of a parking space, and sighed.

It is painful.

What is painful?

I'm not sure.

Anyway, I felt something heavy.

A night-light was far away, and the vicinity around me was sunk in the darkness.

I was not sure if my feet were actually touching the ground.

What is this feeling?

Where has this instability come from?

Of course, it hasn't come from outside of me.

I was looking for the reason why I lost the stabilizer. I had to find it out and shoot it down as soon as possible.

It was not Higasawa's sleeping face.

It was not the compliment from the Teacher, either.

No. No! Someone was shouting.

No. No! The one was shaking its head.

For some reason, my pulse became rapid, and it was getting harder for me to breathe.

Even though I was on the ground, I was getting excited.

I looked up at the sky.

I was intentionally moving my body slowly.

The stars were sparse and the clouds were thin.

The moon was hiding behind the roof of the billet. The direction was hazy and bright.

My pulse was fast.

The engine was generating low, groaning sounds.

My thoughts shifted, from one phase to another.

The propeller blades were slicing the air.

It was the same excitement as I had when I controlled my aircraft to lean to one side when chasing the enemy aircraft's trajectory.

What is this feeling?

I'm not sure.

I thought of meeting Sasakura, and stood up once.

But, I sat down again.

What was coming up to my throat stopped at the point.

Was it the cause of a little trouble that I was having with my breathing?

I felt as if I was being squeezed.

I put my hands on my neck, and attempted to apply pressure on it.

I inhaled, and exhaled.

I tried to apply pressure on my neck a little bit more to make sure if what I was doing was working.

I repeated the process.

Why am I feeling the resistance by this much?

In short, is this the resistance against living in general, or living on the ground? Why can't we keep on flying forever? Shall I go to the hangar immediately and take off with Sanka? As long as the fuel lasts.

But, in the end, I will fall.

On the ocean.

Then, I will be sinking.

Surrounded by the dark, sea water.

No air.

Agonizing.

There is none but air in the sky.

So, I wish I could die while flying, like Higasawa did.

What will be falling will be only my body.

I guess my feelings and heart will stay in the sky.

I assume that the heart has the same weight as the air.

It can stay, probably.

I heard the door of the billet opening.

A silhouette was moving and walking toward the parking lot.

It was coming toward me.

It cannot see me.

It stopped in front of a vehicle, and unlocked the door.

I stood up quietly, and walked toward it.

The starter cranked up, and the engine raced.

I touched the door of the passenger seat and opened it.

I got inside the car.

The man in the driver's seat was looking at me.

He said nothing.

I also said nothing.

10 seconds.

The idling of the engine.

The cams' movements.

The transfer through the transmission belt.

Did I wish that this engine would stop in the middle? Or, did I want this engine to pick up and send me somewhere? Or, was I hoping for another, completely different thing?

Anyway, the darkness beyond the windshield was an absolutely different world from the sky above the clouds. I wish I could escape from such a terrible place.

I imagined myself making a sign of the cross.

As if it was taking off from the ground, the vehicle started running quietly.

I kept silent in the car.

I could not say anything.

There were not too many words that were coming up to my throat. They were the repetition of the remarks, such as “I do not want you to go and take me anywhere.” But each of the words was shattered before it materialized into a spoken word.

At times, I looked at the profile of the Teacher who was at the wheel.

If we were in a cockpit, I could not even imagine how much better it would have been.

I wish the road lit by the headlight were above the clouds.

I was only imagining such a situation.

If this were an airplane ...

I wanted him to bring me to anywhere.

I don't have to go back anymore.

I wanted to fly forever and ever.

However.

The rumbling sound from the rolling tires made me sink.

Over, and over, and over again. I was still alive.

Then, this place was the bottom of the sky.

I was now crawling on the ground.

I'm a pilot.

I'm dying.

The one next to me was the genius, also known as the ace.

Those in the car were a male and a female.

I did not know where we were heading for.

After all, it should be somewhere on the Earth.

Probably, a dirty place.

It was at night. The road was dark. Light could not reach far.

The bugs jumping out from the meadowland.

They collided with the windshield, and then were smashed.

The heater was a little hot, which made me sweat a bit.

How can there be only such lukewarm air?

I could only forget the soreness of my throat occasionally.

A small sound from the radio. *Is it blues, or rock?*

As if we were unwillingly dominated by the noncommittal rhythm.

Still, I kept silent.

It continues.

Forever.

Reluctantly, it continues.

Forever.

The place we had arrived at was in a mountain area. It was like an aged mansion.

After getting off the vehicle, I felt that the chilly air was comfortable to me to a certain extent.

A huge door of the mansion opened, and a well-style entrance hall could be seen inside.

One woman wearing a long skirt appeared. She smiled viscously at the Teacher.

“Oh?” She looked at my face. “Is she your companion?”

She was Fuko with white platinum hair.

I said nothing.

She seemed to remember nothing. She might have pretended to do so. Or, she was not Fuko that I knew.

“Hey, what’s wrong? You are showing a frightful look to me.” Fuko laughed.

The Teacher said nothing. He was walking up the stairway. Soft steps were covered with a carpet. The carpet looked as if it had soaked up alcohol that was

spilt by someone. The carpet had already given up entirely.

He opened a heavy-looking door, and we entered the room.

The Teacher took off his jacket, put a cigarette in his mouth, and sat on a chair by the window.

I was just standing at the center of the room.

That was the only spot which I could stand on. On the right, by the wall, I saw a bookshelf, a desk, and a table lamp with a shade, and a cabinet. On the left, there were a bed and a side table. That's all.

"Then, what are we going to do?" The Teacher asked.

It was dark.

Only when I lit a cigarette, I could see his face looking downward.

That's all.

"Am I showing a frightful look?" I tried to let out my voice. It turned out to become a voice quite well.

"I don't see your face." He answered.

"Why is it dark like this?"

"Shall I turn on the light?"

"No, I like this situation."

I was watching the red light of the cigarette the Teacher was smoking.

Red.

That's all.

"I want you to make a decision on one thing, before I am done with smoking this cigarette. The woman you saw earlier will come to this room."

"You mean, Fuko?"

"Yes, Fuko. As soon as she comes here, please get out of this room." The Teacher said.

"Why?"

“Why not?” The Teacher smiled a bit.

In a moment, I felt as if I became a bat in a limestone cave.

Or, was it caused by the lime that has dissolved out of my body?

I felt I could not move my legs.

“I don’t want to get out.”

“It is what you can decide to do ... So, shall I go to another room?”

“I’m sorry.” I apologized immediately. “Do not get angry, please.”

“I’m not angry.”

I walked to the door, opened it, and went outside.

The place was bright.

But, it was cloudy.

Fuko was standing in the corridor.

Three more persons were a little away from her. All of them were females.

“What’s going on?” Fuko asked while laughing.

“Umm, do not enter the room, please.” I said. “I beg you.”

Fuko widened her eyes. Her head was slowly and slightly tilting on one side.

“Then?” Fuko’s lips formed a subtle smile.

I nodded slightly, and broke away from her.

Without changing the direction, I then walked backward.

I turned back, and opened the door.

I entered the dark room again.

The Teacher was in the bed. He was still smoking the cigarette.

I took off my jacket in haste.

Then, I unbuttoned my shirt.

I felt the acceleration, and I started having trouble with breathing.

I could not see meters and gauges to check.

I did not have a drop tank to jettison.

Episode 4: Turn

The gigantic bird will initiate the first flight from the summit ridge of the great Monte Ceceri. Then, it will saturate the universe with wonders, and fill the books with the fame. Long live the eternal glory of the place of his origin.

This excerpt is from a manuscript originally written in Italian by Leonardo da Vinci.

-1-

Instead of Higasawa's Sanka, Kurita's Sanka was modified. After that, one more new type of Sanka came to the airbase. It was allotted to Kusurida. There was no extra pilot for replacement. No big project was being planned for a while.

The Teacher was often absent for duty-trips. I had not flown with him since then. Whenever we were on a scouting mission, my Sanka and Kurita's flew together. If we needed another for an escort duty, Kusurida joined the pair. In either case, I played the leading role.

Sasakura devoted himself completely to modifying engines. When he was doing maintenance works, he seemed to be conducting experiments of some sort all the time. Still, experiments that could be done on the ground were limited. In the final phase of any experiment, trials with the use of actual aircrafts would have to be implemented. In that case, how did he want to conduct that part of his experiment? I did not want to be a guinea pig for him. So, I had to make sure not to get too close or be friendly to him, who was into explaining his experiments enthusiastically. I felt that one part of me who behaved defensively about this issue was like my twin sibling who had suddenly popped up. Anyway, the frequency of my visits to the hangar was decreasing more than before.

The elderly woman at the cafeteria gradually decreased the amount of dish for me. But, I could not always finish all of them. Still, my health condition was not bad.

When I was off-duty on a fine day, I passed by the hangar, turned at the edge of the runway, and walked toward the bank on the other side of the runway. It was the place where I talked with the Teacher, when I came to this airbase. I sat at the same place that he was lying down on. I watched birds flying in the sky, until I got tired

of doing so.

Of course, the Teacher did not come to the place. Nobody came.

I spent about one hour there and went back. When I was on the return path, I was repeatedly simulating in my mind the new flight patterns. I thought I would try it in the next opportunity. I was not sure how such ideas would be materialized as results in the end. In actual combat situations, there would not be any time for me to recall such things while being too busy with dogfights. However, as I came to think later, new patterns ended up being adopted before I knew it, or the similar methods were applied to actual combats in many cases. Therefore, the proper incorporation was evident.

About one month of uneventful period of time in which nothing happened had passed.

Recently, the person whom I talked to most frequently was a man named Kurita. Even so, this man was very taciturn, and I could only have a simple conversation with him. That was interesting to me. Then, I often witnessed the occasions, in which Sasakura, whom I had not talked with as of late, would start conversing with Kurita and explaining things to him. So, I could start the conversation with Kurita about what Sasakura was doing recently. As long as I heard it through his filter, there was no harm done. I could say it was an ideal way of communication.

The Teacher was still being the same, old himself. He seemed to team up with the Suiga pilots to form a team. I no longer teamed up and flew with him.

After that, two more Sankas were added to the airbase. Suiga became a backup aircraft. I organized the Sanka team, whereas the Teacher took care of the Suiga team.

I did not get the chance to talk to the Teacher alone. Even though we met in the airbase, we could still pass by each other without feeling any mental resistance. Although it might be a weird thing, I thought we, pilots of fighter aircrafts, might be blessed with such casual mindset. I would think so, as if it were somebody else's business.

In the first place, I could not understand what I had done that night. Still, I did not have any regret. In that situation, I could do nothing but fly like that. In any case, we flew along the most suitable route. The act of flying itself had such a

meaning. It was just about the route appearing as a result in the most appropriate situation, in which everything was optimally balanced in ideal ways. If it was too fast, it would turn by drawing a big arc. If it was too slow, it would fall downward. That was all there was to it.

Although I did not think about doing the same thing again, I was certainly reminded of it several times.

Then ...

As I knew it.

It overlapped with the face of sleeping Higasawa.

Perhaps, was it Higasawa, not I, who got into the 'Teacher's bed? She might have been possessing my body.

Could it be that it was her very last flight?

Then, I left the base for a two-week duty-trip, in order to join a maritime military training program. I was selected as the participant, after voluntarily applying for the candidacy on my own free will.

I got on board a drill aircraft carrier. I participated in the training every day with unfamiliar folks. Once I flew, there was no difference. Only during the takeoff and landing procedures, things were different, just during such moments.

Additionally, if anything, we attended lectures more often than we participated in trials of practical skills. I had to watch the slides, while struggling to stay awake by fighting the terrible urge for sleep. The situation in which I did not have to look around made the boredom swell overwhelmingly, and it apparently triggered my drowsiness.

During the program, a helicopter landed on the aircraft carrier and a man was getting out of it. Then, I was summoned to the captain's room, and met the man. He said he belonged to the information bureau at the headquarters, but did not introduce himself. Although the man wearing the uniform was young, his rank was higher than the captain's.

"About the 'Teacher, I have something to ask you."

I was sitting on a chair. The captain excused us and only the two of us were left

alone.

“Do you feel anything suspicious regarding his behavior?”

“What do you mean by ‘suspicious?’” I asked back.

“For example, he seems to go out periodically, to probe into something, or to be frequently visited by someone.”

“Excuse me, sir. May I ask why I am now being asked about that?”

“I have come here to ask you. I’m here not to be asked by you.”

He was staring at me with his cold gaze.

“I apologize.” Taking my eyes off him, I was looking at my knees. “I’m not particularly close to the Teacher. About such matters, I have noticed nothing.”

“Then, who is close to him?”

“Well ..., in my opinion, he seems to be close to no one.”

“According to Goda, he thinks you are the person who knows him best. I heard you were treated by him with favor.”

“He is not such type of person. I cannot be treated by him with favor. Even when I want him to teach me, he hardly talks about such issues.”

“So, does he still talk to you about such topics at times?”

“Yes. Really in few occasions, though.”

“Have you gone out to somewhere with him?”

“I haven’t.” I answered immediately.

“Not even once?”

“Never.”

“Okay.” The man nodded. “Thank you. That’s all. I would like you not to tell anyone about meeting me today and being asked about him. I hear that you are the promising prospect of the company. I hope you live up to our expectations.”

He stood up and held out his hand. I also stood up and shook his hand over the table.

Then, I went back to my room in the cabin. My private room was very limited in space. From a small, round cabin window, I could see the ocean and the sky equally. I did not have time to chat with anyone. I did not feel the pain about being alone. Rather, it is the opposite feeling that I had.

For takeoffs and landings of the aircraft carrier, we used Sanka, pusher aircrafts, and twin-engined middle-sized aircrafts. I had no problem with using Sanka. But the twin-engined aircraft was oversized and a little difficult to deal with. It was staggeringly heavy. Moreover, an extra personnel would get on the cockpit, sit right next to me, and command me to do this and that. It was the worst pain for me. It was maybe because I was not familiar with the situation in which I was with somebody else in the sky. I had believed that the sky was the place where I could be alone. Come to think of it, the crews getting on bombers were always with others. I completely forgot there was such type of sky for others. It was similar to the way I believed that the bed was always the place only for myself. After I experienced the night with someone else in the bed, it would become a different place from what I had known up to that point. When I woke up in the morning, I found myself looking sideways. This way, various places were getting polluted one after another. That was what I came to realize.

After the training session ended without any trouble, I went back to the airbase.

Sasakura procured a truck from somewhere. On the night I came back to the base, I went to that particular bar beside the bridge with Sasakura and Kurita by riding on the truck. It was a boisterous engine that made explosive sounds sporadically.

The bar was quiet on the day. No other customer. It was quiet because the jukebox was broken, a man in the counter explained. The same elderly man with gray hair. He looked weaker than when I saw him in the previous occasion. He seemed to be already dying. I did not think it was because of the broken jukebox.

About when coffee and meat pie were brought to the three of us, I heard a car stopping in the parking lot, and then high-pitched laughter followed.

The door was opened and a few women entered. There were three. The last woman was wearing a yellow hat. The three of them were about to sit down at a table near the counter. In the middle of the process, the woman with the yellow hat

stopped while staring at me. I too looked back at her and noticed something. It's Fuko. Since she was wearing very different makeup, I failed to identify her at first.

Fuko burst out into laughter, and chuckled. The other two women compared my face with hers. I thought she was coming to me, but she sat at the table and took her eyes off me.

“Who is that?” Another woman asked her.

They started whispering something. They were glancing at us, but not laughing anymore. They seemed to understand the minimum level of manners. Rather, they knew that it was the very least of what they had to do as a part of their job.

The women started drinking beer. Sasakura talked about engines and Kurita was listening to it. I was staying silent, and sometimes heard the voices from the women's table. Still, I was not looking at the table anymore.

After we drank up the coffee, we left the bar and got into the truck. Then, we drove toward the airbase. Sasakura was driving it. I did not think I wanted to play the role of the driver, because I felt a woman might be sleeping on the road.

By the time we got out of the truck, it was past 21:00. Toward the hangar, Sasakura and Kurita were walking. I guess that they wanted to continue their conversation. I parted from them and headed for my room. On the way, I was passing by the building that housed the Teacher's room.

I saw the light of the room at the edge of the second floor. The curtains were drawn on the window. I had never visited his room since that night. Moreover, had I not even talked to the Teacher? I tried to recall it, but I did not have any memory of that.

I wondered what I had learned from him?

I thought I had gotten the grasp of something since I met him.

However ...

I did not recall the advice from him or the simulation of his techniques being useful in direct ways or paying dividends practically.

If anything, his warning me about my dangerous stalling maneuver during the first flight mission with him would qualify as his only contribution to teaching me. I had

not resorted to applying the same technique since then. He said my view was narrow. I was not sure how I could widen my view. Looking around swiftly to all directions was about as much as what I could do.

Do I have anywhere else to look at?

I wonder where it is.

I wonder where the things that I could not see are.

But.

Perhaps, it is ...

It might be what I do not want to see.

While thinking about such things, I was back to my room. Flipping the switch of the light, I spread my vision of the room silently like a vinyl sheet for picnic. I took off my jacket and fell down on a cold bed. Since I had not slept in a bed for a long time, I was glad that I could feel it.

-2-

I was summoned by Goda next morning, and then I heard that a woman named Kai would come from the headquarters in the afternoon. It seemed that she was scheduled to visit the airbase to talk to me. I felt slightly depressed.

I got out of the office building and headed for the hangar. Since I had not seen Sanka for a long time, I wanted to clean the cockpit for the first time in a while. However, when I arrived at the front side of the hangar, a dull explosive sound echoed.

I was startled, and ducked under the shutter in haste to enter the hangar. I looked inside it, and no one was there. There appeared to be no abnormal situation. My Sanka was covered with a sheet.

I got out of the hangar again. An incinerator was located behind the hangar. I suspected that something exploded inside it, and I went behind the hangar.

As I got closer to the incinerator, the vicinity was filled with white smoke. Even though I thought it was from the incinerator, I was making an incorrect assumption. Sasakura with goggles was walking toward me while coughing.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Nothing.” Sasakura answered, put the goggles over his head, placed his hand near his mouth, and waved the other hand like a fan.

“What is this smoke?”

“Don’t worry. It’s okay.”

As the smoke was dispersed and became thinner, I saw an unfamiliar stuff near the backdoor of the hangar. A steel stand was assembled, and something was placed on it. Below the stand, a plastic container that looked like a tank was placed. Several tubes stretched out from the container, and were linked to the machine fixed on the stand.

“What’s that?” I asked Sasakura.

“I think it’s okay now.”

“What is okay?”

Sasakura was lowering the goggles to his eyes again, and walked toward the apparatus. Then, he pulled out a trim pipe sticking out from the tank.

“May I get closer to it?” I asked.

“Yeah, probably.” Sasakura turned to me, and nodded.

I thought of deciding not to do so, but the curiosity inside me prevailed and I approached it.

The one fixed on the stand was a revolving mechanism, and it looked like a compressor. It was charred black. Probably, he was conducting an experiment of some sort.

“What is this machine for? Compressor?”

“Kind of.”

“I get it. Is it a mechanism that is designed for compressing intake air?”

“That’s one of the purposes.”

“Are you trying to mount such a big thingy to an engine?” I laughed. “You need to reduce the size, more and more.”

“Nah. This one itself is an engine.”

“What?”

I looked at the mechanism again, but I could not understand it at all. I thought he was just kidding. Perhaps, it was a model. He was probably testing it in the simulation of the reduced size.

Sasakura was showing a troubled look, and started dealing with the machine with a tool in his hand.

“I am getting inside the cockpit.” I told him.

“Yeah.” Sasakura answered absent-mindedly.

I left him behind, got around to the front side of the hangar, and ducked under the shutter to go inside. I could have entered from the backdoor. However, if I did so, I had to walk through Sasakura’s living space. I decided not to do so.

I took off the sheet carefully, and got into the cockpit. It was as cold as usual. With my arms crossed above my head, I closed my eyes. If I sat there and closed my eyes, I could see the sky immediately. It’s mysterious. I also felt the vibration of the aircraft.

I savored the feeling over and over again.

This is fun.

I got outside once, and picked up clean waste cloth, and brought it to the cockpit. I cleaned the interior of the cockpit with it. I wiped the instrument panels and meters, and scrubbed the inner surface of the windshield. It was not that dust and litters were there, for the adjustment of the mechanism, oiling the machine, and the basic cleaning were what the mechanics were assigned to do the works of, of course. I did not have a habit of posting photographs, inscribing letters, or hanging lucky charms inside the cockpit, so it was neat and clean. So was the Teacher’s cockpit, I heard. Those getting on aircrafts such as bombers seemed to decorate themselves with lucky charms or talismans, even though I did not know too many of such examples. I wondered if not too many fighter pilots believed in that sort of superstitious thing. Or, were they having faith in their skills more than in God?

I heard something and raised my head to see outside. The one entering the hangar

was a familiar mechanic. I did not know his name.

He looked around repeatedly, and finally noticed me in the aircraft.

“Where is Mr. Sasakura?” He asked.

“Conducting an incomprehensible experiment at the back of the hangar.” I answered.

“Oh, again?” He smiled wryly. “Mr. Goda is keeping an eye on him.”

“Is he?”

“But he seems to be making an excuse by insisting that he does it because Ms. Kusanagi has ordered him to do so.”

“Oh.” I was having trouble with reacting to the remark.

I did not care if he made such an excuse at all. If my name was useful for Sasakura justifying his action, then I would say that it was a favorable situation for me as well.

The mechanic took a torque wrench from a shelf and went out.

After I did the cleaning for a while, I left the hangar. I had decided to take a walk toward a river bank.

I saw three Suigas taking off from the runway, one after another. After that, I could see two bombers flying over at a very high altitude. The sky without any cloud was indeed dangerous.

In the afternoon, I met Kai in a reception room of the office building. She was not the only one there. Two women, likely to be civilians because they were not wearing uniforms, were accompanying her. One was in her 40s or 50s. She was wearing glasses with her hair tied at the back of her head. She was introduced as the one working for an education-related job. The other was in her 30s and she said she was an employee of a broadcast station. I bowed to them.

“She is the ace pilot of our company.” Kai spoke. She seemed to be referring to me.

“You mean she is the number one, among female pilots?” The younger one asked.

It was not what I could answer. I looked at Kai.

“No, we do not keep the scores for each gender separately.” Kai explained.

“I suppose you have an experience in which you lost your friend during your work.” The elder one spoke in a gentle tone.

“I do have the experience. Recently, only about a month ago, one pilot flying with me died.”

“Oh ..., it’s a tough job.” The woman squinted.

“It couldn’t be helped.” I uttered what I was not actually thinking from my heart.

“Do you have any handicap as a female?” The younger one asked.

“Nothing.” I answered immediately. “Although I might have a subtle physical handicap, my advantage of being light-weighted more than makes up for the shortcoming.”

“Oh. Does your weight affect your flight by that much?”

“If the weight changes by 20 kilograms, the way of flight will differ completely.”

“Now I understand why even male pilots tend to be slender.” The woman nodded. “Ah, but, I heard you don’t have the physiological tendency to gain weight in the first place.”

“That’s what we would like to have, isn’t it?” The women looked at each other with smiles.

I glanced at Kai. She was staring at me with a completely emotionless look in her face.

The questioning session continued for about 10 minutes.

About the reason why I aviated aircrafts.

About whether I got the ecstatic sensation from shooting down enemies.

About whether I had already made up my mind to face my own death.

Each question was not exactly what I had not thought about even once. I had already asked myself about those issues over and over again. Still, any of the questions were difficult to answer. Still, I lied to them by giving fake answers to all

of those questions.

I feel happy about the fact that I can play a role by getting on an aircraft.

We must face opponents in any occupations.

I recognize that it is my own mission ... and so on.

The two women left the room. They were going to look around the airbase after that. As Goda seemed to be assigned to play the role of the guide, he was waiting outside the corridor. I could see Goda's smile for a moment. Kai and I were left behind, alone in the room.

"Thank you." Kai whispered, picked up a pack of cigarettes, and offered me a cigarette by extending it toward me. "Do you want to smoke?"

"No, thank you, ma'am."

Kai put a cigarette in her mouth and lit it with a lighter. She exhaled the smoke sideways. "Were you getting angry?"

I kept silent.

"Don't worry. You can be honest."

"Yes, ma'am. Just a little, though." I nodded.

"You did quite well, I think." Kai nodded, while holding the cigarette in her hand. "Yes, it was a well-controlled, calm response."

"Thank you, ma'am." I replied with an emotionless face.

"I think you have a very valuable desire to improve yourself."

"I do not have such a desire."

"Okay." Kai nodded. "If you can be unaware of your aspiration naturally, that makes it even better. I wonder if your parents have taught you well."

I decided to consider that statement as her joke, and ignored it.

"Let me ask you frankly. Have you ever wanted to commit suicide?" Kai asked.

"I have."

"Why have you not done so?"

“I’m not sure. Probably, I thought it would cause people around me troubles.”

“But, when you are flying, you can do that anytime, without giving anyone problems ...”

“Yes.” I nodded.

“Recently, have you stopped thinking of doing so?”

“I think I have. Each time I touch down on the surface, what I desire most strongly is the opportunity to fly once again. Once I die, I won’t be able to fly again.”

“Hmm. That is a good answer.” Kai loosened her lips. “It is the big problem that Kildren are dealing with. We might have to promote the way of your living.”

The way of my living?

What type of way of living is it?

I haven’t realized I have had my way of living.

I don’t know the way of living.

The means by which I can live without knowing such a thing.

I can understand it a little.

Just a little.

A route on which I might be able to keep living.

I just see it.

Just a little.

“That’s enough. Thank you so much.” Kai stood up and held out her hand. She seemed to love shaking hands. “Let’s see again in a month.”

-3-

About one month had passed. I was assigned a duty-trip with the Teacher. We moved by train, not plane, for almost the entire day. I wondered why we could not go to the destination by plane. My guess for the reason was that it was such a strictly confidential project. After all, I was not told of the definite information about the purpose of the duty.

While in the train, I read books. The Teacher slept most of the time.

We only had short conversations at times. For example, about new cipher codes, about the structure of a machine gun safety lock, about the duplexing the trim tabs of rudders, about the new style of propulsion system, which Sasakura was testing, and so on.

Moreover, we also discussed the comparison between the pusher configuration and the tractor configuration. It came down to the comparison between my aircraft Sanka and the Teacher's Suiga. We had experienced the aviation of both types of the aircrafts. We talked about the differences between the aircrafts while flying, and about the possibility the two types of aircrafts had. It was really a fruitful discussion. However, fruitful discussions hardly contributed to actual dogfights.

Still, in the middle, I realized that Higasawa would probably have wanted to talk about such topics. It seemed to be certain that her will remained somewhere within my body like scattered fragments of a bomb. Like vegetation dispersing their seeds and sowing them all over the places, human's will might spread everywhere in invisible space.

We got off at the terminal station, where a vehicle was waiting for us as scheduled. We got into it and rode on it for three hours. During the last hour, we were on a terrible mountain road. I learned for the first time how hard a vehicle could actually rock.

However, when we arrived at the destination, what we saw was a vast, open space. We could see a paved straight road that was obviously used as a runway beyond a building.

"Why didn't we come here by plane?" I murmured.

Because I was shaken in the train and the vehicle for many hours, I was exhausted. My legs felt heavy and I was having a headache. Additionally, I felt sick.

We were shown into a conference room and were given a briefing session. At the time, I finally learned of and understood the details of our duty. It was a demonstration flight for the new model of aircraft, not a test flight. The test flight had already been conducted, the one in charge of explaining the matters involving the demonstration flight emphasized the point. The pilot scheduled to perform the flight appeared to be me, not the Teacher. That was what I suspected because

everyone was looking at me.

Reference materials were distributed and the specific explanations commenced. The aircraft was of pusher configuration, with twin engines. In other words, two propeller engines were mounted near the back-end of the aircraft. Near the midpoints of the main wings on both sides, its propulsion mechanisms were mounted. The first doubt I had about the aircraft was whether it had issues with its weight balance. Such a basic problem had to have been solved already.

I was hearing the briefing session absent-mindedly. The time was approaching 16:00. I wondered if I would not be flying on the day.

But after the explanation, we were shown into a hangar and able to observe the actual aircraft.

This aircraft is huge. It was the first impression.

It was painted all in red.

Someaka was the name of the aircraft.

Men carrying cameras took my pictures. In front of the aircraft, I was exposed to flashlights from various angles. They took many photographs of me, while I was getting into the cockpit, standing on the main wing, and taking the seat after raising the canopy.

I fastened the seatbelt.

Since I was in that situation, I was dying to fly as soon as possible.

A mechanic gave me the final explanation to make sure that I understood them all.

They were all obvious things.

All the maintenances had already been done.

After the aircraft was tugged outside, I waited for a while.

I looked at the sky.

No wind.

I received the signal, indicating that I could take off at any time.

The western part of the sky was being painted in vermillion.

I started the engine.

I heard a strange sound, because the propeller speed was being decreased.

I checked all the gauges and meters. The mechanic came back, got onto the main wing, and explained to me the sound involving the engine tuning. But it was nothing special at all. I was not an amateur. Without the usage of weapons, aircrafts were all about throttles, ailerons, elevators, rudders, and flaps. There were only four types of control surfaces. Among them, we needed just two of them for normal flights.

He repeated the engines' tendencies and the pitch control of the propellers. I did not have to do anything difficult. They had already been aligned to the most appropriate positions, he explained.

The mechanic got off the main wing.

I closed the canopy.

I unlocked the brake, and taxied the aircraft to the runway.

It appeared that the Teacher was moving to another place, and was going to fly with a cameraperson. The aircraft was not visible at that point yet. I was surprised by the fact that he was assigned to such a duty. Why was I doing this? Was it because this aircraft Someaka was of pusher configuration? No. I was doing this because I was a female. Probably, that would be the answer. Still, I was simply happy to get on the new model of aircraft.

When I reached the edge of the runway, I got a go-ahead command through the radio.

I slowly pushed up the throttle.

I was not feeling the reaction torque at all, because Someaka had two engines.

I could feel the heftiness from the frequency of the vibration that was conducted to my body, when the tires were rolling on the runway.

I looked at the right and left. The wings were huge. Probably, many weapons could be loaded on them. It was more of an attack aircraft rather than a fighter aircraft. Or, was it regarded more as a light bomber?

I controlled the elevators for the pull-up maneuver.

The aircraft took off seamlessly.

The landing gears were retracted. The aircraft was ascending smoothly.

By rolling to the right and left, I confirmed the touch of the aileron control. It was not as heavy as expected. If anything, the elevator control was a bit heavier for me.

I made a turn. I had no complaint about the excellent slipping.

While flying horizontally, I adjusted the trim tab alignment. They were already aligned almost exactly at the ideal angles. The mechanics probably had already checked the trim tabs.

It was very quiet, probably because the cockpit was isolated from the exterior environment. I do remember being told that it could ascend to the higher altitude than Sanka could. I wondered what they would plan to do at such a high altitude. But, I admitted that I wanted to fly that high. The farther away I was from the ground, the more things I could forget.

The Teacher was ascending. His aircraft was Senryu. Since I was given the instruction through the radio to do so, the two of our aircrafts flew side by side for a while. Apparently, they wanted to take photographs of my Someaka while making a turn. In short, the only difference was what was seen in the background of the picture.

After they finished taking photos, I was permitted to fly freely. I pushed up the throttle and ascended. I wanted to test the Someaka at higher altitudes. More than that, I disliked the situation in which I was being watched by many people on the ground.

Its climbing power was excellent without doubt. It did not drag in the middle at all.

If I made use of the vertically mobility, I could perhaps do interesting things.

But the pressure on the pilot would also increase proportionally to that. I would not commend any notion of repeating the maneuvers of rapid ascent and steep diving.

The Teacher was ascending, too. As I looked at the Senryu, I noticed that he was flying right behind me. Senryu was a pusher-configuration model with no tail assembly, and it was an aircraft with tandem seating for scouting duty. It was fairly light and its high speed was the most notable feature. When it was first developed, it was intended to be a fighter aircraft, supposedly.

I controlled the elevators for the positive pitch movement to enter the loop.

I looked backward, and I noticed that the Teacher was entering the loop, too.

I tried to make a smaller loop.

He was still following me.

I rapidly made a 180-degree roll, and turned to the opposite direction.

Then, I controlled the elevators for the push-over maneuver.

Again, I moved the ailerons to the opposite direction.

I deflected the rudder, and then checked the rear view.

Senryu was getting a bit farther away from me.

Throttle down.

I lowered the flaps.

Sudden braking in effect.

I deflected the ailerons and made a sudden roll over.

I controlled the elevators halfway through for the pull-up maneuver.

The body of Someaka creaked.

The instantaneous snap roll changed the orientation.

Throttle up.

Accelerate.

To the Teacher's rear end.

My body was pressed against the seat.

I held the control stick tightly.

The fuselage was shaking.

Check the gauges on the control panel.

The speed was getting close to its limit.

Directed almost straight down.

Senryu was entering the turn maneuver.

I followed it, and was closing the gap.

The Teacher changed the direction of the turn.

It's a sophisticated move.

After enduring the delay a bit, I pushed the control stick.

I used the flaps only for an instantaneous moment.

The engine was roaring.

It might have been the first time for them to get themselves revved up by that much.

I heard a voice from the radio, saying something. *Get down to the ground*, or something like that.

Just when I thought I finally caught up on the Teacher, he escaped upward.

It's the Immelmann turn.

I was sure that the cameraperson blacked out.

I turned to the right, and checked his flight track.

Let's do it again, from the beginning.

While diving, I had my aircraft oriented upside-down.

I choked the throttle, and waited for the right timing.

The Teacher was also flying with his aircraft oriented upside-down.

I slightly deflected the ailerons, and made a turn while rolling.

By chopping the elevators and the rudder alternately and rapidly, I was getting inside his course.

The Teacher was also getting inside with the banking turn.

It's a beautiful dance.

We passed by each other.

Immediately, I moved the ailerons to the opposite ways, and closed the throttle.

I deflected the elevators for the pull-up fully, and then brought them back.

Right before the stall, I controlled the rudder to the right.

The Teacher had already entered the turn. *He is fast.*

I'm feeling delighted.

I pushed up the throttle.

I kept the attitude by controlling the flaps.

I retracted them back to the neutral positions, and then accelerated.

Making a small turn.

Rolling over.

I controlled the rudder, and let the nose slide.

I put my finger on the safety lock of the control stick.

Oh, I have forgotten that this is not an actual dogfight.

I maintained the banking angle, and was turning for a while.

“Boomerang, get down from there.” I was being called through the radio.

Throttle down.

I continued the turning maneuver. When I lost the speed, I let the aircraft point downward.

I was falling toward the ground.

I brought the flaps back to the neutral position, and gained the velocity even more.

I checked the meters.

The altimeter was now moving faster than the clock.

I want to fight.

I want to fight against the Teacher.

I wished so.

If he shoots me down, I can accept it gladly.

That was what I was wishing for.

“Hey, pull up! Boomerang, do not push yourself too much.”

I feel good.

My consciousness is fading away.

Then ...

I am reminded of them.

Whatever happened in that dark room.

The red glow of the cigarette the Teacher was smoking.

Fuko's white face.

I was reminded of this and that.

Where am I?

Why was I there?

“Boomerang, what's wrong?”

Kai's face came to my mind.

If I were to commit suicide, I might as well do so when in an aircraft.

By plunging into it, it would be the end in a moment.

It won't even have time to spin.

The ground was approaching.

I would do nothing, and that would be fine.

It was not the runway.

Instead, it was a black forest.

Control the aileron a bit.

A red sky.

A black sky.

They were spinning from one to another alternately.

The aircraft was vibrating.

A red lamp on the panel was blinking.

“Boomerang! You are going too low!”

Faces of the people who had gathered on the footpaths.

Stupid idiots!

There is no pity!

Nobody is pitiful!

Everybody is doing great.

Everyone is living a great life.

No one wants to die.

No one wants to be pitiful.

In order not to be pitiful, everyone is trying to live to the fullest.

Higasawa was great.

Higasawa is waiting for me.

There is no pity.

Never.

The Senryu had just passed right beside me.

Only for a moment, I heard the engine sound.

“Kusanagi.” The Teacher’s low voice.

I tried to find the Senryu.

Rolling.

He was making a turn at a slightly higher altitude behind me.

The ground was close.

I deflected the elevator for the positive pitch maneuver.

The nose of the aircraft was raised and my body was pushed against the seat.

I held my breath.

I looked at the gauges, and then checked the oil pressure.

I adjusted the ailerons a bit.

Right above me, the Senryu had passed by again.

It was an angle at which I could have been shot.

If that were Suiga instead of Senryu, then I would have been shot down by now.

I clicked my tongue.

“I will shoot him down.” I uttered.

Horizontal low pass flyby.

I pushed up the throttle.

The runway was approaching at an incredibly fast speed.

There were many people in front of the building.

Deflect the ailerons to orient the main wings vertically.

I maintained the attitude with the rudder.

I am going to let them hear the roaring sound.

To the insane bums.

I am going to make them hear the sound, which ground dwellers do not know.

I passed by them with a knife-edge flight.

Then, I let the aircraft fly inverted and go down.

I ascended.

I felt my body being stretched toward my head.

The seatbelt was supporting me.

One more time.

Once more, I will challenge.

Again, I will challenge the Teacher.

I ascended, and then rolled 180 degrees to check the situation surrounding me.

I searched for the Senryu.

Where is the Teacher's aircraft?

But at the time, he had already entered the course of his landing procedure.

I sighed.

Suddenly, I started feeling sick.

“Boomerang, start landing now.”

I was given the instruction through the radio.

I was feeling so sick that I was having trouble keeping my eyes open.

I made a large turn, and then headed for the leeward.

I cannot take it.

I cannot fly anymore.

I have to land.

I am realizing that I am just an ordinary human being, after all.

-4-

After I landed the aircraft, I went to the restroom and vomited in the bathroom. As I looked at myself in the mirror, even I was shocked by my pale face. It was as if I was ready to die at any moment.

A brief meeting followed, and I was asked to report my feedback about Someaka. I could give them my opinion regarding the dive characteristics. They told me that they would be working on making the adjustment of the matter in the direction.

It had become completely dark by the time we left the airbase. I felt depressed, just by thinking that I would have to ride on a rocking vehicle. Still, I fell asleep immediately in the rear seat.

The Teacher woke me up. We had already arrived at a hotel in a nearby city. The two of us entered the lobby and checked in. We were scheduled to stay at the hotel and to go back to the airbase I was stationed to by train on the following day.

“Are you ready to eat dinner?” The Teacher asked.

“I think I am.” I replied. Thanks to the sleep, I might have recovered from the fatigue to a certain extent.

“I once lived in this city when I was young. If it is okay for you, I can invite you to a good restaurant.” He said. “You know, if the restaurant still exists, that is.”

Although I was not interested in eating out at all, I was simply happy to be invited by him. We scheduled the meeting time, and then went to the respective rooms.

I took a shower immediately.

My body felt heavy. It was as if my arms and legs were turning into lead.

I started worrying that I might not be able to pilot an aircraft again with that much of weight.

Still, I washed my hair.

After changing clothes, I looked at myself in the mirror several times.

I was worrying about how the pale face was looking like.

I hardly looked in the mirror at myself, for it was not my habit. I did not like to look at my own face.

Was it more correct to describe that I did not care about it?

At least, I was sure that no one could look into my face at point-blank range. If someone dared to try it, then the one would be hit by me before that. So, in the same way, I felt I might be able to be hit by myself if I gazed into the face at such a short range. *I will leave her alone. I will not get too close to her.* I found myself thinking such things.

I had only one set of clothes other than the uniform. I put it on and left the room. When I was waiting while letting my back lean against a round pillar in the lobby, the Teacher came down from the upper floor.

The restaurant was very close to the hotel. It was on the second floor of a building, located along a narrow alley. We sat at the innermost table. There was nothing but a candle on the table. There was no menu.

“Is there anything that you cannot eat?” An elderly woman with an apron asked

us.

“I can eat almost anything, but I cannot eat much.” I answered.

The waitress smiled gently and returned to the kitchen.

I drank wine. It was the first alcohol in quite a while.

“Why are you called the Teacher?” I asked.

“At first, I was called Cheetah.” He said. “Just an anagram.”

I recalled the spelling in my mind.

“The letter ‘r’, instead of ‘h’.” He said so while taking out a cigarette. “Someone misspelled it.”

“Does Cheetah mean a wild cat?” I asked. “I have never seen it.”

“They inhabit the area around here.” He exhaled the smoke. “Are you okay? You were looking sick.”

“I think I am getting carsick from train and car, not aircraft.”

“Okay. At least, it is not as bad as it could have been.”

“What are they intending to use that aircraft for? It is not suited for dogfights.”

“Do you think that Sanka is superior?”

“Yes. I mean, if it is one-on-one, that is.”

“Yeah. That is what I think.”

“I wonder if those who are in the development team do not notice that sort of thing.”

“When we create something, we often end up not getting what we have originally intended.”

“Or, are we entering a situation in which we need more attack aircraft?”

“Who knows?” He shook his head just once. “I am not well-informed about such political state of things.”

If we only have to worry about dogfights, then fighter aircrafts are all we need. But there are enemies who try to stay far ahead of the game, by destroying

beforehand airbases from which such fighter aircrafts take off, and factories in which such fighters are manufactured. If things go like that, we need attack aircrafts and bombers that can take care of targets on the ground.

“I think it would be better if all we have are fighter aircrafts.” I commented. “I think they should not manufacture aircrafts specialized in dropping bombs.”

“I agree.” He nodded.

If so, we could fight only in the sky forever.

The earth would remain peaceful.

As for boxing, boxers fight in the ring.

No boxer would try to destroy the opponent by storming into her house.

Probably, the strategy was planned by those who had never stepped up to the ring. If they had the confidence, then all they had to do was to intercept the enemy. Because they were scared, they could not wait. Because of the fear, they would try to attack the enemy's territory first.

We could keep on talking mostly about aircrafts. I wanted to get the Teacher's opinion regarding the pusher configuration aircrafts again. Why did he dislike the efficient pusher configuration models?

“After all, the problem comes down to the time it takes to escape from the stalling.” The Teacher answered.

The pusher configuration aircrafts like Sanka have the propellers mounted on the rear parts. On the other hand, Suiga is a model of tractor configuration aircrafts, whose propellers are attached to the front parts. The tractor configuration aircrafts are inefficient in terms of the mechanical structure, because they have to receive the winds generated by their own propellers. When the aircraft stalls and starts diving with its head low, its control surfaces do not work unless its speed reaches a certain point. At the time, the tractor aircraft can slap the winds from the propellers against the control surfaces of the wings, and the control surfaces start working sooner. In an extreme case, even when the velocity goes down to zero, it can maintain and adjust the attitude by rotating the propellers at a high speed and deploying the control surfaces boldly.

“But, there is ... I wonder, if the difference is less than one second. Five-tenths of a second? As for the case of the new version of Sanka, the control surfaces would be brought back to the neutral positions swiftly.” I said.

“That would be a plenty of time to shoot down the enemy.” The Teacher curved the edge of his lips to smile.

In that perspective, he was right. However, in terms of the hardware specifications, the pusher aircrafts had the obvious advantage in the lightness and the efficiency.

Still, the most notable difference was caused by pilots’ tendencies or familiarities, and that was what it came down to. The physical structure of one of these aircrafts was different from the other type of aircraft, as if it was flying in the totally opposite direction. The switching could not be done so easily. I did not understand the feeling well, because I was not familiar with the previous model in my short career as a pilot. I imagined that pilots could eventually learn to recognize the aircraft as a part of their bodies if they flew for a longer period of time. If so, probably changing the aircraft model from one to the next suddenly would be difficult like switching their dominant hands.

By the time the dishes were brought to the table, we were talking about engines. About intake switching. About supercharger that had not yet been put to practical use. About pistonless propulsion mechanism that made use of the compression by the turbine. The Teacher also knew well the fact that Sasakura was conducting his experiments. He seemed to know more than I did.

The dishes were very delicious. However, since I did not want to feel sick from eating too much, I left some of it on the table. Probably because of my weak digestive organs, I had had issues with frequent stomachaches since my childhood. In my case, physical condition was synonymous to how my stomach was doing. I stopped drinking wine in the middle and switched to drinking water.

We also talked about the maritime training. The Teacher told me that the new type of Sanka with the folding wing configuration was being developed.

“Where did you get the information?” I asked.

“Well, I just heard it from a friend of mine. It seems to be strictly confidential.”

I recalled the man whom I met in the captain's room of the aircraft carrier. I was considering if I should have talked about it to the Teacher.

Cups of coffee were placed on our table. He took out a cigarette and lit it. My headache had gone away to some extent, but my body was still feeling heavy as if it was rusted. I was probably getting exhausted. I wanted to go back to my room at the hotel and get in the bed. Even so, my eyes were gazing at him and my lips wanted to speak something to him. I was not sure what I wanted to say. But, what I wanted to tell him had already been decided, and I felt it was about to jump out of my mouth at any moment.

"Shall we leave now?" The Teacher put the cup on the table, and asked.

"Umm ..." I put the cup on the table, too. "I have one thing to tell you."

He nodded slightly without saying words.

"A person belonging to the information bureau of the headquarters came to see me."

It was not what I really wanted to say.

He said nothing, and squinted.

"Then, I was asked about you, the Teacher, whether I suspected anything suspicious about you."

"You must have been asked not to tell me about it."

"I have." I nodded.

"You're a promising prospect of a pilot. In fact, they summoned you today because they wanted to take your pictures. Although you may not like it, I recommend you make use of this by riding the jet stream of political momentum. You will fly high and it will take you far."

"So?" I asked, while leaning my head to one side.

"It may benefit you more, if you have nothing to do with me."

"What do you mean?"

"You may not want to be too close to me."

"Why?"

“My company does not need a person like me anymore.”

“I don’t think so.” I spoke quickly. “Even though they can manufacture aircrafts, they cannot easily develop pilots.”

“Is that so?” The Teacher sniggered a bit. No, he just let his lips assume the shape of the supposed snigger. His eyes were not showing any sign of smiling at all. Rather, they were terrifying eyes, as if he was furious.

“Every pilot admires you. Everyone wants to be a pilot like you ...”

“In short, what is it?”

“The aim.”

“Correct.” The Teacher nodded. “The aim is just a mark. It is not substantial. They are numerical values, coordinates, or signs. We can make such things as many as we like. They are make-believe. Just imagination.”

“No, I don’t think ...”

“We replace ugly things with good-looking ones. That’s the way for everything. We cover dirty things with beautiful ones. It does not happen the other way around. We make something, just the exterior of which looks beautiful. By doing so, the interior gets dirtier. The opposite can’t happen. Think about our jobs. The cool image is created, like the photographs they shot today. But, where is the substance? Not even a single drop of blood appears in the photographs. There is no oil stain.”

“What do you mean? Are you telling me that whatever we are doing are dirty?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“We kill human beings.”

“Then ... What about the things Sasakura has been doing? He maintains the tools to kill people.”

“Same as what we do.”

“Then, what about this restaurant? The cooks make dishes for people who kill people.”

“Yeah, it is the same here.”

“Do you mean that everyone is dirty?”

“Yes.”

“If so, it cannot be helped.” I was shocked a bit and break out into laughter.

“Generally, works are all dirty. The very act of humans living itself is already dirty.”

“Yes.” The Teacher nodded. “The problem lies in the magic to make them look beautiful. It is the most crucial problem.”

“But, if we avoid thinking that they are beautiful, then we would be fed up. We would end up hating to live in this world ...”

“If you want to do so, you can just hate it.”

“If I do so, I cannot live anymore.”

“Why do you have to live?”

“Why do you live?”

“Me? It’s simple. I don’t dislike the dirty things so much.”

“It’s just an excuse. Or, sophistry.”

“Yeah. I love such simple excuses and the dirtiness of sophistry.”

The Teacher put out the cigarette in an ashtray.

“I wonder where we were in the conversation ...” I uttered. *Yes, the story about the man belonging to the information bureau.* I recalled it and smiled. “Well, that’s okay.”

“Are we ready to leave now?”

“Yes.”

We split the bill and left the restaurant. It was not as cold as expected outside, thanks to the lack of wind. I looked up to the sky, and saw the stars. The air was not unclear, relatively speaking.

We climbed up the slope of the alley, and walked on a sidewalk of the main street. The light from the street lamps was orange. On the other side of the street, the shop window of the first floor of a building was bright. Mannequins wearing coats and overcoats were lined up, side by side. A bus was carrying many people. Faces were lined up in the bus windows. Absent-minded faces. Expressionless faces. The

faces which seemed to be looking at us. But, they were probably not looking at anything. That was also the case for my eyes as well at that point. They were not looking at anything. They were not looking for anything. They were not the eyes that were trying to seek for and find the enemy aircrafts. They were equivalent to just sleeping.

I was walking while thrusting my hands into the pockets. During that time, I was thinking about myself in the future, about what to do after going back to the airbase on the following day. I was not sure. I would just follow Goda's instructions. We did not have anything known as a plan. We could fly at any time. We could fly anywhere. If we encountered enemies, we would fight. We did not know when. It was the same as not knowing what would come out of the next corner of an intersection. I got accustomed to such a life. Rather, I thought we were fit for it. I preferred this life to the one in which I had to wait for a certain thing that had been set far ahead and still had to endure the moment of its delayed arrival. I would much rather choose the current situation, in which only the things that I could find within the visible range would come to me.

We went back to the hotel, and entered the elevator. The door of the elevator was made of stainless steel, which reflected the figures of the Teacher and me when the door was closed. The lukewarm acceleration lifted us up. We walked on a corridor and reached the front of the room. The Teacher's room was right next to mine. I was thinking if I had to look at him. In the end, I inserted the key, opened the door, and entered the room without looking at him.

I collapsed on the bed, with my jacket on. I turned only my face sideways, took a breath, and looked at the window. Since the curtains were not drawn, I could see the windows of an adjacent building. It looked like an office or something of the sort. A bright room. I wondered if there were a few people inside. I could see the ceiling, lights, and the upper part of cabinets. White florescent lights were lined up. Various things seemed to be posted on the wall. There was a clock. My room was dark, so they could probably see nothing here even if they tried. I did not even want to bother getting out of the bed and walk to the windows to draw the curtains. So, I did nothing but close my eyes. Switching off.

Since then, my life had not changed. Three new members were added to the airbase. Their aircrafts were all new versions of Sankas. It was officially announced that fighter aircrafts were shifting to the pusher configuration in their entirety. Probably, the decision was based on the accumulated numerical data. Since there was the chance that the number of enemies I had shot down was included in the stats, I could not feel too comfortable. After all, each pilot had his or her own unique inclination and characteristics.

I did not think that pursuing the most optimal condition was the right thing to do in cases such as this. In the first place, fighter aircrafts themselves were neither the optimal nor the right ones. They were not the ideal form as aircrafts. For example, stability represented the failure for a fighter aircraft. Fighter aircrafts were supposed to be constantly unstable, and had to be able to enter the stalling maneuver swiftly. There was no other type of aircrafts with such properties, except for fighters. When it did not engage in fighting, it would be better to have the higher fuel efficiency, the faster speed, and the higher capacity of weapon loading. However, once it entered the battle, it would be used in completely different ways. It contradicted as a tool. It was the mechanism that embraced the contradiction from the beginning.

Then, it was not just for aircrafts. The pilots who used the aircrafts had to face the same contradiction from the beginning. If the pilots were stable, they would not be able to win. They had to be always unstable, lose sight of themselves at once, assimilate into the air current, immediately slip into the wave of acceleration. They needed such aerial lightness. It was hidden when they were taking off and going up from the ground. It was the instinct that they would have forgotten by the time they returned to the ground. It was the demon that dominated us only in the sky.

I had shot down 14 enemies over the period of two months. It was the highest count record by pilots belonging to our airbase, of course. It was more than the Teacher's achievement. During the period, my aircraft was completely unscathed. It did not even receive a single shot. It did not have to go through any trouble at all. It was all thanks to Sasakura.

Among the familiar members, Kusrida went down. It was on the day when he flew with me. Although it probably was a coincidence, he said, "I will be the one who is going down next", in the dining room at the night before the day. I wondered if such premonitions could be felt. Or, such a resignation like a short rest

would cause the momentary delay of decision?

In the sky, we always had to be strongly fixated to aviation. We had to desperately cling to piloting. Relaxing the hand that was grabbing the control stick, even for a moment, was a no-no. We had to forget the graciousness, and could not settle down to relax even for a short amount of time. We focused on for how long we could keep the tension high?

I was conscious of my pulse, my blood current.

I pushed them. *Move it! Hurry up! Faster!*

I deployed the control surfaces more quickly than I could make the decision.

I shot faster than I could think.

I expected faster than I saw.

So, only in a short moment, we could look at a tremendous amount of things in the sky.

An eddy generated from the smoke gushing out.

Scattered, spinning fragments of the aircraft.

At times, I even could count the numbers of the propeller wings.

I did not recognize that Kusurida was going down. I could only see the smoke in the distance. I was not sure if it was the smoke from Kusurida's downed aircraft. Still, the one who had shot down Kusurida was later shot down by me. It was the only thing I could do. But, it was not the revenge or anything of the sort. I did not shoot it down for Kusurida. It was completely different. Kusurida was a nice guy. The guy I shot down might have been an equally nice guy.

I met Kai twice. When I saw her in the previous week, we took a car to the city and had a meal together. We drank vintage wine. Of course, the one who paid was not Kai. It was out of company expense. What excuse did she use for it? Expense for conference? Or, expense for training? I felt like I was gradually transforming into what I had not been. But, living on the ground might have been something like this. In short, it could be about gaining the functionality to cheat on everyone, including myself.

Around when the leaves turned to yellow in autumn, I took a two-week vacation,

and made a reservation for a hotel near my hometown. Even though I had no intention of going back home at all, I still had a few things to see and a few persons to meet in the vicinity.

Probably because I was riding on a train for long hours, I had a headache when I arrived at the hotel. Then, I visited an acquaintance and had a little conversation. He was a doctor and the only person whom I could call “Doctor.” He was already old and always drunk. In fact, I once failed to commit suicide because of him.

I had one thing that I worried about. He examined me, and I found out that my foreboding turned out to be correct. I felt slightly relieved, relatively speaking. After going back to the hotel, I called on the phone the Teacher at the airbase.

“This is Kusanagi. Pardon me for my making this call at this late hour.”

“Where are you?”

“About 500 kilometers north of the airbase. Umm, actually I have something to consult with you about. I want to have an abortion. I talked about it with my acquaintance who is a doctor. He told me that I need a guarantor, other than the patient that I am, for the paperwork.”

“Is that the reason why you are calling me?”

“I have no one else to ask.” I said. “Umm, I do not want you to misunderstand it. I have no funny thoughts about that at all. I don’t want to cause any trouble on you. I have no regret or anything like that at all. He told it would not take too much time. I want to get it over with during this vacation. Then, can you do me a favor ...?”

“I will come to you tomorrow.”

“No, you don’t have to do that. All you have to do is to call the hospital tomorrow. About your signature, you can send it via the mail service. I got a consent. Generally speaking, I expect such flexibility ...”

“Kusanagi.”

“Yes?”

“Does the doctor know that you are a Kildren?”

“He does.”

“I will call the hospital, so give me the number.”

So, I gave him the number.

“How is your current physical condition?”

“I’m doing fine.” I answered with a bright tone in my voice. “Really, there’s nothing wrong in particular. Please do not worry about it. Still, if possible, I want to keep it secret. Is it okay?”

“Of course.”

“I appreciate it. You are being a lot of help for me. Thank you so much. I will buy you a dinner next time.”

“Crazy, indeed.”

“What?”

“No, sorry about that.”

After finishing the telephone call, I took a shower. Talking with the Teacher on the phone was the most difficult task for me. I was done with it without any trouble, and therefore I could relax. I sank my face into the hot water in the bathtub for joy. I was able to get a sound sleep that night.

In the following morning, I got myself dressed and got down to the lobby. The acquaintance doctor was waiting for me. His name was Sagara.

“What’s the matter, doctor?” I was surprised. I was scheduled to visit his hospital.

“I have a vehicle waiting for us outside. Let’s go together, shall we?” Sagara said so while putting his arm on my back. Even though his breath usually reeked of alcohol, it did not on the day. Moreover, he was wearing a descent suit.

“Why do we need a vehicle?”

“It’s a bit far away.”

“Where are we going?”

“Hospital.”

“Hospital? Won’t your place suffice ...?”

“Well, a bigger hospital. My acquaintance works there. That’s okay. Don’t worry.”

“Why?”

“We should prepare for the worst.”

“Oh, what? What do you mean by the worst?”

“Anyway. Everything is going to be okay. Trust me.”

“I trust you.” I exhaled my breath. “Why? Is it such a serious matter?”

“No, that wouldn’t be so big a deal.”

I had noticed that my physical condition was not very good. I thought it was because of the pregnancy. In the first place, I had not been physically strong. Still, it was not that I had a bad part of my body in particular. I had become a top-flight pilot, more or less. I was self-confident about it. But, there is no way that it had anything to do with what I was dealing with. I did not think that Sagara knew anything about my job or my achievement. Since I did not want to use the health insurance, I had not shown my ID to him.

A taxi was waiting for us. We got into it. I had decided not to say anything in the vehicle. After about 30 minutes of the ride, we arrived at a hospital. It was a very huge building.

I started feeling as if I was becoming as heavy as a whale. But it could not be helped. I just wanted to get it over with soon.

A tall, young doctor appeared. He examined me briefly in a medical consultation room. To my surprise, the young doctor’s name was Sagara, too. Maybe, he was a son of Dr. Sagara, my acquaintance. But, I did not ask about it. I just briefly answered what I was questioned. After the examination, I took the medicine given to me and received an injection on my arm.

When I was lying on a bed in the waiting room, the elder Sagara entered.

“How are you?” With a smile, he sat beside the bed.

“I’m okay. He told me that anesthesia would start working before long. Would it render me sleepy?”

“Yes, you will feel sleepy.”

“Can I go back to the hotel before the end of today?”

“Well, I’m not sure. But you can do so tomorrow, at the latest.”

“Can I get back to my work and do the job soon as usual?”

“You mean, whether you can pilot an aircraft, right?”

“Doctor, you have known that all along, haven’t you?” I nodded. The Teacher must have told him about it on the phone.

“That’s okay.” Sagara nodded. But he suddenly stopped smiling at the time. “I have been thinking of keeping it secret. However, as a doctor, I have changed my mind about it, and decided to tell you about it.”

“About what?”

“I have noticed that you are a special kind of person, of course. Since I first examined you, I have known that, needless to say. You have the stronger vitality than ordinary people have. So, you are immune to diseases. You do not suffer from aging that is generally known to us. Unless you are injured, there is little likelihood of your dying.”

“Well, I do not need such an explanation, doctor. What is the point that you are making?”

“I want to say that the same theory is applied to a life inside you.”

I was shocked. I did not even think about such a thing. I had never gotten or heard of such information anywhere. Come to think of it, it was obvious. But, what did it mean? It had nothing to do with the abortion.

“Since this is a rare case, we have little data. But there is a high likelihood.”

“If so, what does it mean?”

“It does not mean all that much. It makes no difference.”

“It makes no difference, because we are going to kill it anyway.” I tried to smile forcefully.

“Under normal circumstances, it will die.” Sagara brought his face close to mine, and whispered. “But, we can keep it alive.”

“What?”

My consciousness was fading away.

Sagara was staring at me without words.

“Doctor.”

I shut my eyes once.

My thoughts were not working well.

What are we talking about ...?

I put my effort into opening my eyes.

“You need not worry about that.”

“Keeping it alive ... That’s absurd.” I commented slowly.

“He asked us to do so.”

“He? Who?”

“The father.”

“What?” I was shocked. “You mean, the Teacher?”

“Yes. He has the responsibility and the right regarding this life.”

“He has neither the right nor the responsibility.” I shook my head.

“Well, you must have been convinced of that. Is that not the reason why you asked him to be the guarantor of the paperwork?”

“But ..., he ...”

“No matter how you waiver the right, he is permitted to have the right. So, if we can keep it alive, we have to do our best for him.”

“I have not asked you to do such a thing.”

“I was asked by him.”

“But, it’s my body.”

“Such logic is unreasonable, Ms. Kusanagi. As of now, the life is still alive. After we extract it out of your body, your responsibility ends there. You don’t have the right to kill the life.”

“How ridiculous.” I closed my eyes again. “Why is the Teacher doing this?”

“After we are done with this, you ask him.”

I desperately opened my eyes and looked at Sagara. I could not focus my sight on him. It was like the canopy being fogged.

“If the child turns out to be alive, you are going to nurture it artificially, aren’t you? Then, will it become a human being?”

“Yes, of course.”

“It will become a normal person, won’t it?”

“Yes, obviously.”

“Are you sure? Will it become a normal human being?”

“You are a normal human being, aren’t you? Human beings are all normal. There are individual differences to a certain extent, medically and genetically. There is no borderline between normal and abnormal.”

“Is it going to be all right? Will some disorders appear ...?”

“We don’t need to worry about that. Everything is all right.”

“But ...”

“Well, why don’t you get some sleep now?”

“Doctor, please.”

“What is it?”

“Keep it secret ...”

“About what?”

“Do not tell anyone about it.”

“Okay.”

My brain was being shaken, as if it was turned into liquid.

I wondered if the life within me was suspended in liquid.

The Teacher’s hand is touching me. I was having such an illusion.

I could see nothing anymore.

It was just bright.

I closed my eyes.

It was a feeling as if I was sinking into the ocean.

Slowly ...

I was listening to the pulse.

I was feeling the resistance of my breath.

And, I was recalling my mother's singing voice, mixed in the bubbles.

-6-

At the night, I was in a hospital bed.

I did not remember it well.

I was looking at the ceiling absent-mindedly. I counted the small holes on the ceiling. If I blinked in the middle, I had to restart the counting process from the beginning. I could not even complete the count for one row of holes.

A tube was extended from a yellow plastic bag to my right arm, where a bandage was applied. My stomach was feeling dull and heavy. When I tried to move my legs, I felt a pain on my waist.

On the following day, I woke up at around noon. My body had managed to feel okay. I went back to the room at the hotel. I needed to get the assistance from someone, only when I was getting off the vehicle. After that, I walked by myself. I and Sagara parted at the hospital. He said nothing. I did not want to ask anything. I felt that nothing in the world had anything to do with me.

In the early evening, I ordered the room service, had the meal brought to my room, and ate it. Tea, bread, and a simple egg dish. They were delicious. I felt that various things were starting to turn around for the better, probably because I got enough energy from the meal. I regained the urge to look for something fun.

While I was watching TV, the door was knocked. I thought a hotel employee was coming to my room to retrieve the dishes. But when I opened the door, I found the Teacher standing there.

Without speaking a word, I was gazing at him for about three seconds.

“May I come in? Or, shall we talk at the lobby?”

“Okay, come on in.” I stepped back.

I put aside the dinner wagon to the edge of the room, and then invited the Teacher to a sofa. After turning off the TV, I sat in a chair.

“I’m glad to know that you are doing fine.”

“Have you come here to say so?”

“No ... I have dropped by the hospital.”

“Don’t say anything.” I spoke immediately. “I don’t want to hear that. It’s none of my business. Surely, I asked you to be the guarantor. Thanks to that, I am reset. So, I appreciate it. But I did not ask you to do more than that ...”

“I wasn’t asked to do so.”

“I wasn’t consulted about it.”

“I might have wanted to give you counsel.” The Teacher spoke, while looking downward. “But if I did, what would Kusanagi have said?”

“She would have said no.” I answered immediately. “She would never have permitted it.”

“Right ... So, this is my responsibility ...”

“I don’t wanna hear that!” I interrupted his words. My voice might have gotten a bit too loud. Then, I gave my head a small shake. “How have you managed to pull this off? I’m impressed. Are you taking a short leave? I have thought that it is impossible for you to take days off, while I am absent from the airbase.”

“I quit.”

“What?” I was shocked. “Quit what?”

“I resigned from the job.” The Teacher answered. “I have come here to bid final farewell to you. If I am already gone just when you are back to the base, that would be rude to you, right? Although it was a short period, I thank you for everything. I hope you will do fine in the future as well.”

The Teacher stood up.

“Um, we are not done yet.” I looked up at him. “What are you intending to do after the resignation?”

“I have yet to think about it.”

“Do not tell me ... Are you doing so, in order to adopt the child?” I asked.

“That’s none of your business.” The Teacher sniggered a bit. “Never mind. I believe we will meet again someday.”

“Won’t you get on? I mean, aircraft ...”

He held a doorknob and looked back at me. He smiled only for a moment. Then, he left the room.

I could not stand up. I reached for the table and picked up a pack of cigarettes. I pulled one cigarette, and then looked for a lighter. But, there was no lighter. I made my heavy body stand up and walked to the closet. I searched an inside pocket of my jacket, and found a lighter. Finally, I could light the cigarette.

I walked to the window and tried to look down at the main street. But I could not see the entrance right below my room. I thought of opening the window. I examined the lock, and looked for an instruction manual, which might be nearby. It seemed that the window was designed not to be opened, probably because it was intended to prevent a person like me from jumping off the window.

I exhaled the smoke. *Bitter.*

I walked to the washroom, put the still-lit cigarette on an ashtray, and washed my face.

My face is probably looking terrible now.

I did not want to see that.

I looked at another direction, wiped my face, pinched the cigarette, and went back to the room.

I sat in the chair.

I felt heavy, as if I was sinking.

A sigh.

Smoke.

“Stupid idiot.” I murmured in a low voice.

Really, this is insane.

Everything.

Anything.

Crazy.

What are they thinking ...?

I wonder what I myself am thinking.

I don't understand anything at all.

Anyway.

I felt as if the incomprehensible sensation was enveloping my entire body. It was as if I was stuffed into a cardboard box with packing materials, like a doll.

Yes, definitely, it was the matter of my body, no matter how it was perceived. Yet, other people discussed the issue pertaining to my body in my absence. It was not that they were bullying me. It did not cause any actual damage on me. I did not care a bit about it. But, it was as if only my heart was being left behind ...

While my body was packed properly, the real part of me was getting left behind. Only my body was sent to a distant place. Everyone would praise me. I would receive the compliments. They were looking at me while smiling happily. *Is it some kind of contest? Or, am I a mannequin displayed in a store window?* My body was becoming such a thing ... It was what I felt.

I did not quite have a definite reason for my disliking the situation. They were not being rude to me. I was not being ignored. *Still, why can no one understand my feelings?* No, even I myself did not know what I was feeling. No, I could not understand it at all. *What is it?* Things went like this, so it would be definitely impossible for me to be understood by others.

Was it that what was not related to me was born inside me? Was it a life of passing by? Was it like a plant seeds that were attached to my clothes when I was walking in a grassland? If the seed germinated and the flower bloomed, it might not have had anything to do with me.

Yes, a life is for the life itself, in the first place.

It is not for anyone else.

It exists independently.

I was born between my parents. But I am sure that I needed them for only a few years. After it can stand and walk, the life is for itself, on its own. That is the natural law of the providence.

No.

That's not true.

I was trying to kill that life.

It was not true that I was not related to it. I tried to cut off the relationship from the beginning.

Even so, the Teacher took it away from the side.

Like a black kite diving steeply and plundering my prey.

Isn't it right?

No, it's not true.

I tried to throw it away.

So, it was not what I was robbed of.

But ...

Whatever I was not related to.

Whatever was supposed to vanish and become clear.

It was left behind.

No matter how hard I thought that I was not related to it.

No matter how hard I believed it was what I had thrown away.

It was no longer what it had been anymore.

It was the problem.

Right ...

Exactly, it was the problem.

The assumption that I would not meet it and see it again.

I wondered if I could handle it that way.

Before I knew it, the cigarette was getting shorter.

I put it out on an ashtray, and picked up a new cigarette from a pack.

I felt a little pain at the back of my neck.

Are my eyes exhausted?

But, why?

What did I see?

I glared at the Teacher's eyes, as if I was ready to bite him.

Was that the reason?

Anyway ...

It could not be helped.

It was no use thinking about it.

I don't care. That was the mindset.

It has nothing to do with me. I could only think so.

Perhaps ... I won't be able to see the Teacher again.

Where does he intend to go?

I could not predict that he would quit the job ...

How could he give up on aviation ...?

It was what I could never do.

I could not even think about it.

The telephone started ringing.

I was startled.

I was reminded that I was in the world with sounds.

As I stood up, my body was staggering. I managed to reach the table and picked up the telephone receiver.

"Hello, this is Sagara." It was the voice of the elder doctor.

“Yes, this is Kusanagi.”

“Oh, how are you doing? How’s your physical condition?”

“Not bad.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I am managing to be okay.”

“Oh, that’s good. But don’t try to do too much for a little while.”

“A short while ago, he came to my room.”

“Has he already left?”

“Yes.”

“Are you okay?”

“Doctor, it is the same question.”

“You seem to be doing okay. You have become stronger.”

“Yes, I myself think so.”

“You need not worry about anything. Yesterday and the day before yesterday would never come again. What comes next will only be tomorrow.”

“I don’t understand the meaning of it too well, I have to say.” I chuckled a bit.

“If it is all right for you, shall we have a conversation together while drinking?”

“If you mean counseling, I don’t need that.”

“Ah, if you want to be alone, I will refrain from drinking with you, of course.”

“Thank you, sir. If possible, I want to be alone tonight.”

“Alright. If you change your mind, give me a call.”

“Thank you for everything.”

“You need not mention it. I got paid for this. It’s my job.”

“Even so, it is true that I owe you one, sir.”

“You have grown up to become an adult.”

“What? have I?”

“Good night.”

“Oh, yes. Thank you, sir.”

I put down the receiver, and brought the cigarette in my hand to my mouth.

What a tough customer.

What an energetic bird.

How vain.

What is the thought behind it ...?

What the heck ...?

“No way.” I clicked my tongue, and uttered. “Ugh. That’s enough.”

-7-

I strolled around in the city for about two days. Then, I rented a car and drove to the suburbs. Then, I bought many books at a bookstore and read them in my room at the hotel. In the end, I was bored, shortened the leave by three days, and went back to the airbase.

In the evening, I walked to the base from the nearest bus stop.

The sky was pink. The illusory clouds were rendered motionless.

I was walking while looking at the sky all the time.

I want to ascend to the sky above the clouds as soon as possible.

To the nostalgic altitude.

I saw a flock of birds flying to the west.

There was no aircraft flying in the sight.

When the base was appearing in my sight, I started hearing the familiar engine sound. Before long, a motorbike jumped out of the gate. It was running toward me.

When it came close to me, I raised my hand and waved at it.

The motorbike passed by me and made a sudden stop. Sasakura looked back at me and smiled. I went out to the road.

“When have you come back?” Sasakura raised his voice, which was matching the

engine sound.

“Just now.”

“What?” Sasakura looked at my overall garb. “Don’t you have a bag or anything?”

I was carrying a small shoulder bag, so I lifted it up a little to show it to him.

“Oh, but, I remember you had a big luggage when you departed.”

When I departed from the airbase, Sasakura saw me off with his truck.

“Um, yes.” I nodded. It was funny, so I found myself laughing. Even when I was standing on the ground, I could laugh at times. “Where are you going? If you are going to eat a meat pie, bring me along with you.”

“Ah, okay. Get on.”

I sat astride the rear seat of the motorbike.

“What happened to your luggage?” Sasakura asked again.

“I dumped it.” I answered.

“Dumped it? Why?” His motorbike had not started yet.

“We jettison drop tanks, don’t we?” I answered.

“Drop tanks differ from the luggage.” Sasakura said, and snorted. After he raced the engine once, the motorbike started running.

The wind hit my body. It’s air-cooled. A little cold. But, it was not a big problem because I was wearing a coat and a scarf. Compared to the chill in the sky, the coldness on the ground was wimpy.

“The Teacher quit.” Sasakura shouted loudly, while turning his head sideways.

“What?” Although I heard it clearly, I asked back anyway.

“The Teacher quit and left the base.”

“Oh, really.”

“Haven’t you learned of it?”

“No, I haven’t.” I replied.

“Didn’t he call you?”

“What?”

“Didn’t the Teacher call you?”

“No. Why does he have to call me?”

“Nothing.”

“What?”

“That’s enough!” Sasakura shouted and raised his hand.

The motorbike accelerated and ran through the straight road.

After it climbed up the slope of a bank without deflecting the elevator, I saw a vaguely bright horizon beyond the river.

Suito Kusanagi is always telling a lie.

She is such a bird.

But, I felt somehow euphoric, and was staring at the sky to the side.

Although the view near us was continuously scrolling, the sky was simply motionless.

I want to hop on an aircraft as soon as possible.

I want to climb above the clouds.

There is nothing.

Nothing, really ...

Nothing to support me.

Nothing to praise me.

Nothing to love me.

Even though, there is nothing.

But.

Nothing to disturb me.

Nothing to obstruct me.

Nothing to look down on me.

There is nothing, really.

I feel that my body is light.

This lightness is my everything.

I was not born to love someone.

I was not born to be loved by anyone.

Just lightly ...

I was born to fly.

Epilogue

I stopped the rolling to the right. I checked behind the aircraft. It was coming from the left.

The elevators for the push-over maneuver.

I raised the flaps.

I pushed up the throttle.

Elevators in the neutral position. Rolling to the left with ailerons.

I added the rudder control to the half-flap configuration, and made a turn.

Rolling to the right.

Under fire.

Too late. Too slow. I checked the meters.

I pulled the control stick toward myself, and entered the loop.

The sound of intake switching.

When the aircraft was pointing upward, I executed the rolling.

I saw the opponent.

It seemed to be intending to climb while turning.

There was another one. On the left below me.

I had no better option. I jettisoned the drop tank.

I choked the engine, and deflected the rudders to the left and right to apply the air brake.

Full flaps.

Down.

My body floated. The seatbelt was pulling down my body.

I pushed down the control stick even more. I added the strength to my legs, and rapidly controlled the rudders.

Stall.

The exhaust from the engine enveloped the canopy.

The aircraft leaned to the left. *It is always to the left. It loves the left, eh?*

High throttle.

The nose of the aircraft dove downward. It trembled, and the wings followed.

Acceleration.

Dive fast, faster.

The control surfaces were back to the neutral position.

It was pointing downward.

I saw the opponent turning right below me.

Has it spotted me?

I rolled once to check the surrounding vicinity.

It's a piece of cake.

The opponent finally noticed me, and rolled to the right.

Too late.

Fire.

I turned to the left, and broke away.

I used flaps only for a moment, and then brought them back immediately.

Who's next?

I pushed up the throttle. While rolling, I ascended slowly.

Something was coming up. *Is it the one which has been observing the duel?*

I saw an enemy plane going down. *Kill confirmed. I have gotten three so far.*

Checking the fuel.

The oil temperature was normal. The oil pressure was okay.

I looked behind, and gauged the velocity of the opponent.

He was lunging at me, not running away. *It is commendable.*

But, in the sky, there was no one who would try to run away.

There was another aircraft above me, very far away. *Is it on my side?*

The number of aircrafts in the air combat zone seemed to have been drastically decreasing.

I had no idea about which side was winning the air superiority over the other at that point.

I always had no idea of such a thing.

I did not care about it at all.

I just countered the one which was coming to shoot at me.

I just fought against those who did not break away.

It was intending to come from my left.

I climbed up, and turned to the left. More to the left.

The opponent was climbing up.

I saw three aircrafts in the distance, a little above the clouds.

Several streaks of black smokes were being stretched, here and there.

Some areas were looking hazy.

I brought back the throttle a bit. *I am letting it catch up on me.*

I let my aircraft roll, and then my aircraft flew upright.

The one above me had yet to move. *Is it dealing with another target?*

It was trying to get behind my back by turning to the right.

I was making it do so just within the limit of the turn radius.

It could not get inside the arc with that velocity. It could not get a clear shot at me.

I increased the velocity gradually.

My engine still had the leeway before it was maxed out. It was running with a straight face.

My body was pressed down against the seat.

I loosened my hand, which was holding the control stick, and relaxed.

I steadied my breath.

I choked the throttle.

Down.

My body floated from the seat, and the metal clasps of the belt creaked.

Rolling over to the left.

I waited for the right timing to use the flaps.

I adjusted the direction with the rudders.

Here it comes.

It is shooting at me.

Too far away.

To the right.

I look back.

To the right, again.

Bringing back immediately. Going up.

The engine was revved up.

I was rolling as a reaction to the torque, and I could see the target.

The enemy coordinate was angled toward the top of the canopy.

Rolling while pitching upward, to make a turn.

My aircraft was creaking.

The oil pressure was slightly going up.

Check the altitude.

I did not have enough of extra fuel.

I am finishing off the target right now. No rush, no hurry. Easy does it. Go with the flow naturally.

To the right.

I momentarily pitched it up, and then brought it back to the left.

The opponent appeared diagonally to the left in the front.

Skidding.

I applied the brake with the flaps.

Holding down the nose of the aircraft with the elevators.

Deflecting the rudders to adjust the attitude to the opposite direction.

I slipped obliquely.

The opponent was within the shooting range.

Fire.

I adjusted the projectile path to the right.

Fire.

Okay.

I broke away to the left.

Making a turn.

I looked upward immediately.

The clouds were getting closer to me.

Where is it?

I see it. It is still there.

Just one.

I rolled the aircraft, and confirmed the fall of the one I had just shot down earlier.

It was emitting fire with a bang from the engine cowling.

“Time for dancing is over.” I received the command through the radio.

I looked around.

I saw four aircrafts below me. I was not sure which side they belonged to.

Above me, there was only that one particular aircraft flying.

Due to the fuel matter, the end of the dance party had to be near for both of us by then.

While turning slowly, I climbed up.

If the one above me was the enemy, then I would try to shoot it down.

I was ascending.

The one was entering the turning maneuver. It was describing a large circle slowly.

Making the circle reduce in size gradually.

We were now at the same altitude.

The speed went up even more.

It means business.

That's more like it.

I saw a weird pattern.

A strange marking of some sort, placed in front of the canopy, was visible.

It still had the drop tank. *Has it been observing me from the higher vantage point of safety?*

What confidence! You think you are that good, eh?

Getting even closer.

We were circling in the same whirlpool.

While sitting in the seat, I was always looking upward.

I looked around again.

There was no one to bother us.

I saw the aircraft above me. *That one is probably pointing upward as well.*

“Boomerang, are you still flying.”

“This is Boomerang. I will get another one.” I replied.

“Come back. It's over.”

The enemy's aircraft was of an old type. It could not possibly be of any match for Sanka.

You can keep flying leisurely only for a little while longer.

I will shoot it down in an instant.

I choked the throttle, and lowered the flaps gradually.

I increased the banking angle, and reduced the radius of turning.

Little by little, toward the center of the arc.

So, I'm catching up on it ...

This was the result that came from the differences in basic performances of the aircrafts.

The opponent's tail assembly was appearing in front of me.

It had yet to flee.

Does it want to be shot?

Full-flap configuration.

I slightly deflected the elevators for pitching up.

I got closer to the center of the arc even more.

With the rudders, I controlled the direction that the nose of the aircraft was pointing.

I fine-adjusted the attitude with the elevators.

It was within the shooting distance.

Fire.

In a blink, the target was floating up.

It had just jettisoned the drop tank.

What good timing!

If I pointed upward, I would stall and be in danger.

I was being patient, and kept the nose down. *I am getting beneath it.*

It should not have been able to reduce its velocity.

I was approaching it from below.

It was getting within the firing range.

I put my finger on the trigger of the machine gun.

At that very moment, it snapped like a leaf.

I rolled over to the left.

It was climbing up.

I am chasing it.

Full throttle.

At the same time, I put the flaps back to the neutral positions.

After a moment of breathing, the engine started racing.

Even though I was still staying behind the enemy plane, it was getting a little bit far away from me.

It was because of this engine that breathed.

But Sanka was lighter. I was going to catch up gradually.

At times, it leaned to the right and left.

It seemed to be observing me.

How can it do that in this situation?

It was probably misunderstanding something.

Doesn't it know the newest model of Sanka?

The pilot should be getting ready for the escape maneuver.

“Boomerang, come back!” I got the command again through the radio.

“I am on my way.” I replied.

Check the meters.

I may be having barely enough fuel.

I should have held onto the drop tank a bit longer for that one.

I could not believe that such an interesting bird was still in the sky ...

Suddenly, it slowed down.

I soon caught up with it.

Is it stalling?

That's a suicidal act!

It is within the shooting range.

Fire.

But, it shook the tail assembly, and leaned to the left.

What is that?

Is it a torque roll?

No, he let the propeller wake flow strike the surface of the fully deflected rudder.

Throttle down, for me.

It's stalling.

At almost the same altitude, the opponent was making a turn.

I saw the canopy and the helmet of the pilot.

The black pattern on the hood was that of a cat's face.

Two of its eyes looked like holes punched on it.

I leaned to the left and falling downward.

I prepared to deploy the flaps.

I pushed up the throttle once, and controlled the direction with the resulting torque.

The control surfaces had yet to work.

I saw the enemy.

It too entered the steep dive. It was accelerating.

Is it running away?

I pushed up the throttle.

The oil pressure is okay.

The fuel system was reaching its limit.

Finally, the control surfaces were starting to work.

The opponent got itself back to the horizontal flight, and started increasing the altitude.

Now, what ...?

Sigh.

I brought back the throttle.

Too bad ...

I looked around.

I saw five aircrafts in the distance.

It seemed that the aircrafts on my side were gathering there.

“Hey, Boomerang. Come back!”

Tsk.

“Roger.”

I looked up at the ascending enemy.

It shook its wings to the right and left.

“What?” I was surprised.

I took off the goggles.

Glaringly bright.

The aircraft was getting farther away.

The image was getting smaller.

There was no one else.

The clouds were far below me.

Only the edges were glowing red.

The aircraft was disappearing from the sight.

I made a large turn and changed the direction.

I took a deep breath and put on the goggles again.

The way it was shaking its wings. How can I forget it?

“Yahoo!” I shouted loudly.

“What’s the matter? Boomerang?”

“Oops. Sorry. I haven’t turned off the microphone.”

“I got startled.” It was Kurita’s voice. He was still flying as well. “Please do not do that again.”

We descended to the lower altitude, assembled the flight formation, and went back to the airbase.

There were still more than half of us left from the flight entering that combat.

Those who went down had to have enjoyed the final flights.

Those who were still flying alive were thinking about when they could get to fly next time.

“Stupid idiots.” I found it to be so funny that I started shedding tears.

I took off the goggles, and rubbed my eyes.

Having painted a picture of a cat, eh?

“Did he mean a cheetah? What the heck is he thinking?”

Then, I burst into laughter.

I was laughing to my heart’s content.

Because it is in the sky.

Because there is nothing.

This book was first published by Chuokoron-Shinsha in Japan in 2004 and translated in 2017 and 2018 for The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books.

The Interview About None But Air with Dr. MORI, Hiroshi

B (Chief Editor of The BBB): Today, to commemorate the completion of the English version of “None But Air”, the second volume from “The Sky Crawlers” series, we would like to interview with the author, Dr. MORI, Hiroshi. Dr. MORI, thank you so much for giving us permission to translate your works into English. Also, we are so glad to have this opportunity you give us again.

MORI, Hiroshi: It is I who thank you for translating my works. I think continuing to do anything is the most difficult part. You make the forward progress little by little, and then what you get is a great achievement of work, by the time you notice it. I believe that many readers would feel that way, too.

B: As for “The Sky Crawlers” series, I was so impressed by the beautiful cover designs for their hardcover versions published in Japan. The cover of the first volume “The Sky Crawlers” features a blue sky, and that of the second volume “None But Air” represents a vivid crimson sky which can be interpreted as a morning glow or an evening glow. The same color themes are used for the covers of their respective pocketbook versions. Are the book design featuring the sky and the color theme of each novel based on your request?

MORI: When I first published the hardcover version of “The Sky Crawler”, I remember I left everything up to Mr. Seiichi Suzuki (an established book designer). But I said to the editor, “If possible, I do not want an *obi* (belly-band, strip of paper looped around a book) on the book cover,” and “Is it a problem if only the English title is printed on the cover?” I think the designer took the requests into consideration, and designed the cover by taking them into account.

After that, I could imagine that the book covers of the subsequent volumes would feature other sceneries of the sky. I said to the editor, “I guess the next volume would feature an evening glow.” But basically, I have never given definite instructions, because I think such requests will inhibit designers’ free imaginations. I have never made an additional request for the finished covers. Anyway, I’m satisfied with the book covers. The hardcover versions are wrapped in transparent plastic jackets, and they are treated as the substitute for *obi* (belly-band). Making a book without an *obi* is very difficult in the current publishing industry in Japan.

B: Surely, the Japanese publishing industry has the custom of publishing books

with *obi* for any types of books. Now I understand that the book jackets of “The Sky Crawlers” series are transparent and made of plastic to realize the Western-style books, which have no *obi*. I believe that it is an important proposal from Dr. MORI to the Japanese publishing industry. In that way, the book jackets of the series alone are already revolutionary. Also, the originality of the titles is outstanding. The titles of “The Sky Crawlers” and “None But Air” were actually written as “Sukai-Kurora” and “Na-Ba-Teah”. By writing the English words in *katakana* (Japanese alphabet), the titles end up sounding neutrally mysterious in ways that are neither English nor Japanese and yet positioned between those two languages. I personally think that many of the Japanese readers have been fascinated by the mysterious echoes. This effect cannot work for the readers outside Japan because they would only see the English titles. About this point, do you feel the limit of English as a language? Also, do you have any plan to play some linguistic tricks, which are based on English and connected with multiple languages?

MORI: In the first place, I write my novels while hoping that the works will be read outside Japan. In the earliest phase of my career as a novelist, for example, when I wrote “The Perfect Insider” (Dr. MORI’s legendary debut novel), I was already hoping so at that point. I remember I was imagining the situation, in which my works would be translated into English or made into movies in English-speaking countries.

About the English titles, I think they work well just by themselves in English-speaking countries. Many of the Japanese readers don’t even see the English titles. So, if I put the English title beside the Japanese, it won’t lead to effective and meaningful results. It is the reason why I chose the Japanese titles written with *katakana* to express the sounds that are similar to English words. I thought, by doing so, the readers would feel motivated to read the English titles as well.

About the linguistic tricks that are connected with the multiple languages, I have not been aware of them all that much. To begin with, I have hardly thought about the linguistic tricks. Probably, I’m not good at it. Mr. Seiryoin (the interviewer), it is your forte, isn’t it?

B: Dr. MORI’s keen sense of linguistics is obviously outstanding among Japanese authors. Even if we are focusing only on comparisons based on the ability to formulate word plays, I personally think no one can match you. You dared to write

deliberately the titles in *katakana* to make readers read English titles. I am hearing the episode for the first time. I'm now fully convinced that you can come up with the innovative ideas because you have always valued the English titles since your debut as a novelist.

In that way, Dr. MORI highlighted the English titles of the novels in the series more convincingly with such intentions. You mentioned in the interview at the end of the English version of “The Sky Crawlers”, the first inception of the series, that the novel was not as well-received by the Japanese readers as your other popular novel series were. After publishing the second novel “None But Air”, did you notice any changes to the way the Japanese readers responded to the release?

MORI: I remember that the second novel received even less responses than the first one. Still, since the publishing company knew that the project to produce a movie based on the series was scheduled to be materialized, they allowed me to write the books for the series, one after another. Anyway, during the period when I was publishing the first two novels of the series, many of the Japanese readers expected MORI, Hiroshi to write mystery fictions. The reviews for this series went mainly like, “This ain't mystery fiction.”

Generally speaking, readers tend to dislike authors challenging to do something new. They want authors to be on the same extended lines of the existing works. In the context, by writing this series, I might have started being recognized as MORI, Hiroshi “an unpredictable author” for the first time. To begin with, I am an unpredictable person in my opinion. But when I work as a novelist, I try to act within the acceptable range of common sense as much as possible. After all, it is a job.

B: I cannot name any author whose works span as widely as Dr. MORI's. There is no arguing that Dr. MORI is “an unpredictable author”. As for “None But Air”, this work includes a trick, which would surprise the readers who are reading this volume after reading the first volume, titled “The Sky Crawlers”. Is this some kind of courtesy to mystery fans from Dr. MORI, who has many popular mystery fiction series?

MORI: When I published the second volume of the series, the majority of the readers had already read the first novel beforehand. That fact made a subtle trick in the beginning effective. However, for me, it is so trivial that I could not care less

about the existence of the trick. I recognize it as something that is not so much a big deal as to be considered to be the courtesy to the readers. Still, I understand I can get a great response from the readers about such minor details, because it is simple and easily understandable.

I knew the first two novels wouldn't be read in this order after the completion of the entire series. I can say it is a trick like a road mirage that appears accidentally and temporarily.

B: I see. I am impressed that you have already imagined the readers' expected impressions after the series' completion in advance. In the previous interview mentioned above, you felt that you created the best work when you completed the writing of the first novel "The Sky Crawlers". Compared to the completion of the first novel, how differently did you feel when you finished writing the second novel "None But Air"? I mean, were you disappointed in ways like, "I wanted to surpass the first novel, but have not quite been able to reach the level." Or, did you have an expectation like, "By writing the stories in the series continuously, I might be able to let the entire series as a group surpass the first volume"?

MORI: Several years had passed between the first and second novels, and I felt that my skill to write novels had improved to a certain extent during the period. In fact, I felt that I had managed to write a relatively interesting story, when I completed the second volume. I analyzed that the second volume would be accepted by many readers, despite the first volume being crude. However, as for any series of novels, the subsequent volumes would never sell more than the first novel, according to the conventional wisdom. Also, generally speaking, the evaluation of each work by the author does not necessarily correspond to the feedbacks from the readers.

The first novel of any series is definitely the masterpiece, all the time. If not, I think that the series cannot even start and be continued to the subsequent volumes. Setting the world and creating the characters alone multiply the difficulty of creating the stories by many folds. Therefore, if the first volume is not the masterpiece, then the series cannot be established. Because of this reason, structurally, it is impossible for the subsequent volumes to surpass the first volume. Still, as for the smoothness of the storyline, the second volume can become more sophisticated than the first one, generally speaking.

B: I was startled by your remark of “The first novel of any series is definitely the masterpiece, all the time.” It is not the special rule that is limited to Dr. MORI’s works. I think all authors who have their own serialized works would agree with your opinion. That’s exactly well said!

In the interview at the end of the English version of “The Sky Crawlers”, Dr. MORI, namely you, said “Because the movie project started after that, I was given the chance to write the sequel novels.” Between the first novel “The Sky Crawlers” (2001) and the second novel “None But Air” (2004), three years had passed. But after that, you published each volume every year until the completion of the series. Were you requested by a publishing company to write the novels in certain ways, for example, while being asked, “We would like you to write the following volumes of the series every year, no matter how many volumes it will turn out to consist of?”

MORI: Correct. By the time I published the second novel, the schedule for the movie project was almost set. However, at first, the director was not going to be Mr. Mamoru Oshii. I remember Mr. Oshii was chosen as the director after I published the second novel. Therefore, the storyline in the first two novels was incorporated into the scenario of the movie. But, creating the movie took more time than expected. Even when I completed the publication of the five volumes of the series, the movie was not yet completed. Then, the publishing company asked me to write one more book volume. So, I wrote the extra volume containing a collection of short stories, and the series was concluded with six volumes in total.

B: Oh, is that so? We as the readers may have to appreciate the delay of the movie project, if we consider that you added the short story collection to what Dr. MORI originally intended to be “The Sky Crawlers” series.

By the way, the quotations from Leonardo Da Vinci are posted in each chapter of “None But Air”. “Geniuses” are used as key persons in Dr. MORI’s works, including and not limited to “The Sky Crawlers” series. Da Vinci is synonymous with “genius”. Have you decided to quote Da Vinci’s texts because “genius” is one of the major themes of this work?

MORI: That’s not quite what I meant in particular. I somehow quoted them because of the atmosphere they present. Although it’s an emotional, fantasy story, I wanted to make it real and based on the scientific foundation. To represent the atmosphere, I decided to quote them.

B: Here is the character named the Teacher, who plays an important role since the beginning of the second novel “None But Air”. He is described in the final part (starting from Episode 4) of the first novel “The Sky Crawlers” only as “a mysterious enemy whose aircraft has a black cat or a black panther painted on it”. The relationship between the Teacher and Kusanagi is implied. Dr. MORI, when writing the final part of “The Sky Crawlers” volume, had you already thought that you could let this character be involved with the storyline more effectively? Or, after you actually started writing “None But Air”, did you made up your mind to use him, and then did you get the clearer understanding of the character as the result?

MORI: When writing the first volume, “The Sky Crawlers”, I realized it was the final episode of the story in my mind. Naturally, what I wrote in the first volume obtain the meanings and would later be described again in subsequent volumes. Therefore, it was not that I came up with the settings when writing the second volume “None But Air”. I had already had in my mind everything to be written from the beginning.

Conversely speaking, the first volume managed to obtain the profound taste, because I stuffed into it the fragments of the major parts of the series storyline. I can also say that the depth that was achieved in the first novel continued to dwindle as I kept on writing the subsequent five volumes.

B: The first novel “The Sky Crawlers” possesses the profound deepness and can indeed be regarded as THE masterpiece, because it already includes all the crucial elements of the series storyline. In this series that is designed to be concluded in the volume titled “The Sky Crawlers”, “None But Air” is placed first in the chronological order. In the story of “None But Air”, the early phase of the widespread deployment of Sanka, the aircraft model of pusher configuration is written. In “The Sky Crawlers”, it is described that the pusher configuration aircrafts are superior to the tractor configuration aircrafts, which have the engines and propellers at the front part of the aircraft. Dr. MORI, do you have any special emotional attachment to pusher configuration aircrafts?

MORI: I don’t have any special attachment in particular. I just knew and understood that it was physically more efficient. The current jet fighter aircrafts are now almost entirely classified to this particular configuration. And I think passenger

airplanes will incorporate this configuration as well.

B: In this series, there are occasionally the scenes in which one of pilots dies suddenly. I think it is inevitable that they die one after another because they fight at the risk of their lives. Do you come up with what pilot dies next, while writing the scene of the dogfight? Or, in another scene in which the character appears, do you get the forebodings, which tells you that this particular character may die in the very near future?

MORI: The life and death of the main characters have already been decided from the beginning. But, the life and death of supporting characters are determined along the flow of the storyline.

B: About the handicraft, you wrote in an essay, “I enjoy the very process before its completion and I lose interest in completed things.” When you finished writing “None But Air”, the second volume and the earliest chronological phase of the series, after “The Sky Crawlers”, the first volume and the final chronological phase of the series, were you able to enjoy the very process of the world being developed, little by little, like the way it is for a handiwork, while having not quite been able to delve deep into all the minutest details of the series?

MORI: No. Since I wrote the final chronological phase of this series first, I knew the destination to reach and how many works I would write. In this context, this series is similar to no other series. Speaking of a handiwork, it is like painting the exterior surface first and then making the interior. I cannot choose this outward-in order of the process in the actual handicraft, but I can do so when writing novels.

B: Dr. MORI has imagined all the details of the series from the start. You have just told me that there is no other work of yours that fits into this pattern. So, now I know that this series has the special meaning among Dr. MORI’s numerous works.

When you finished writing the second novel “None But Air”, I imagine that you were having the rough ideas about the movie that was scheduled to come out in a few years and the projected conclusion of the series. Back then, did you feel not only the responsibility of doing a job but also the expectation like a door to unknown was opening, for the third and the subsequent volumes that you were going to write to complete the series?

MORI: I frequently encounter the unknown while writing. But, I cannot discern

the details, when I vaguely plan the future storyline. Besides, I had the occupational duty, according to which I had to write a few more volumes. But, the state of mind was somewhat like “I will think about it in one year”. Since it was the period, during which I had to write many books for other series, I could only think about the topic to that extent. But, I can say one thing. Because it is not a story categorized in a typical pattern of mystery fiction, I think I could write them while more or less feeling the freedom of creation. At the same time, the fact that I could write stories without such restraints, clues, and hints, gave me the confidence in technical aspects of writing.

B: I am learning a lot because you are telling me the details of your mental state while writing. The more I listen to your account, the more I am convinced that this series is truly special and has a unique value among Dr. MORI’s numerous works.

As for the future of the English version of “The Sky Crawlers” series, we have just gotten the permission from Dr. MORI to translate the third volume “Down To Heaven”. We would like to show our sincerest appreciation for giving us this opportunity. This series has already been downloaded in more than 20 different countries, and we have received many enthusiastic feedbacks and inquiries from the readers living outside Japan. We are really looking forward to the responses to the first two novels after the scheduled publication of “Down To Heaven”. The titanic talent and the unique characteristics of Dr. MORI, Hiroshi easily jump over the borders, and are now being discovered in many countries in the world. We have been able to predict so in the past. As one of his big fans, I’m really waiting for the day when Dr. MORI becomes “MORI, Hiroshi, the global treasure.” Dr. MORI, let me express my sincere gratitude for telling us the precious talks. I cannot thank you enough.

MORI: I believe that there is indeed such a thing as a divine act to help us, because the series I thought wouldn’t sell well was made into a commercial film and is being translated into English. I am not sure if I should simply conclude that it is just due to “luck”. Anyway, I have to appreciate it. Thank you so much and I myself am really looking forward to the English versions of the rest of the series.

This interview was conducted in December 2017, exclusively for The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books.