



Sky Eclipse

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Sky Eclipse At first she resisted, for even though she had lost those dearest to her, she was filled with love of life. Lonely though she was in this vast emptiness, she was still glad to see the colours in the sky at dusk, or watch the yellow moon rise from the rim of the ocean, to greet a bird winging its solitary way across the wastes of water or to try to count the stars that spangled the heavens at night.

This excerpt is from *Snowflake* by Paul Gallico Episode 1: Gyroscope She was made up of hundreds and hundreds of pure, shining crystals, like fragments of glass or spun sugar.

This excerpt is from *Snowflake* by Paul Gallico

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It was a windy afternoon. Not a single cloud was in the sky. Even with my eyes closed, I felt dizzy from the glare just by looking up. Sasakura did not like brightly

lit places. He had just sneezed twice.

In the hangar, two mechanics were working while talking all the while. They were younger than Sasakura. Their topic of conversation had nothing to do with the aircraft they were working on. Instead, it was about a woman who showed up at a nearby bar. Sasakura found it boring but did not complain to them. He went outside the building to evacuate and smoke.

Sasakura got in the shade of a nearby tree and leaned against its trunk. At that moment, he saw Kusanagi walking toward him from the billet, and moved his back away from the tree for some reason. In other words, he thought he was at least showing that he was not slacking off his attempt at supporting his own weight.

“About what you said the other day,” Getting closer, Kusanagi started speaking to Sasakura. “You told me that the control being drawn to the rudder left as the elevators are pulled just before stalling is not a quirk of the aircraft, didn’t you?”

“When did I say such a thing?” Sasakura asked. It was a topic that suddenly touched the core, so he was more than a little surprised. “Did I really talk about that?”

“You know, at a party the other day. I wanted to ask you more about it, but I was called away from another table ...”

“Oh, that happened about three weeks ago, didn’t it?” Sasakura laughed funnily. However, as Kusanagi in front of him stared at him with a serious look, he inhaled the smoke from his cigarette and started accelerating his thinking. “Well, yes, that tendency appears in any aircraft. If the direction of the propeller rotation is different, the left and right of the effect will be the opposite.”

“Opposite? How come?”

“Umm, it is difficult to explain.”

“Try it.”

“In short, when it is facing up ...” With one hand pointing upward, Sasakura attempted to explain. “Here, the propeller is turning this way. In this state, you pull up. In a normal situation, the airframe will pitch to the upward direction. However, just when the aircraft is about to stall, and you pull up, the airframe will move just at that very moment. Then, the tail assembly will be in a complete stall condition, and

the elevators will not work anymore. Then, the gyroscopic effect of the engine's rotation will be more significant, and the motion will act as a force in this direction, different by 90 degrees to the direction of rotation."

"Gyro effect?"

"You learned it in school, didn't you?"

"I did. Hmm, I see. So, does a pusher-configuration airplane fall to the right?"

"If you have been pulling up, yes."

"If I'm pushing down, it's the other way around."

"Yes, that's right."

"While the aircraft speed is still there, will the movement be mixed with the pull-up maneuver?"

"That's what I mean."

"What happens when I rev up the engine?"

"I guess the torque roll will come into play."

"Yes, it should. But the more it is revved up, the more likely that this will happen, right?"

"Theoretically, yes."

"I see ..." Kusanagi nodded. She took a cigarette from a pocket and lit it. She glanced toward the hangar.

Sasakura also turned and looked in the direction. The two men, who had been chatting, were now working in silence, probably because they just noticed Kusanagi's presence a moment ago. The aircraft that they were working on was not Kusanagi's Sanka. Her aircraft was in the farther back of the hangar. No one but Sasakura was allowed to touch that Sanka.

"If you don't choke the throttle, and if you lower the blade pitch of the propeller, then the effect will be much greater," Sasakura added.

"But I have no time for controlling the pitch."

She's right. It is almost completely outside the realm of concern in usual piloting

schemes.

“By the way, I have one thing to tell you, concerning a different topic ...” Kusanagi exhaled the smoke. “Those from the information bureau are coming here tomorrow. I hear that we are going to pull out the Sanka, and they are going to take some pictures.”

“Again?”

“Again.” Kusanagi frowned slightly. “They’re going to film the flight scenes, too.”

“Oh, is it on video?”

“Probably. Shall I lower the blade pitch a little?”

“Why do you do that?”

“Wouldn’t that make the sound more dynamic?”

“It will lower the fuel efficiency.”

“Also, new carburetor intake parts will be arriving.” Kusanagi showed a happy face this time. “I think it’s probably in the evening. Can you check them out just in case, and then replace them?”

“Again?”

“Again.”

“Titanium? More importantly, I can make it lighter if you’ll let me grind it for you.”

“That’s scary.” Kusanagi shook her head horizontally.

“I don’t know what scares you and what doesn’t, and what the criteria are.” Sasakura burst into laughter.

However, Kusanagi just raised one eyebrow slightly. She turned her gaze away from him in an instant and walked back towards the billet, with the cigarette still between her lips.

Sasakura snuffed out his cigarette on the ground and then returned to the hangar. The two mechanics just started talking again.

“Give me the box-end wrench for 16 mm.” One man said.

The other man threw the wrench gently, and it was safely relayed across three meters of distance.

Sasakura approached them silently.

“Oh, sir. What was Ms. Kusanagi’s business about?”

“Well, nothing in particular.” Sasakura answered. “More importantly, don’t throw your tools. At least, don’t do it near me again.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“I apologize.”

Sasakura walked straight to the back of the hangar. He passed by Kusanagi’s Sanka and glanced at its cowling. Then, he opened the door leading to the pit and entered a dark tunnel-like passage. As he descended the slope, he reached a half-basement area with a warehouse and a workshop. He entered the workshop and went farther in. That was the room he lived in. There was a small window high up the wall, but it was on the north side of the building, so it was not very bright. It was originally a place to store tools for engineering. Even now, the shelves that occupied half of the room were filled with tools. Sasakura considered himself to be one of the tools and felt no discomfort at all. There was nothing to do here except to get tools, sleep, or change clothes. He opened a drawer on the shelf and took out a new turning tool. Whenever he put spirit into the engineering, he sharpened the blade. If he did not have time to do so, he replaced the old blade with a new one.

Sasakura took it back to the workshop. First, he set the turning tool on the lathe. Then he turned on the power switch on the wall and put on his safety goggles.

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12 hours had passed. It was late at night. Sasakura was still grinding the parts. The milling machine had been running continuously. Generally speaking, it takes the longest time to fix the material to be carved out. He read the dial of the micrometer and gently knocked the material with a small hammer. He measured it repeatedly to make sure it was right and then carefully set it in the machine. The rest of the process was automatic, so he could rest in the meantime. This was supposed to be a non-smoking room, but he had brought an ashtray and was smoking a cigarette.

There was no dangerous substance that was inflammable. There was no mechanic that disliked smoking. After all, the oil stench was much stronger, and one would feel that the air was cleaner when he was smoking.

As the milling machine finished carving by one full stroke and automatically stopped, he snuffed out his cigarette in the ashtray and approached the machine. That was when he heard something hitting the windowpane twice. He thought a cat walked beside it, and the gravel bounced to the window since it was positioned low from the outdoor point of view and close to the ground. He heard the sound once again. Because it was brighter inside the frosted glass, he could not tell at all what was going on outside.

Cardboard boxes against the wall were blocking the view, so Sasakura moved them out of the line of sight and stretched upward to open the window.

The cold air blew into the room. And there was Kusanagi's white face. She was bending down and peering at him.

"May I help you?" Sasakura asked. "But, that's not the entrance."

"The front door was locked," Kusanagi said. "What are you doing? I mean, at such a late hour."

"The only thing I can do is craft."

"What are you making now?"

"Umm, it is difficult to explain."

"What part is it?"

"Engine."

"Whose engine?"

"Whose? It's the engine of Sanka."

"Whose Sanka?"

"Well, about that, you know, I don't really identify that."

"Can I come over? Unlock the front door, please."

Sasakura nodded without words. Then he closed the window and clucked his tongue.

He removed the goggles from his forehead, lightly wiped his hands with waste cloth, and left the room.

The hangar was pitch black. He turned on just the light he needed and twisted the lever on the door next to the shutter. As he opened it, Kusanagi was already waiting for him outside. She was wearing a cardigan over her shoulders. She was in plain clothes.

“It’s cold tonight, isn’t it?” She said. It was dark, so Sasakura could not tell what expression she was having on her face.

“What do you want?” Sasakura asked.

“Am I bothering you?”

“Yeah, well, close to that. I was in the middle of the process. I don’t have time to waste.”

“Then you can keep working on it. I’ll be watching.”

“Give me a break.”

They walked through the hangar and back down the dark corridor.

Upon entering the workshop, Sasakura set the machine first. Kusanagi stood while leaning against the entrance door and watched in silence. The next stroke would be easy since the same material had been remaining on the milling machine. The machine started moving again.

“So, what?” As soon as Sasakura’s hands were free, he turned to Kusanagi and asked.

“How many of those are you intending to make?”

“As many as there are cylinders. Then, some spares, too.”

“Really. What will happen when you replace them?”

“I’m not sure.” He shook his head horizontally. He thought about smoking a cigarette, but stopped, remembering that he had just had one. “Well, it does make it lighter. It’s also more durable because it’s an integrated unit.”

“Lighter? With such stuff? It’s just by a little.”

“No, it’s a moving part. It’s the part that experiences the reciprocating motion at

great speed. If this gets lighter, then the spin rate will increase by 200.”

“You’re kidding. By that much?”

“Probably.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, I won’t know until I try it.”

“If it’s that drastically great, why not make it lighter from the start?”

“It’s impossible in mass production.”

“Ah ..., yeah, you’re right, it does sound complicated.”

“It’s specially customized.”

“The Sanka is, after all, my Sanka, right?” Kusanagi asked.

“Hmm, well, I guess that’s one way to interpret it.”

“Hey, I’m not mad at you.” Kusanagi relaxed her lips slightly. It was only for a second, so he might have misunderstood it. “But I don’t like the idea of having it replaced without telling me.”

“Okay, I’ll report it to you.”

“Has this kind of thing ever happened before?”

“Yeah ...” Sasakura nodded.

“So, I’m an experimental guinea pig, huh?” Kusanagi leaned her head. Her eyebrows were raised, but the rest of her facial expression did not change.

“I don’t deny that. But I only do things I’m absolutely sure of. The things that really need to be experimented are more complicated.”

“Is that something that doesn’t have a theory?”

“Actually, there is always a theory. The theory comes first. However, even if I make a product according to the theory, there are times when problems occur for other reasons. There are parts that I might not have noticed, and parts that I have overlooked. The more complex a certain something is, the more likely it is to fail. That’s why we need to experiment. But something as simple as this is fine. It works as expected. Machines are honest. If I make them properly, they will work

properly.”

“Why are you trying them with my Sanka?”

“There’s no particular reason ...” Sasakura sighed.

He went to the machine to look at the blade as it was spinning. While brushing away the swarf, he checked the work surface.

The reason was simple. Kusanagi’s Sanka had the best chance of coming back to the base. No matter how many good parts were installed, if the aircraft would not come back safely, it would be all for nothing. Of course, that did not just mean that he would miss the parts he had made. *What he misses is the data. He can’t deny that he wants to create an environment where he can utilize the data if possible.*

“You’re not allowed to use the workshop at such a late hour,” Kusanagi commented.

“I know. I’m grateful that you are tolerating me.” As he spoke, Sasakura felt that his own face was becoming more expressionless this time.

“Maybe you’re trying to make it by tomorrow. Is it because you heard that I’m flying tomorrow?”

Sasakura was not sure how to reply. She was right to the core. *Kusanagi is a difficult person to deal with. She can be emotional, but at other times she can be cool, calm, ruthless, and collected.* He was not sure which one was the real her. At least she was a pilot. *And what’s more, she is an ace pilot.* At this base, she was the assistant commander. She was in a position to give absolute orders to the mechanics. If he offended her, he could lose all of his fun.

Kusanagi stared at him for a while. Then, she averted her gaze and walked over to the milling machine to take a look at the rotating mill.

“Stay away from it.” He warned.

“What?” Kusanagi was startled and turned to him. “Sorry. I am just looking at it.”

“No, I mean ... It’s dangerous. The chips will fly out and get into your eyes.”

“Oh.” Kusanagi widened her eyes. The facial expression was indicating that something was funny.

“If you want to look at it, put on the goggles.”

“No worries. I can avoid them.”

“Avoid them?”

“If they come flying at me, I just close my eyes.”

He was too dumbfounded to say anything. Sasakura felt like smoking again. However, there was a no-smoking sign on the wall. There was also an ashtray full of cigarette butts in plain sight. For the time being, he decided to hold back.

“You may be right,” Kusanagi mumbled. “I guess my eyes are more important than what you put on the engine.” She walked straight to the door. “Good night.”

Kusanagi left the room.

Sasakura imagined her in the cockpit, wearing an eyepatch. He also thought that if they could make a poster with such a picture, it might have a surprisingly good advertising effect.

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Those whom Kusanagi referred to as the “information bureau” came to the base the following morning. There were three men in a wagon. They set up their cameras in front of the hangar where Sasakura was and near the runway. In the afternoon, another person joined them. It was a tall woman familiar to Sasakura. At first, they seemed to be having a meeting in Kusanagi’s room, and Sasakura soon saw them walking together to the hangar. He told the young ones, “They’re here.”

The Sanka was ready to fly. It was tugged out in front of the hangar. There was nothing more the mechanics could do. *If they don’t ask them to put weapons on it or add a drop tank, or anything else in the last minute, though.*

Sasakura was surprised when he saw Kusanagi approaching. She was not wearing a flight suit. She was still in her usual uniform, that is, a skirt. It was forbidden to fly an aircraft while in such clothes, but Sasakura decided to keep quiet. She had flown without her flight suit on several occasions before. Those times were in cases of emergency, so she might have been able to make an excuse. Today, Sasakura wondered if she was commanded to do so from the information bureau.

“So, at first, let’s take a still photo in front of it first.” The tall woman said. Before Sasakura knew it, the other three men were coming back from the runway.

For about 15 minutes, they took pictures with Kusanagi as the model. The mechanics had to stand behind the cameras and observe without disturbing them. About ten onlookers gathered, but they all kept quiet. The political clout of the information bureau was potent enough to provide its nametag with the power to silence the mechanics. None of the pilots was there to watch. Maybe they had not been informed of the photo session. Even if they knew it, they probably were not interested in this kind of thing.

Kusanagi was photographed in the front of the aircraft, on the main wing, and in the cockpit, in that order. She was in the Sanka. She did not seem to have any intention of changing her clothes.

“Alright, then, move to the runway.” The woman pointed in the direction.

“Check the rearward!” Kusanagi shouted from the cockpit.

An aircraft marshaller with flags stepped out in front of the aircraft.

“Checking the rearward,” the attendant behind the aircraft responded.

The control surfaces of the main wings and stabilizers were moving. Flaps were not out yet.

“All clear!”

“Ignition!”

The canopy was still open.

The cranking motor started turning the propeller. After a delay, a light explosion sounded and the exhaust was emitted. The engine started, while belching white smoke intermittently. The Sanka’s brakes were released, and it was taxiing on the approach area to the runway.

The men from the information bureau started running toward the runway. Only their boss, the tall woman, was walking in that direction at a slower pace.

Sasakura and the other mechanics walked about 10 meters behind her. Since they were not allowed to move past her, their pace became slower, as if they were marching in a funeral procession. I could see some people peeking out of the

windows of their billet when they heard the sound of the engine.

Kusanagi's Sanka taxied from the approach area to the runway and waited there. She applied the brakes, lowered the propeller blade pitch, and revved up the engine occasionally to warm it up. By the sound of it, it was not getting warmed up just yet. It sounded a little damp. However, in an emergency situation, the aircraft would have to take off even in such a condition.

As Sasakura and other mechanics approached the Sanka, the canopy was still open, and Kusanagi smiled at them. It might have been a smile for the camera, but in any case, it was an expression she had not shown until a moment ago. She had to be feeling good just from being in the cockpit, even if just a short span of time had elapsed under that condition and she was yet to take off.

"Okay," The man in front of the camera tripod shouted and turned around.

The tall woman raised one hand lightly. She seemed to be carrying a transceiver as well. Kusanagi in the cockpit raised her hand slightly to signal the response. She closed the canopy. The engine revved up, and the brakes were released. The Sanka began to move forward. The engine revved even higher, and the plane passed in front of Sasakura and the others from right to left. The transmission of the air vibration was evident.

The aircraft took off, while banking to the right. Then, it went up while turning to the front.

Sasakura was listening to the engine sound. It sounded like the fuel was still slightly thick, but it was not bad. *I guess that's the way it is.*

There were three cameras. One man was holding each one. One of them was a little bigger than the others, and it was probably a video camera.

The Sanka returned to the right in the distance ahead of them without gaining any altitude. It looked like it was flying slightly above the riverbank that stretched in that direction. In terms of distance, it was probably farther than the embankment. The Sanka went straight to the far right and seemed to be turning again at a low altitude.

"Why is she flying so low?" One of the mechanics asked.

"Because it's fun," Someone standing behind them responded.

Sasakura looked back. Before he knew it, a few pilots had come out to watch the flight.

So far, there was no sign of camera running. *Maybe, Kusanagi is just playing around with it.*

The aircraft entered the approach centerline, and turned toward them. There was still some distance. It was much lower than an ordinary approach course, and the engine was running high. It was getting closer to them at a considerable speed.

The men behind the cameras got into the positions to look into the viewfinders.

The Sanka was approaching with a roaring sound.

About 200 meters in front of them, she banked the airframe.

The aircraft was passing by in an oblique orientation to bank toward them with the canopy facing them.

From right to left.

Leaving behind the wind pressure and a blast.

In the blink of an eye, it flew away past the overrun area.

No one could speak.

The opportunity to witness a low-pass flight without lowering the engine revolution at such a close distance would have to be quite rare. It was frighteningly impactful.

She returned the airframe to the upright position, and the Sanka continued to climb in the sky, this time along the centerline of the runway. It was gaining altitude. The aircraft pointed straight up. And now, it seemed to be falling towards the observers.

“Wow, is she looping the loop?”

The engine started sounding dried up a bit. *It's not every day we get to hear the sound of the engine going full throttle up close like this. It's a rare opportunity.*

The Sanka turned its nose toward the ones on the ground, and lunged at an oblique angle over the left side of the runway.

Even though it was expected to make a rolling maneuver, it approached them

with its airframe being inverted.

The engine was choked, and the sound of the wings feeling the wind was getting closer.

The Sanka was about five meters in altitude when it passed by in front of them, and they could see Kusanagi, upside down in the canopy, smiling at them. After it passed, it exhaled white smoke, revved up the engine, and went straight up, while keeping its airframe inverted.

“Did you get that footage?” The woman asked loudly.

Each of the men raised one hand in response. After making sure of the response, the woman communicated something with the walkie-talkie in her hand. She was probably giving Kusanagi an order.

The mechanics just squinted and watched the stunt flight with their mouths open. The pilots behind them had their arms folded. The difference of the pilots from the mechanics was that they were not squinting. The pilots did not seem to be blinded by the sky at that level of luminosity.

The Sanka swooped down from the right side of the sky and approached them at a low altitude. The engine was running pleasantly. The resonant bass sound shook the air and propagated as wave pressure in Sasakura’s body. Entering the airspace above the runway, the Sanka executed a half roll. The wings were oriented vertically, and the nose was lifted slightly. It plunged into the air while being overturned on its side.

“Eeeek!” Someone screamed.

It was a knife-edge maneuver.

The engine was at full throttle. The main wings were vertical, so the only thing supporting the aircraft’s weight was the lift from the fuselage. The canopy was facing the spectators.

With a roaring sound, the Sanka passed by in front of them.

It was a flight that they would never usually be able to witness.

The Sanka stayed in that position, gradually gaining altitude and leaving to the left.

“Unbelievable ... She’s ascending while doing the knife-edge maneuver.”

“I have never imagined that such aerial acrobatics were possible.”

If the aircraft were at a high enough altitude, it would be relatively easy to do so. That was what the Sanka was capable of executing. However, only a limited number of pilots could fly it at such a low altitude and without shaking from side to side.

To their left, the Sanka went into a vertical climb and choked the engine midway. Suddenly, it became quiet. Then, it turned downward with a stall turn, lost the altitude, and then entered the approach course smoothly and horizontally. Silent like a glider, it was getting closer to the airfield from the left.

The cameras were pointing in that direction.

The Sanka was flying low, as if it was about to land.

Is it about to execute a touch-and-go landing?

Just when Sasakura thought so, it did a half-roll and assumed the inverted flight.

The Sanka's altitude dropped so low that the canopy almost scraped the ground.

It seemed to float up a little, and then it did another half roll.

This time, it was in an upright position.

Just before it came right in front of the observers, it did another half roll.

Stop it already! Sasakura almost shouted.

It's too dangerous!

It's not going fast enough.

That's just way too close for comfort.

It passed in front of the cameras while assuming an ultralow-altitude inverted flight, then it returned to the upright orientation again.

A half roll once. Then, while in the inverted attitude, it finally revved up its engine and climbed up.

“That's not good for the heart,” Sasakura murmured.

To their right, it rose vertically. Halfway up, Kusanagi choked the engine and performed a stall turn.

Next, it approached them from the right side, while maintaining the corkscrew

maneuver with the repeated rolls.

This time, the altitude was at least 10 meters, as it should have been.

Still, the Sanka continued to roll.

When passing by the people watching, it switched to an eight-point roll maneuver, stopping momentarily at each 45-degree angle while making a complete 360-degree roll.

After it passed to their left, Sasakura heard some people clapping. Probably they could not help but want to clap their hands.

This time, it was an Immelmann turn.

It was approaching them quietly from the left.

It had its airframe inverted and passed by in front of them at the altitude of three meters. Kusanagi in the canopy was clearly visible. She was not looking at them.

It flew off to the right.

“Okay. Make a landing,” The woman with the walkie-talkie commanded.

The Sanka made a slight turn to the right of them. Then, it headed for the runway by entering the approach surface.

It was getting closer, while swinging its nose from side to side.

It landed on the runway quietly, showing a sideslip as if the nose was pointing sideways until it was about to touch down. As it passed by in front of the camera, Sasakura heard the braking sound.

A few hundred meters to the left, it entered the taxiway.

After running in the opposite direction on the adjacent runway, it went back to the original position, where it was right before the taxiing.

Its canopy was already opened.

All the camera lenses were focused on her, up close.

The engine was sounding flawless.

At least during the flight this time, the engine did not breathe. Sasakura was satisfied that the modifications he had made to the exhaust pipes the other day with

Kusanagi's permission were having a positive effect.

As for the parts he ground in the previous night and replaced early that morning, he did not know the effect. Although he said he would report it to Kusanagi, he had not done so yet. *I'll have to take off the cover later and observe it with the light and a magnifying lens.*

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The Sanka continued on its way to the front of the hangar, where it stopped its engine. Kusanagi got out of the cockpit, stood on the main wing, and also had her picture taken while sitting on it. That seemed to be the end of the photo shoot. The woman from the information bureau put her hand on Kusanagi's shoulder and seemed to be offering words of appreciation, but Sasakura did not hear them.

Kusanagi was no longer smiling. She was back to her usual face. When she left the Sanka and came close to Sasakura, she asked him, "May I have a cigarette?"

"How was it?" Sasakura asked as he handed her the cigarette.

Kusanagi put the cigarette in her mouth and lit it.

"What are you talking about?" She exhaled the smoke and asked back.

"How was the engine?"

"It was okay." Turning to the side, Kusanagi answered. "Isn't it always like that?"

"Wasn't it chattering?"

"Hmm, I wonder what that was. I could occasionally feel it behind the seat. Maybe it was the pitch control linkage."

"I'll check it out."

"Anything like that can't be helped."

"It would be helpful to me if you could remember the rotation speed value at which that happens."

"Okay. I'll do that next time." Kusanagi nodded. "Sasakura was right about the way I fell in the stall."

“You know, it’s the law of physics.”

“Yeah. I want to try a few more things, but it’s not easy.” Kusanagi seemed to be smiling slightly.

The woman from the information bureau approached them, and Kusanagi left for the office building while she was talking to her. The other men were carrying the equipment for filming. The mechanics and pilots were gone before long. *They must have gone back to their respective places.* The two remaining men were using a winch to pull Kusanagi’s Sanka into the hangar.

Sasakura walked up to it, put his hand inside the rear cowling, and touched the nearest cylinder head. He checked its temperature. Then he looked at the exhausts. He could not reach them. He wanted to check the oil adhered on them.

“Well, that was great, wasn’t it?” A young mechanic spoke to him with a smile. “It’s the first time I’ve witnessed such an acrobatic flight. It was really powerful. Like a circus.”

“If I get permission, I would want her to fly with measuring instruments on board. I wonder why they don’t let us do that kind of measurement. They are just investing too much time on making all those promotional videos.”

“But, I think that’s the way it’s got to be. I think publicity is more important.” The young man laughed.

Maybe so, Sasakura thought. It was sure that no one was seriously thinking about improving the performance of aircrafts. It was something that he had felt from the very beginning of his career. What the mechanics were expected to do was to maintain the performances of the machines at all times. To ask for more than that was deemed unreasonable. So, who was asking for that? Were they the designers who were responsible for developing the machines? The engineers? Where are those people? I want to meet them just once. Why don’t they come to listen to the voices of the field staff?

Well, anyway, this aircraft called Sanka is a masterpiece. Whoever designed it must be a genius. They have not disclosed who designed it, but they’ve got to be someone from our company’s research center. Sasakura had always hoped that one day he would be assigned to that laboratory and meet that person. He wondered if such a chance would ever come to him.

As the Sanka arrived at the back of the hangar, Sasakura quickly moved the lamp stand toward it, put his head inside the cowling, and checked the cylinder heads. From the looks of them, there was nothing wrong. He had to remove the cam cover and check the inside as well. Sasakura brought the light closer and looked everywhere with the magnifying lens. *Everything is looking fine.*

If this modification was okay, the next step would be to modify the connecting rods. That would be a bit of a big job. It would be too dangerous to replace the rods suddenly. *I have a spare engine, so I'll have to experiment with it as I go on with that. It would probably take about a month to grind the parts. However, I will be able to raise the engine speed by 400 rpm. I'm sure Kusanagi will be pleased.*

Sasakura put the cover back on, took a sample of the exhaust gas, and put it in a small glass case.

Other mechanics finished the usual maintenance procedures. After a quick check on them, Sasakura retreated to the back of the hangar.

He made coffee in a pot, drank it, and opened his notebook. He wrote down various things that he had noticed. Half of them were pictures instead of words. He noticed that he was preoccupied with the connecting rod. He went to the shelf to get a catalog to look up the specification standards for bearings. He was still holding his coffee cup in one hand.

The door was knocked.

“Yes?” He replied simply.

After taking out a thick catalog from the shelf, he turned around to see Kusanagi standing at the door.

“Oh, it's you.” Sasakura was a bit surprised.

“Today's duty is over.” Kusanagi was entering the room. “I hate that they're making a sideshow spectacle of me.”

“But, it was nice for you to be able to fly as much as you like, wasn't it?”

“It's ridiculous.”

“Isn't it fun?”

“Not fun at all.” Kusanagi had a chair by the window. With the backrest in front

of her, she was sitting in the direction that was opposite of the normal. “Wouldn’t it be more useful to fly while talking to Sasakura than to fly like that?”

“I agree with that. It would be even better if you could get measuring instruments on board.”

“But, you know, I’ll have to get permission for every test flight.”

“Right.”

“Perhaps, have you lowered the propeller-pitch base angle a bit?” Kusanagi asked.

“What?” Sasakura walked over to the pot and was pouring another cup of coffee.

With that newly filled cup, he approached Kusanagi.

Sasakura handed the cup to Kusanagi. She quickly sipped at it.

“It tastes bitter. And it smells like oil.” That was what she felt.

“That’s just your imagination.”

“But, thank you.”

Kusanagi realized that Sasakura had lowered the propeller-pitch base angle. He had been thinking about it. Last night, he set it a tad bit to the negative side, by rotating the bolt through 180 degrees, in case she had to fly acrobatically at a low altitude. He had not expected her to notice the subtle change. He was just wanting her to fly comfortably.

“I think it’s probably due to the cam parts I made last night.”

“Did you replace them?”

“I’m reporting it to you now. It worked, didn’t it?”

“It did.” Kusanagi narrowed one of her eyes. “It’s too late to report, and I don’t know which change was responsible to the effect.”

“No, it’s more like your piloting skills have improved, I’m sure,” Sasakura said lightly.

“If you lie to me, it will show on your face.” Kusanagi glared at him.

Well, she is probably right, Sasakura understood that. When I lie, my face has to be looking as bitter as this coffee, and it must be reeking of oil.

Episode 2: Nine Lives The night before he had still been at her side. Now he was gone. With a feeling of sadness that was too deep even for tears, Snowflake knew it was for ever.

This excerpt is from *Snowflake* by Paul Gallico

-1-

He liked the banks of the river with its inert atmosphere. It luckily matched the angle of the sunshine, so his body naturally warmed up when he lay there. He shifted his hat toward his face to block the glare, but that was only because it was somewhat bothersome for him to keep his eyes narrowed. It did not mean he disliked the glare. Compared to the brightness in the sky above, the light on the ground was utterly dull. Still, it was strange that he could not help but make a dazzled face as if his nerves were remembering the phenomenon. Also, the hat seemed to be a necessary shield to stop such inertia.

He heard the sound of a car running. On top of the embankment, there was an asphalt road that was cracked like a biscuit. Weeds had encroached on both sides, making it look much narrower than it really was. Cars rarely reached the spot. As he raised himself, he saw a white sedan approaching him. There was an iron bridge about 500 meters upstream. After crossing it, the car must have come into this embankment road. Downstream, there was no bridge from the vicinity to the sea. Neither were ordinary buildings or houses on the landside nearby. The only things in the vicinity were where he worked: the military base, the runway, and the facilities that were affiliated with these. He stood up. It was Monami, driving the car. She spotted him, and the car came to a stop.

He walked a few meters up the bank to beside the car. Monami turned off the engine and peeked out from the side of the driver's seat. She seemed to be dazzled by sunlight. The window was down. She drove with the window open, even on very cold days. She appeared to mistake the wind for fresh air.

"I thought you would be here," Monami said, twisting her body and putting both

elbows on the door. “Your job does not give you anything to do, does it?”

“What are you doing here?”

“I’ve just come to check on you.”

“I think you should go back home soon.”

“Why? Is this place off-limits? I’m free to come, aren’t I?”

“How are you taking care of the baby?”

“No worries.” She laughed.

“Answer me.”

“I’m letting the neighbor lady take care of my baby.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“That woman, she wants to take care of it. Of course, she does. She’s been nagging us, hasn’t she? I said to her, ‘If you insist so much, why don’t you do it then?’”

“Did you tell her that directly?”

“How could I? No. C’mon.” Monami raised her voice. “But that kind of thing. I do get that kind of thing, you know? That’s why it works better that way. I mean, you know, relationships. Anyway, if you show them that you trust them with your attitude, they won’t think badly of you.”

“I wonder if it is a good idea for you to use your baby for that.”

“Hey. What? Is that a bad idea?”

“No, it’s not any of my business to say this and that about.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah.” Monami twists her lips. “Hey, hey. What time will you be home today?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you don’t seem to be busy right now.”

“Do I look like that?”

“You do.” Monami laughed again. She looked like she was in a good mood.

He thought Monami in a good mood was worth so much that even if he subtracted Monami in a bad mood from her in a good mood, then there would still be a lot left in her.

He heard a faint sound. He turned his eyes in that direction. He could see two aircrafts approaching from a low altitude.

“Oh, airplanes?” She turned her head in that direction, too.

“They are about to touch down.”

“Really ...” She shaded her eyes with her hand.

One aircraft entered the approach phase first, and it glided onto the runway over the embankment. The other turned once toward the ocean and then made its approach maneuver. It was a crosswind, but a light one. It would be an easy landing, probably as easy as putting a foot into a sandal. But, three aircrafts took off a few hours ago. For a while, he stared at the sky in the same direction, which the two had just come back from.

“Is anything wrong?” Monami asked him.

“No, it’s nothing. You should go home now.” He was aware that his tone of voice might have become a little stronger.

“Yeah, I get it.” As if she sensed that, she pulled her chin back and pouted.

He was already walking down the obliquely aligned path from the embankment, when Monami started the car engine. He wondered if gravity was making him go too fast. There was no point in hurrying up like that. He decided to put his hands in his pockets to loosen himself up and walk slowly.

Still, he soon entered the base premises. He walked in a straight line in front of the runway to get closer to the hangar. The two planes he saw earlier were already being tugged into the hangar with a winch by the mechanics. As he got closer to them, they stopped their work and bowed to him.

He looked at the serial numbers of the two aircrafts. From them, he realized who had not returned safely. It was a novice pilot named Mizuno. He had flown with the rookie just once before. *I noticed that he wouldn’t be able to fly for too long. I heard the novice talking about quitting at some point. I didn’t listen to what the rookie said carefully, but maybe I*

should have made the statement back then. He thought about it for a moment.

One plane was unharmed, but the other had bullet holes in the tail assembly and the rear part of the fuselage. He went under the main wings to check the rest of the plane. His honest impression was that it was a lucky aircraft. He could not tell if the bullets entered the cockpit or not. It was a delicate angle. He could have climbed on top of the wing and looked inside, but he did not want to go that far. It was probably deemed a courtesy. At least, the canopy was not stained with blood.

The mechanics pulled the intact one into the hangar first. After seeing it, he headed toward the central building. He could see a man running in the distance. Three people were standing and talking in front of the office building. As he was about to walk past them, one of them stopped him.

“Oh, excuse me, sir. There’s a document I need your signature on.” The clerk with the glasses told him. Of course, he was acquainted with the staff but did not know the name.

He walked into the office building. The clerk went to the desk and came back to the counter with a document.

“Sir, here it is. Sign here, please.”

“What document is this?” He asked.

“This is a written pledge. It’s a document about your taking in a child.”

“No, I didn’t take in the baby. It’s indeed my child.”

“Right, but I think it’ll be easier to handle the issue in the end if you pretend that you are taking in the child. What will you do?”

“Whatever you want.”

“Well, anyway, sign here, please.”

He wrote his name on it while wondering how many documents he had signed so far. In this world, there is no time to sign anything important. The more unimportant the issue is, the more it needs the documents to be signed.

“Thank you, sir. I think this will give you the allowance starting next month.”

With one hand raised lightly, he left the room. The two others were still standing

and talking outside.

“Sir, who has fallen?” One of them asked him.

“Who knows?” He pretended not to know.

When I die, who will sign the papers for me? Or, have I already signed the forms for the case I die? Yes, I feel like I have already signed the deal a long time ago.

A van was parked in front of the central building. Shimano came out of the building with bandages on his upper arm. A doctor in a white coat ran to the other side of the van.

As he approached the van, Shimano looked at him, stopped, and smiled. It was the kind of facial expression to generate when receiving a gift.

“This is not a serious injury,” Shimano said in a hoarse voice. “I’m about to be taken to the hospital for something like this, you know? I can walk on my own, for goodness sake.”

He was still excited. He was getting intoxicated. He would soon become so exhausted that he would not even be able to stand up. He tapped Shimano lightly on the shoulder.

“Come on, get in quickly.” The doctor shouted from the other side of the car.

A doctor’s assistant also got in, and then the car started leaving the space in front of the central building. It then moved toward the gate. After its turn signal started blinking, the car disappeared from the sight. Another person was sending off the car. It was his colleague, the only pilot at the airbase who was older than he was. They made eye contact with each other just once, but there was no change in the facial expression or no conversation.

He was about to enter the building, but something moving at the edge of the roundabout made him look back. It was not an enemy plane, but it was a black cat. The cat stared at him, too. If it were an enemy aircraft, then the angle and the distance would have been deemed dangerous. The cat averted its gaze and disappeared noiselessly behind a garden tree. It was a familiar cat in this neighborhood. There was no house in the area except for those in the airbase. Someone at the military base, probably a mechanic, must have been feeding them. Pilots would not do that sort of thing. They would want to minimize their

involvement on the ground.

Minimization, he thought to himself for a moment, then walked up the stairs and into the central building.

-2-

Four pilots had gathered in a lounge and were talking. When he peeked inside from the corridor, they all turned to look at him.

The pilot who had just returned from the sortie was not there. The pilot was probably in his superior's office to give the report. He thought about what to do, but walked to the back of the corridor. He knocked on the large wooden door. As he heard the response from inside, he opened the door and entered the room.

The major, the practical boss of this military base, was sitting on the sofa in front of a free-standing single-panel partition, while facing the entrance. He was still young. The major was an elite officer who had just been transferred from the headquarters a couple of months before. In the seat closer to the entrance sat the pilot, Takashira.

"Ah, it's you. You've come to the right place at the right time." The major spoke. "This way." The major indicated the seat right nearby with one hand.

He saluted lightly, walked over to it, and sat down. Takashira, who was sitting opposite him, looked up at him. The eyes were bloodshot. Takashira was the leader of the three planes that were on the latest mission this time. One of the consort planes was lost, and another was damaged. The ongoing explanation was about how it happened.

After that, Takashira's report continued in an unhurried tone. He listened to it in silence. He was the highest-ranking pilot. He was often asked to give advice to the novice major, and it was not unusual for him to be called upon in such cases to hear the reports from other pilots. It was not that his participation would solve any problems, but it seemed to somewhat convince many others that it would be the remedy. Perhaps they were mistaken. *That's all. Just listening. It's an easy job, isn't it?*

It was a reconnaissance mission, but they encountered the enemy aircrafts above the sea. The opposing flight also consisted of three fighter aircrafts. Takashira had

shot down one of them, so the battle result was not too bad.

“Do you have any comments?” The major asked him.

“No, nothing in particular. I think it was a good decision.”

“I think so, too.” The major commented while looking at Takashira. “That’s all. Good. Now you can go get some rest.”

“Is Shimano all right?” Takashira asked.

“I haven’t received a report yet.” The major turned the head to the side again.

“Shimano is okay.” He answered instead of the major.

Takashira stood up and saluted to the other two. He seemed to be trying to smile a little, but the face was still tense. He turned to face the major and him again at the door, bowed, and left the room.

The major stood up and walked to the desk, picked up a cigarette, and lit it. The major then walked back over to him, still sitting on the sofa, and offered him cigarettes in a pack. One of the cigarettes was sticking out of the pack by half its length, and he held it between his fingers. The major lent him a lighter, and he lit the cigarette with it.

“I’m glad I let them engage in the mission with three aircrafts.” The major said, while exhaling the smoke to the ceiling. “You were right. If I had followed the manual, I would have dispatched them to the mission with two aircrafts.”

“If the flight had consisted of just two, then they might have been able to escape from the battle.” He said. He handed the lighter back to the major.

“No, he wouldn’t have done that, would he?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I believe Takashira would have never run away from the adversaries.” The major relaxed the lips. “He didn’t care about whether his colleagues might die or not. All he could think about was how he was going to fight and destroy them. That’s all.”

“More or less, that’s what we all do.”

The major turned to him, raised one eyebrow, then nodded silently.

“May I leave now?” He stood up.

“Oh, I’m afraid that there is one more thing.” The major sat down in the chair opposite him. It was the same chair that Takashira had been sitting in earlier.

He sat down once again. He was still holding the cigarette in his hand. He reached for the ashtray on the table.

“You’ve applied for the sustenance allowance, haven’t you?” The major crossed the legs.

“I have.”

“Have you gotten married?”

“No. If so, I can apply for the different kinds of allowance.”

“Right. Of course.”

“I’m going to live with a woman.”

“I heard you have a baby. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Is that the woman’s child by a former marriage?”

“No.”

They were silent for a moment. He let out a puff of smoke, and so did the major.

“You mean, it is your baby?”

“Yes, it is. That’s exactly what I wrote on the application.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t want to get into your personal life, but I don’t see, you know, that it is the kind of thing that I would expect you to do.”

“Oh, you do not?”

“If there’s anything you want, just let me know. I’ll do what I can to help you. For example, yes, the school wants to hire you as an instructor. Did I tell you about this?”

“Yeah, I turned it down.”

“The information bureau is also very keen on you.”

“I’m afraid,” He shook his head horizontally. “My current job suits my nature.”

“I think it would be easier if you are transferred, and for the sake of, you know ... your child ...” The major cut off the words after saying that much. The one who had just given up on trying to convince him was not stupid.

He stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray.

“It seems that we will be flying tomorrow.” He said.

“What?”

“I’m sure we’ll get that command soon.”

“Oh, you mean there’s something in that area, you say?” The major said. “Yes, I suppose that’s conceivable.”

That is something for the information bureau to contemplate. It is not the job of the aviators. The pilots just simply feel the sweetness of the air in the sky around them, to judge whether the air is sweet enough to attract flyers or not.

That was all that the major wanted to talk to him about. After saluting, he left the major’s room.

In the lounge, six pilots had gathered around Takashira and were talking. He had not intended to join the conversation, but Takashira spotted him as he passed by in the corridor, and came out of the lounge.

“Sir, thank you so much.” he was spoken to from behind.

“About what?” He looked back.

“I mean, you covered for me, didn’t you?”

“Did I? No, I don’t remember doing that.”

“I lost one of my consort planes, though ...” Takashira narrowed one of his eyes slightly. “I wish I could back him up a little sooner. I’m really sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry about that.”

Takashira looked into his face and then gave a slight nod. It was about time for the pilot to sober up. *From now on, he will feel more and more the weight of reality, the gravity of this earth. They have been doing it over and over again, but while they are up in the sky, they forget all about it. It’s just like being drunk. So, when they sober up, they feel the heavy disappointment.*

“Sir, are you here on standby tonight?”

“No.”

“If you don’t mind, would you like to go somewhere with me?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, but I have a previous engagement.” He declined.

“I’m sorry. I hope we will go out together someday.” Takashira smiled.

“Yeah ...”

Takashira was about to go back to his room.

“Oh, wait.” He stopped the younger pilot. Takashira turned around at the door.

“I missed the first part of your report. Were the enemy aircrafts of pusher configuration?”

“They were pushers, all three of them.”

“Well, thank you.”

He left the building, and walked toward the hangar. The sun was still high in the western sky, but the temperature was already starting to drop. He was not intending to go to that embankment again. Since he had no assignment to work on, he could just go back home. However, in his free time, he would have to choose from taking a nap on the slope of the embankment, running casually along the side of the runway, and going to the hangar to see the aircraft. When he was younger, he used to stay in his room in the billet and read books. Now, he kept nothing in his room except for a change of clothes. It was because he was now living outside the military base. *Life is getting more complicated*, he felt. The older he got, the more complicated it seemed to become. The more people he knew, the more relationships he had at work. The more there were, the more intertwined they became. There was no such thing as a clean slate. There was nothing that could be simply tidied up. Unlike an aircraft whose weight got limited in order to fly, life got heavier and heavier. It could afford to be that way. It could get heavier.

He walked in through a small door on the side of the hangar. There was a mechanic near his aircraft. The mechanic was sitting on a dolly, but when he noticed the visitor, he stood up and bowed to him.

“Sir, will you be flying tomorrow?” The mechanic asked him.

“What makes you think that way?”

“Umm, I just feel so for some reason.”

“That’s what I’m here to tell you.”

“Are you saying you’re flying tomorrow?”

“No, I don’t know yet. I just feel so for some reason.”

-3-

He returned home a little after 10:00 p.m. His duties ended three hours ago, but it was always this late. The commute took only 10 minutes or so. He used a black sedan whose engine looked like it was about to fall off. He had once driven a white sedan, but it was in such a good shape that he gave it to Monami.

Sleepy-looking Monami greeted him at the door. The child seemed to be asleep. He could tell because it was so quiet.

“What about the meal?”

“I’m done with it.”

This conversation was a regular occurrence. He could not understand why she would ask him so. What was she going to do if he had not eaten yet? There might be some canned food in the fridge. There was also beer.

Perhaps that was the kind of conversation she had been dreaming of. So, of course, he did not complain. He did not know what or when she ate. He could only guess that she probably went out to eat somewhere with her child. Before he could think of any more details, he switched to the different scene.

He took a beer out of the fridge, grabbed a glass, and sat down in a chair by the window. The television was turned off. Anything that made noise would wake the kid. It was as if children were afraid of a night raid.

Monami came up to him and told him that she learned a new kind of origami art. She said there was an elder woman in the neighborhood who could teach her how to do it. He had heard the story several times. She sat on the carpet, assumed a posture as if she was sucking the table, and folded the paper. Her origami creations

were placed all over the house. He had no idea of what they were worth. She once gave one of them to him as a good luck charm, but he left it on the dashboard of his car for several days.

“Has someone fallen?” Monami asked, while folding origami.

“Yeah, one of the young ones.”

“The relatives will have trouble dealing with it, won’t they? If someone left home in the morning and has not come back.”

“Few of them have families.”

“But they do have their fathers and mothers, don’t they?”

“They live alone in the billet.”

“Really ... Do they hardly go back to their respective hometowns?”

“No, not too many of them go back.”

“Is that the case for the one who just died?”

“Umm, I don’t know.”

“There you go, it’s done.” She showed him the origami. “What do you think this is?”

“Bird.”

“What kind of bird is it?”

“I don’t know to that extent.”

“It’s a parakeet. You know, like here.”

“Oh.”

“Doesn’t it look like it?”

“Yes, it may look like that.”

“It’s a strange workplace, isn’t it?” Monami stood up and walked to the kitchen. She seemed to have decided to get herself something to drink.

“What do you mean?”

She pulled out tea in a plastic container from the refrigerator. She poured it into

the small glass and put the container back into the fridge. Holding the glass in one hand, she came back over to him.

“Newcomers tend to die more often than the veterans. New blood keeps coming in. However, won’t this mean that nothing will change, you say?”

“What’s the problem if nothing will change?” He drank up the beer. He poured the remaining beer from the bottle into the glass, but it did not get even half full.

“The question is when to quit.”

“Whose question?”

“Mine.”

“About who’s quitting?”

“Of course, your quitting. I am wondering when you’re going to quit your current job.” She applied her lips on the glass. She sighed slightly. “Isn’t it enough? Considering your age, wouldn’t they try to get you another job?”

“No, because there’s nothing else I can do.”

“That’s a lie.” Monami pouted. “Don’t tell me you’re thinking of dying in the end. You’re shoving the baby into my arms, just like that.”

“I feel sorry about what I have done to you.”

“I doubt you really feel that way.”

“Hey, did something bad happen to you?”

“No matter how bad things may get, ordinary people like me can’t just say to heck with that and just fall to death. You know, I go through a lot. There are times when I’m so frustrated that I just want to die. But it’s not that easy to die, is it? To begin with, how am I supposed to die? I don’t even know how to die. I’m such an idiot ...”

“I know you’re not an idiot.”

“Oh, sorry.” Monami nodded obediently.

She had a habit of calling herself an idiot. He scolded her for that once. At that time, he might have used a stronger tone. He was careful not to get emotional to her, but there were times when he could not control himself.

Cannot die, he thought.

It is true that there is a system in our society that prevents us from dying easily. We are taught not to die, and we are pulled by strings from all directions to make it difficult for us to die. There is no one who does not think about what will happen to people around the one after the demise. Thinking about such a thing itself is an effect of the system that makes it difficult to die.

Going up to the sky means escaping from that invisible restraint. They can die there at any time. At their own will, by their own fate. And, if they die, no one will blame them. No one will regret their deaths greatly. They will not be hated. To die in the sky is special. It is a special place. At least, in terms of the perspectives from the ground, that is.

But, that's not true.

When they get up in the sky, they know that.

What do they understand?

It is the meaninglessness of being alive or dead. They can feel that it does not matter whether they are alive or dead. They can understand intuitively that it does not make much difference.

Especially when they are dancing with enemy aircrafts, the reason seeps into their bodies. It is the truth, that is the opposite of morality. Because it is the truth, it is comfortable. It is the comfort that comes out of being ruled by something that is neither life nor death. Once you touch it and are intoxicated by it, you will wish to return to it. Over and over again ...

And then.

Once they have experienced it, they are no longer alive or dead. After they come back to earth, they stay that way for a while.

At the foot of where he was having a seat, Monami was sitting on the carpet.

Her back was pressed against his knee.

Human warmth propagates slowly, with a delay.

Women are the beings who occasionally make me feel alive, he thought. When he wanted to feel alive, they were gratifying. However, when he did not want to feel alive, they

were depressingly annoying. At that moment, he was wondering which version of the woman Monami was being.

He turned his gaze upward.

He looked at the ceiling.

The dim white fluorescent lights were not dazzling at all.

A faint voice from the adjacent room.

Monami quickly let her back leave his knee. The quickness of her reaction was her gentleness. The quickness with which he deflected the control surfaces was also his kindness to the opponents. They are the same.

They listened breathlessly to the voice from the next room.

They expected that the wailing was about to start, but it became quiet.

Monami sighed, and looked back at him. Then, she smiled.

“It is alive, isn’t it?” He said.

“Yes.” Monami showed her white teeth.

-4-

He left the house while it was still dark. Monami and the child were both sleeping peacefully.

It was so cold outside that his breath turned white. By the time he reached the base’s parking lot, the heater in the car was finally starting to let out warm air. But his body was already warm enough. Strangely though, it was always like this on the day he was scheduled to fly.

He showed up at the central building and signed in to work. Then he headed for the hangar. The pilots he was flying with were already lined up. They gave him a quick salute as he approached them. They were all younger than he was. They were looking as if they were waiting for him to say something. *Words are worthless, but there are times when people want to hang on to them. There are still such things on the ground.*

He lit a cigarette to think of a word to speak. He happened to look to a certain direction and saw that black cat in a bush next to the hangar. It was staring at him

with the eyes that were glittering with green.

“That cat is always around here, isn’t it?” One pilot said.

This was a seasoned veteran. The man had been here before he came to this military base, and had flown with him many times. The one also lit a cigarette belatedly.

“If you’re a cat, you can fly eight more times even if you go down and crash.” The man said so, and laughed.

The dude was the one who would say such silly things that made no sense.

The other two pilots were new, with less than six months of experience. They continued to stare at him, just like the cat. This was the first time for both of them to fly with him.

“Do you two smoke?” He asked.

“No, sir. I don’t smoke.”

“Neither do I.”

“We still have time for a cup of coffee, at least.”

“Yes, sir.”

They must have already drunk coffee. He looked at the back end of the hangar and saw white paper cups on a table against the wall.

Four of their aircrafts were already tugged out of the hangar to the front. Four aircrafts flying together meant that this was not a reconnaissance mission. And, even if it was an escort mission, then the probability of the aerial engagement was quite high.

He exhaled the smoke.

“I don’t have anything in particular to say. Do you have any question?” He asked.

“No, sir.” One pilot responded immediately.

Another one nodded without words.

“Let’s fly with grace.” He spoke.

Think only of yourself.

Be free.

Have fun.

Don't think about anything else.

He swallowed those statements. *Ridiculous.*

Words are ridiculous. They are all lies.

He could get enough time to smoke until his cigarette was short.

They climbed into the cockpits, and conducted the final check.

Lock the canopy.

The engine started. The exhaust gas blew up lightly.

The propellers disappeared from the view. The aircraft rumbled roughly, and then vibrated finely.

He checked the meters. *There is no anomaly.*

He deflected the control surfaces. The mechanics responded by raising the hands.

He looked at the clock.

Raising a hand to give a signal.

Release the brake.

The aircraft began to move.

The tires on the asphalt are probably screeching painfully.

But, it was drowned out by the sound of the engines, and he did not hear the tire noise.

He taxied toward the broad runway threshold.

The weather was as soft as female skin.

He was in the lead. At the end of the runway, he turned around. He paused there.

The control tower gave him the green light immediately.

His left hand pushed up the throttle.

His right hand was lightly touching the control stick. *It is not yet showtime.*

Both feet were on the rudder pedals.

The aircraft started running.

The tailwheel left the ground first.

The wings grabbed the air.

His right hand pulled back the control stick just a little.

It became quiet. The aircraft lifted off the ground.

He looked at the control tower.

When the aircraft rose by about five meters, he moved the control stick slightly to the left and right.

The aircraft banked left and right.

He intended to greet those on the ground.

Check the gauges.

He retracted the wheels.

The sound of that mainwheel fairing closing was always unpleasant to hear.

He swung the nose of the aircraft slightly to the right, and checked the view behind him.

The second aircraft had just taken off.

His aircraft was climbing at a gentle angle.

The ground gradually became a distant view.

The blue sky was getting brighter and brighter.

There were clouds high in the sky ahead. Visibility was good.

As he flew slowly for a while, the remaining three aircrafts caught up with him. Maintaining the altitude, they headed east. Soon, they were over the ocean. It would probably stay that way for another half hour.

He brought the aircraft a little closer to another and sent a hand signal to the cockpit next to his.

The pilot signaled back. *There is no anomaly.*

Everyone was probably smiling at that point in time already.

He could tell that he himself was in a state of euphoria. He was having the mysterious feeling that he would be fine as long as the engine was running. *This sound is the heartbeat.*

And, certainly.

I wish that someone will fly over here.

I hope that I will meet them.

It was not the desire to shoot down the opponent.

It was not the feeling to want to shoot the bullets.

It did not even mean that he wanted to fight.

Then, what is it?

Maybe there is no expression for it on the surface.

Because words are for the ground.

There is no language in the sky.

There are no words to describe the sensations that exist only in the sky.

The closest word that comes to mind is ...

Dance?

Or.

Frolic?

Yes, I want to fly and frolic about.

He wanted to run around.

In this spacious, beautiful, free place.

With his dignity and solitude at stake.

Everyone who comes up to this place is great.

See that black cat symbol on the hood of my aircraft?

There is no friend or foe.

Let's greet each other with respect.

They are all those who give me something certain.

They will teach me life and death.

Maybe, they were gods.

The place to meet such gods.

That was the reason why the heart danced so much to the extent.

His body trembled with anticipation and aspiration.

Until now.

Even now.

From now on.

Always.

Even though I might have been thinking about quitting, I forget about it when I reach this space.

Quit? Quit what? Right, I don't even know what I'm quitting.

My only complaint is that I can't stay here long enough.

This world is more real than others, though.

In a world where there was nothing but blue, vibrations, and air, tiny dots would appear.

He also caught the pulse signal. The indicator lit up.

Recently, his eyesight was a bit impaired, but that was okay. Once he came up to the sky, he could see fine.

He responded by waving the main wings from side to side.

He took off his goggles once, and let the cool new air in.

A deep breath.

Twisting his head from side to side.

He moved his shoulders up and down lightly.

Relax.

Let it flow.

Fly elegantly.

Those were all he could think about.

I'm glad.

His face was smiling.

Softly.

Gently.

And.

Gracefully.

Fly.

Without limit.

Forever.

I pray that it will continue and last.

Episode 3: Waning Moon Why had he been given to her, if only to be taken?

Who had called him away in the night so swiftly that he had not had time even to say 'Farewell' ...?

This excerpt is from *Snowflake* by Paul Gallico

-1-

He seemed to have been dreaming of a festive dance party. The only thing that remained in his body forever was the rhythm, whether it was his breathing or the spasm. Still, when he slowly opened his eyes and looked around, there was a light nearby. It was the canopy. It was glowing vaguely, as if it was being electrically charged. It was beautiful. He wondered what kind of light it was. The sky was no

longer bright. If it was the real sky, then he was no longer flying. He remembered. That was a certainty.

His body was cold, and he could not feel even half of it. He moved his neck to raise his head and looked at the meters. He felt as if they were indicating the condition of his body. But, they did not make any sense. The needles and the counters had all stopped. The indicators were also out. They were neither tilted nor stopped. He felt a slight acceleration in a slow cycle. *This does not seem to be a desert. Have I been swallowed by a whale?*

How long has it been since the aircraft crashed?

Where am I?

He closed his eyes again. He went back to replaying the dream. Little by little, the images came back to him. His bodily sensation returned like a faint scent.

Yes, that was amazing.

The enemy aircraft that was spinning and closing in.

It was like buzzing wind.

His bullets were sure to hit the enemy. It was as if they were absorbed into the target. However, another aircraft stalled and stayed still pointing up in front of him. As if it was spreading its arms wide and standing.

He fired a shot again.

Evasion.

But, he might have been a moment, just a moment too late. He saw the canopy of that upstanding aircraft. There was another one above it, so he looked at that too. Either one of those moments would probably have been superfluous. In hindsight, he could notice that. There was no point in regretting it.

He turned to the left.

There was no time to control the flaps or the throttle. *I'll pass.* He did not even think.

Up, for just a moment.

The aircraft pointed upward, but it could not kill the speed at all. As if it was

gliding, it forcefully pressed the air against itself and got closer to the opponent. The enemy aircraft started to fall and was already in the smoke.

Into the smoke.

The main wing touched the opponent.

Invisible.

A loud noise and impact.

The reaction rolled his aircraft in the opposite direction, and then this time his aircraft started spinning. The world spun around him, round and round, but he could not quite comprehend what was transpiring because the surroundings were gray. He did not even recall closing his eyes.

When I was a child, I boxed. Did I not get hit so hard that I couldn't open my eyes? Something like that. I am recalling it for the first time. Yes, it was like that.

He heard a buzzing sound somewhere in the cockpit. The needles on the meters swung from side to side. The control stick froze, got stuck halfway through. Still, he solidified his stance, and swung the rudder to the reverse direction. He trusted his bodily sensation and chopped the elevators in small increments. The throttle, of course, was in slow. Before he knew it, his left hand was grabbing it. *Can I use the flaps? It will have no effect anyway, though.*

The spin rate went down. He could tell from the gauges that his aircraft was descending. He wondered if it was in the cloud. There was almost no visibility.

He heard the sound of an electric guitar. Maybe one of the instruments had just failed. He had no choice but to remove his goggles and helmet. Suddenly, his vision clearly broadened, and he saw something black over the nose of the aircraft. It was the surface. *Is that the ocean? Or is it the ...*

Ailerons were not effective. Only one side was working. He looked at the main wings. Part of the left main wing, from the left vertical stabilizer to the tip, was missing. There was a streak of white smoke, like water vapor. *Is that fuel?* He attempted to deflect the flaps, but there was little change. Just the rudder on one side was effective, and that was weird. It was impossible to fly straight under the condition. He decided to give up on the attitude control. He thought of just turning the aircraft and sliding it on the oceanic surface.

He had the option of bailing out, but the ocean was below him anyway. He did not want to leave the plane and stay far from it. No reason. It was just something that he thought about vaguely.

Above him, he saw clouds that were increasing the distances from him. Gray and white. He could see two pillars of black smoke piercing the sea in the distance. Compared to those types of crashes, his version of going down could be interpreted as far more gentlemanlike.

He heard a voice from somewhere.

Who is it?

He looked around. He wondered if there were angels flying outside the canopy. *Oh, maybe I am already dead*, he thought.

It was a voice that leaked from the receiver of his helmet. He hurriedly put his helmet back on.

“Do you copy?” He heard a voice. It seemed to be that of an ally.

“Yeah, I’m barely floating.” His own voice responded.

“What’s the damage?”

Did it mean damage to the aircraft or the pilot?

“I don’t know. Ailerons are split. Only one side is working. Maneuvering is difficult.”

“Crash landing or ejection?”

“Umm, I’ll try to get it down.”

“We have located you.”

“Roger that.”

They want me to wait quietly after I get to the surface.

I’m sure that’s the only option.

Up ahead, near the dark clouds, he could see a small shadow of an aircraft. It was kind of them to come all the way down. Maybe, they were going to watch him fail in his attempt at crash landing and get smashed.

He did not remember much of what happened next.

All he remembered was that he put his goggles back on just before the crash.

In any case, he survived the wreck.

I'm still alive.

Now, however, how long shall I wait here?

The fact that they confirmed the position seemed to mean that they were on their way to rescue him, so he should wait there. But even if the aircraft and the pilot thought they were staying still, the ocean was not necessarily stationary. He did not know much about it, but he had heard that there were such things as oceanic currents. It was unlikely that he would be picked up right away, and it would probably take at least several hours. By that time, his coordinate would probably change. Besides, according to the extremely optimistic estimate, the accuracy of his position was around a few kilometers. If the weather was clear and the visibility was good, then he might barely be spotted by chance. That was the accuracy level of the “position”.

Before he knew it, seawater was already seeping around his feet. The aircraft was not designed to function as a boat. It would sink eventually. However, it was not heavy enough to force itself to sink instantly. It is said that if the air is accumulated in the aircraft nicely, then it can stay afloat for a long time. He did not know if it was an urban legend or a fairy tale, but he had heard of something like that. The manual surely did not mention anything, except for measures to take, such as to turn off the battery and conserve the power for the radio. He had nothing to do, except for just sitting tight.

He wanted to open the canopy, but decided against it. Even if he went out of the cockpit, nothing good would come out of it. There might be vicious fish that would attack humans. He did not know much about fish. He did not trust fish, at least not enough to say he loved them.

It was not cold. The water around his feet was not chilly either. Fortunately, he did not seem to be seriously injured. He had been rocked from side to side and had gotten constricted by the belt, so there were some sore spots on the body when he moved around or touched them. There would probably be bruises. He did not want to see them. Such things were parts of everyday flight as well.

Then, he closed his eyes again for a while, and was reminding himself of the scenes from his last dance on the clouds. When he closed his eyes, his vision is brightened, and the clear and wonderfully fast images were replayed repeatedly. In particular, the final collision scene was repeated over and over again. His arms moved automatically. *I should have done it this way. A little more on this side, and I could have slipped through it.* It made him secretly happy to find such a beautiful possibility. *Next time, I'll definitely cut into that. Yes, there is a way.* He could bask in the satisfaction of knowing that this was how he was going to get stronger and stronger. Being alive was not so bad after all.

But, when he opened his eyes, all he saw was a sky that was getting darker and darker.

It changed from gray to purple.

The seawater was filling up the cockpit to his waist. He unbuckled his belt and lifted his body to the level as high in the cockpit as he could. Still, the space was limited. *Maybe, I can't live here for the rest of my life.* The thought made him smile again. He felt much calmer. However, his body was becoming heavier and heavier instead. He wondered if it was because the seawater had soaked into his body or if it was due to the low altitude. At any rate, a feeling of exhaustion, like black oil, permeated his entire body, making him feel numb and tingly.

He had apparently fallen asleep.

He focused his eyes on the hands of the clock on the panel, and calculated how much time had elapsed. It was only about an hour and a half. He felt as if he had been asleep for two days already. In the meantime, it seemed as if life on the planet Earth had become extinct, and the times had completely changed.

The canopy was glowing differently. It was because of the moon.

He raised himself up a little and looked up at the sky to see the full moon hovering behind him. It was very bright. It was like a searchlight.

It was as if the sky was covered with soft clouds. But, if there were such big clouds, the moon should not have been visible. It was strange. He felt like he was floating on a cloud, not in the ocean. If it were not for the flooding in the cockpit, he might have believed that.

He reached out and operated the main switch of the battery. It was already unresponsive. It was no wonder, for the cockpit was so substantially dipped in water. Saltwater is a conductor. *So, that is why the clock appears to have stopped*, he realized. He raised his arm and pointed his watch at the moon. There was not so much of difference between the time that was indicated on the control panel clock and that on his wristwatch as he thought.

This aircraft had yet to sink. Could it be that it would stay like this? Since it had been floating until now, maybe it would somehow hold onto the buoyancy until morning. It was not hard to breathe, and the cockpit did not seem to be sealed. It was not too hot or cold, so if it stayed like this, then he could survive for a while. He wondered if help would ever come. The aircraft itself was probably dead, but the pilot should still be useful for the company. Thinking about that, he sighed and smiled to himself.

-2-

The next time he woke up, he was surrounded by the blinding light. It was as if a mass of light had just fallen from the sky and fine particles had precipitated. The seawater was already up to his chest, and the surface was very close to his face.

When the light source moved, he could see a large black object. He also noticed the rhythmic whirring of the engine.

He raised himself and rubbed the canopy. He looked outside. There was a ship nearby. *Thank goodness*, he thought.

He unlocked the canopy to open it. He could not put as much strength into his fingers as he wanted. His skin might have gotten pruney from being soaked in the water.

As he unclasped the metal fittings and managed to push up the canopy, cold air rushed into it and the splashy wind with seawater droplets hit him in the face. It was the first time since the crash for him to feel this cold.

A voice came from above him. He could not quite make it out. And, he could not look up because of the glare. For the time being, he responded with a wave of his raised hand.

Still, the waves were relatively gentle, and the acceleration of the vertical oscillatory motion was sluggish. Rather, he had already gotten used to the cycle. Thanks to the approach of the titanic object, he could finally see for the first time that the aircraft was moving up and down.

Something fell on the surface of the sea. It was a white lifesaver ring buoy. It had a rope attached to it. The light was directed toward it, and that would allow him to see finally what was up there. The deck of the ship was several meters above him. A number of people were looking down.

The idea of jumping into the ocean at night was terrifying, but apparently, they wanted him to take care of the rest of the rescue procedure for himself. He decided to get out of the cockpit. There was nothing to pick up to take with him. His ID card and other documents were in his jacket pocket.

The aircraft's wings were almost completely submerged. He put his feet on the wing and walked out of the cockpit through the canopy, open at an oblique angle. He felt his body was heavy. And, it was cold. Various sensations were coming back to him. Suddenly he began to feel sick, and his head started to hurt. Maybe he was not in shape to make a move like that.

He swam to the lifesaving ring buoy and held on to it. Then, he was lifted up by a rope. All the while, all he could see was the aircraft being submerged in seawater. *I'm going to have to say goodbye to her. Thinking about it gives me a strange feeling, like closing the lid on a coffin.* Except for the edge of the main wing, the aircraft's silhouette was beautiful and it was almost kept intact. Maybe because he had just opened the canopy, it was about to sink already.

Finally, he was lifted onto the deck by many hands. A large towel was wrapped around his body. He was placed on a stretcher and carried into the room. His wrist was grabbed, and the pulse was taken. They asked him some questions, and he answered them. He suddenly began to feel sleepy.

They told him to change his clothes. They asked him if he wanted to take a shower. He thought for a moment before nodding. *Oh yeah, they even have showers here. Ships are amazing.*

As he bathed in hot water, he thought that he indeed started feel a little better. Or rather, it was how he was living his life originally. He realized that the life had

become gradually dull enough to be about to stop.

He put on the bulky clothes that they gave him. They apologized that it was all they had on the ship, but he did not mind it at all. He had intended to wear his own clothes, but it certainly felt better not to get wet. He wiped his head with a large towel, and sat down on the chair. The cushions were soft. He was again impressed by the ship being loaded with such large chairs.

“How do you feel, mister?” The man, who was wearing a white uniform and a pair of white gloves, asked. In the room, another man was standing near the door, and was also looking at him.

“I’m fine.” When he answered, he could recognize that his voice was hoarse. “Um, is this a cargo ship?”

“Yes, it is. We happen to have passed by and have just found you. We had not received any report that a search was underway in this maritime area.”

“Have you contacted them yet?”

“Yes, of course. We’re currently making confirmations.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, we just did what we had to do. Um, sir, aren’t you injured?”

“Maybe ... No, I don’t think so.”

The man in the uniform was looking fixedly at him, then smiled a little later.

He turned his gaze downward. He looked at his hands. The sleeves of the clothes that he was wearing were so long that his hands were half-hidden. He rolled up the sleeve, and touched his wrist. He flexed his fingers. There was nothing unusual about them. He had expected them to be wrinkly by the seawater, but they looked fine.

Strangely enough, the feeling of relief that he was rescued did not come over him. *I just happen to be on this ship. I must have inconvenienced these people by making them do unnecessary work and taking up too much of their time.* That was all he could think about. *Isn’t there anything I can do to help them?*

“I can at least clean a room.” This was the statement that came out of his mouth.

The man gaped, blinked several times. Then he breathed out. Maybe he recognized it as a joke.

Silence prevailed for a while.

He looked around the room. Wooden walls, flooring, and fine furniture. The man was sitting on a chair of a desk, painted in white. A stained glass lamp shone faintly on the desk. The ship was hardly shaking. It was a large ship. He almost forgot that he was at sea.

“Mister, would you like something to drink?” The man asked him. “How about some coffee?”

“Yes, please.” He nodded. *Now that you just mentioned it*, he thought. He was thirsty. Still, considering the fact that he had not had anything to drink for hours, he was not all that much thirsty. The man looked at the face of the young man at the door. The young man nodded and walked out of the room. He wondered if the young man was responsible for that sort of duty.

“It appears that you have not quite been contacted by anyone to search for me ...” He asked what he had been wondering about. “How did you manage to locate me? Who found me?”

“I did.” The man answered.

The two of them faced each other eye to eye. The man seemed to be smiling faintly. Maybe it had to do with the shape of his mouth.

“I was off duty. I happened to be out on deck to feel the night breeze, and it was just a coincidence. I saw something faintly shining.” The man kept talking. “I had the ship stop immediately and turn it around. It’s not often that the sea is this calm around here. The moon was also out and it was bright. You were lucky.”

“By morning, the aircraft might have sunk.”

“Yes, probably ... If the search party were to be dispatched, then it would have been done after the dawn.”

-3-

The man was the vice captain of the ship.

He woke up in the middle of the night. He had a horrible dream.

Many human heads were protruding from a vertical stone wall, and they were looking down at him. From the top of the wall, a grandiose voice beckoned to him. *Climb the wall*, the voice commanded him. In order to climb the wall, he had to use the human heads as footholds. "Put your feet on us," the heads said softly, but when he actually put his weight on them, they let out voices that sounded more like screams.

He climbed halfway up. As he looked down, he realized that he was already high up, far from the ground. And yet, the wall continued endlessly farther into the sky. Countless heads were looking down and staring at him below them. The head he was on was groaning. There was a single white moon in the night sky, only half of which was visible. *I wonder where the master of the grand-sounding voice is at. The voice does not reach me anymore.* All he could hear was the whispering and breathing of the heads. The moaning was reaching him from below.

His own breath. The scratchy air. Sweat from his forehead.

This is a dream.

It was what he always dreamed.

He stepped off the bed and put on his shoes. When he stood up, he finally felt that he was in reality.

He washed his face. Then he rinsed his mouth. By that time, his heartbeat had returned to normal. He opened the door and stepped out.

He walked on the deck. The ship was quiet as if it were at a standstill.

The sky was a blur. A flat expanse of ocean.

The wind was neither cold nor warm.

Leaning over the railing, he looked down and saw streaks that were indeed spreading. He could see that the ship was cruising on the sea, as if it was gliding. He had never seen a sea so calm.

There was nothing but sky and sea around him. He could not see anything else in particular. In the sky were the full moon and shapeless clouds. The sea surface was just a fine reflection of them.

Suddenly, he had an idea for a solution.

No, maybe he had been aware of it for a long time.

I will just climb over the railing and sink into the sea.

At this time of night, I won't be discovered.

He looked back. There was no one on the deck. It was a blind spot from the wheelhouse. It would be easy for him to dive into the water without anyone noticing. He could do it at that very moment.

Usually, he would prefer to do it at a place where the water was a bit colder. That would be a more surefire method to execute. However, this voyage would not take him through such northern waters.

Am I going to live and drift in the sea for a while?

That is also the will of God.

God?

Can such a thing possibly be ...?

No, I shall not think about it.

Indeed, I must not mention it.

It's the doom.

The doom for all.

Cigarettes were in his jacket pocket, so he took out one of them and put it between his lips. He looked for a lighter. In another pocket, he found it. The usual place. *Yes, God is in the usual place.*

He lit the cigarette, and exhaled the smoke.

Then, he recalled something.

Until a few years ago, he had worked for a different company. As a navigator, he was on an aircraft carrier. It was the type of ship that carried fighter aircrafts. He just did what he was told, calculated, and drew lines on the marine charts. There was no hesitation, no thinking. He just did the calculations, just like a machine.

What he saw there were a number of expressionless faces, faces, and then faces of

people.

In particular, the faces of those who piloted aircrafts.

They were much younger than he was, but they had calm eyes that looked enlightened.

Their immobile mouths in the forms of slight smiles.

When a signal was issued, each of them just responded by lightly raising one hand.

Then, the aircrafts were tugged to the catapult, to be launched.

Many of them never came back after that.

Even if some of them came back, they were too wounded to move in some cases.

The terrible case was, well, that time.

One of the aircrafts came to a sudden stop due to a faulty arresting wire that was designed to let the landing aircraft deploy the arrester to get it hooked to the wire. The hook was damaged, but the aircraft was intact. However, when the canopy was opened, the pilot was found dead. The sudden negative acceleration caused the belt to constrict the one to death.

It was a woman with a white face.

At that moment, he was blocking out any feelings. So, he did not feel anything. It was a regular work shift and a part of his job. *People's death is the natural order. Everything is God's will. Each fate is according to the schedule.*

That face still came back to him, and was replayed.

Repeatedly.

Yes, those heads on the wall were ...

Those were her heads.

Use me as a springboard to climb this wall.

That was what she was saying.

That was what they were all saying.

He wondered if living was really that much full of grudge.

The cigarette smoke was invisible to him. It quickly assimilated into the wind and disappeared. He threw the shortened cigarette into the sea. Then he gripped the railing.

He looked at his hands, and put the strength into them.

I'm going to get through this.

Then everything will vanish into thin air.

I might as well join the grudging heads on that wall, and become one of them.

Wouldn't it make me happier than the one to climb the wall?

The sea around him was as motionless as a desert. Only the wind was acting on him.

The white moon.

Even that moon would eventually fade.

The moment is just for now.

Something was glowing, and he turned his gaze to it.

Was that a wave crest?

That was not what it was. Instead, it was a bit more of a linear glow. From the front, it was getting closer and closer. When it reached the side of the ship, he realized that it was something like a capsule. He could see a doll or a human figure inside.

The capsule glowed dimly in the moonlight.

He could see a white face inside.

It was a peaceful face as if the one was asleep.

Eventually, he saw a shadow around the capsule, sinking into the black surface of the sea.

He ran to the stern.

He wanted to look at it for more. Or, he was just admiring its beauty.

Is that an angel?

Or ...

Noah's Ark.

The dove has come back.

“Stop the ship!” He found himself shouting.

While making sure of the location, he ran to the nearest wall.

He grabbed the shipboard internal telephone.

“Emergency stop. I’ve just found a person in distress behind us on the port side. Emergency stop.”

The dove has returned. The landmass has not appeared yet.

-4-

He could not sleep.

He lay in bed for several hours. He closed his eyes and remained motionless.

Still, what he saw were the same. A bright sky above the clouds. A beautiful dance floor. Smoke and flashing lights. The sound of explosions and vibrations. The weight of the control surfaces on his arm. Reaction and reflection. The consciousness blurred as if it was ripped away, and it was enveloped in the sweet blood scent of ecstasy. In an instant, he rubbed his cheek against the cold metal surface, and was brought back to the world shaken by the explosive blast.

Roll sideways, then climb upward. Stall, then full throttle. Feeling and diving under the wind. Spins, loops, rolls, slips, skids, turns. The world blurred from side to side. Up became right, down became left. Light, debris, slight movements, breathing, needles, meters, levers. Oxygen, fingers, toes.

I can see it. The enemy is coming.

Passing by. Evasion.

Pull back. Wait. Stop breathing. Fire. Evade. Shake. Glide.

Dance, and dance, endlessly.

While holding my breath, I calculate. My next trajectory. My next opening to the new way.

He predicted the next development of the situation, and made the move first.

Splendid. Fast. Light.

Precisely, coldly, and quietly.

His right hand followed his right arm, and his left hand beckoned his left arm to follow.

His body was already a part of the aircraft. They were united, assimilated, and integrated with each other.

His thoughts were on the tips of the meter needles.

Fire.

Evade.

Turning.

Downward.

Fall.

Over and over and over again. Little by little it shifted, and it repeated. Little by little, it was rubbed. Little by little, it was chopped, and it repeated. It repeated. Little by little, it disappeared. Repeated until it disappeared.

Where is life?

There is no life here in the sky.

No such thing is flying.

He fired away.

Flashes of light flew ahead of him.

He fired the shot again.

The smoke rose.

He evaded it.

He was enveloped with a white cloud, and suddenly it became quiet.

What is this?

His body was softly wrapped in the cloud. The feeling of floating.

The sensation of being constricted was fading away.

What in the sky is it?

Stretching out the arms and legs, freely, endlessly, without resistance.

The sea surface was approaching.

Freefalling.

Well, it's over.

Dead already.

The approaching sea surface.

He could see himself floating on it.

At the same time, he was diving into his body.

His viewpoint switched instantly, and he was looking up at the night sky.

That's the moon.

It is white.

The pitch-black sky was vaguely hazy.

He reached out his hand and saw a transparent canopy in the foreground with respect to the sky background.

Like a planetarium, the night sky was projected on the background.

He wondered if all of these were fake. Was the fight to the death just a moment ago an illusion projected on this screen? Or was it just an illusion reflected on his own canopy?

But, that's okay.

It was still beautiful.

And yet, it was amusing.

That certainty was welling up from his throat. Then it leaked out of his mouth and became a muffled voice.

“To the place once more.”

He opened his eyes. Unfortunately, he was still sitting on a bed in the dark room.

He stood up and approached the wall to turn on the light in the room. But, the door was closer. He opened it and stepped out.

He opened one of the circular windows that lined the wall of the passage. He felt the air was flowing. It was not wind. The ship was moving.

He walked up the stairs, opened the door, and stepped out onto the deck.

He looked out over the railing at the ocean. He leaned forward and looked at the sea surface. Nothing was there. It was pitch black. There was no moon in the sky. It was almost dawn. But, he could not tell which way was east.

When he turned around and looked behind him, he saw a white glove on the railing at the higher level.

He walked back through the door, into the corridor, and up the stairs. That was the direction to the stern. There was a door, so he went out of the corridor.

A man in a white uniform was standing there. It was the one he had met earlier. He was the vice-captain of this ship. He saved his life a few hours ago.

“Are you having trouble trying to fall asleep?” The vice-captain turned to him and smiled belatedly.

“No, I was able to sleep. I’m just waking up now.”

“But, it’s just four o’clock.”

I do know what time it is.

“They’re supposed to pick you up at 11:00. We received the call.”

“I see. Thank you.”

“Until then, please feel free to relax. If you have any requests, I am available ...”

“No, thank you.”

“Is there anything you’d like to drink or eat?”

“No, sir.”

“Cigarette?”

He thought for a moment.

The man smiled and got out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He held it out

to him.

He pulled out a cigarette from the pack, which he had just received. The man handed him a lighter, and he lit the cigarette with it.

He exhaled the smoke. It gave off a familiar aroma.

The vice-captain was looking at him. He returned the cigarette pack and the lighter to the owner. The items were brought back into the pocket.

“What were you doing then?” He exhaled the question along with the smoke. “Is it your duty to patrol the seas?”

“No.” The vice-captain shook his head horizontally. The smile was already gone. Silence.

The wind was steady.

The sea was not rough.

The sea and the sky were pitch black.

He could even feel as if they were stationary.

He could be under the illusion of being in the outer space.

Inhale the smoke, exhale the smoke.

Breathe in, breathe out.

People are born, people die.

People kill, people are killed.

“Is there anyone waiting for you?” The vice-captain asked.

That was a strange question, he thought.

“What do you mean, sir?”

“Well,” He seemed to be sniggering wryly. “There must be someone waiting for you to come back, right? I’m sure they’re worrying about you right now.”

“No, there is no such person.”

He exhaled the breath, turned around, and looked at the ocean once.

“But you believed it, didn’t you?” The vice-captain turned to him.

“Believed what?”

“I mean, that you would survive.”

“No, sir.”

“Didn’t you believe that you would survive?”

“I did not, sir.”

“Then why did you stay in the aircraft? The vice-captain narrowed his eyes and had his eyes glued on him. “The chance of survival was slim. Didn’t you ever think of throwing yourself into the sea?”

“I did not.”

“The aircraft would sink eventually. Were you ever thinking that you would sink with it?”

He closed his eyes and thought back on what he did, but he did not recall having such idea.

“No, sir. I did not think of that.”

“So, what were your thoughts? What were you thinking about, alone in the cockpit?”

“Well, I wasn’t thinking about anything in particular. It was the same as usual. I was asleep most of the time, because I didn’t have to control the aircraft anymore.”

“Were you liberated, then?”

“Liberated?”

“I mean, liberated from fighting.”

“No, sir,” He shook his head horizontally. He thought about it, but it did not seem to be right either. “I’ve never thought about that.”

Then, he started wondering why he was being asked these questions. *What is this man trying to do? His questions are very abstract.* It did not seem like the vice-captain was trying to find out anything confidential. He was sure about that point.

“So, what did you think about the fact that I was able to find you and rescue you?”

“I thought I was saved fortunately. I’m grateful to you.”

“Why?”

“Do you ask me why?”

“Because you have survived?”

“It is because I can fly again.”

“Ah ...” The man opened his mouth a little, and then turned his gaze upward.

He seemed to be looking into the sky. A pitch-black sky.

Pitch-black clouds.

The outer space above it.

Does this man know anything about it?

Has this man ever seen it before?

“The place is ...” The man made a sigh and then smiled again. “The sky has got to be like under the sea, right?”

I know nothing about matters in the sea.

He thought he could not fight there.

However, they might somewhat resemble each other.

At least, it is more like the sky than the ground or the sea surface.

As the cigarette grew shorter, he looked around, wondering how he should take care of smoking.

A white glove was pointed to the sea.

Following the instruction, he threw the cigarette into the sea.

A small red flame fell at an angle.

He could not watch it fall to the surface all the way.

“The ocean purifies everything.” The man said.

I thought about the word “purify”.

The sky does not purify anything.

Nothing can stay there.

“If you’d like ...” The vice-captain took the pack of cigarettes and lighter out of his pocket again. “Take this.”

“Sorry?”

“I won’t smoke anymore.”

The meaning of the statement was not clear to him at the time.

However.

In the following morning, when he was getting on the small boat to transfer to the seaplane that had come to pick him up, he was told by another sailor the fact.

The vice-captain was no longer on board the ship.

Episode 4: Spit Fire

There seemed to be no place that Snowflake could go to find peace in the vast ocean through which she was now drifting aimlessly, driven by wind and current, or roaring storm.

This excerpt is from *Snowflake* by Paul Gallico

-1-

The sun was getting lower in the sky as if it was peering through a window. The yellow glow that was about to seep into the sides of all universal things and the resulting movement of fine dust that seemed to have been left behind were floating in a nostalgic way. The jukebox at the corner of the bar was partially out of lights, but it was still pumping out the bass of slow-tempo blues. The air was streaked with such micro-vibrations that his skin felt were rough and finely scratchy, even if he thought he was gently caressing it with his hand.

The master was cleaning his boots. There was only one customer. It was a woman. She was wearing a black jacket, a knee-length black skirt, and sunglasses. She had visited the bar several times, but she had not spoken to the master except for when she was placing orders.

The master had already brought her the coffee to the table, so there was nothing left to do but take the money for coffee. He used his knife to remove the pebbles from the soles of his boots and shaved off the splintered tip of the rubber as well. As he immersed himself in his work, the reason he was doing this faded away. He felt like he was plowing a farm field, solving a puzzle, or just walking by putting his left foot and right foot forward alternately. Any other feelings were sucked out by the blues music.

The master heard the sound of a motorcycle engine. The sound of tires on gravel and the high-pitched squeal of brakes came closer. Through the window in the doorway, he could not see the motorcycle. But, he did not have to walk to the window to learn that a visitor had just arrived. A short while later, he heard the door open, so he gave up on cleaning his boots, which had just hit the climax. He raised his head above the level of the counter table.

The visitor's face was what he did not recognize. He knew most of the customers. It was only about three times a year that someone he did not know would come to the bar. It meant that the new customer would come to the bar several times after that, and someone else would stop coming instead.

The woman sitting at the table looked up. The newcomer also noticed her. He stopped and bowed lightly to her. It seemed to the master that the woman gave a slight nod. Or, maybe she just appeared to be doing it. The woman was looking at the master, but he could not see her eyes and tell what she was looking at because of the sunglasses.

The customer who just came in was a young man with a childish haircut. There was a trace of wearing a helmet on his hair. It was a type of hat-head. The customer took a seat at the counter. After looking around, he turned to look at the master. The customer's mouth was forming the shape of a slight smile. Maybe he was actually smiling.

"What do you want for a drink, sir?" The master asked.

"What do you have?" The customer asked back.

"For drinks, we have coffee, beer, soda, and cola."

"Coffee, please."

"Anything else?"

"For now, give me a coffee for a start."

The master started making coffee. He hooked the white cup lying on the towel with his finger to pick it up, and turned his back to the customer. It had become so routine that it was almost as if he was moving unconsciously. His nerves were still focused on the customer. However, he was not looking back.

"Bring to me the same thing as what she's eating." The customer whispered.

He was probably being careful not to let the woman at the table hear his voice. The master turned politely and showed him a silent nod.

The jukebox music had already ended. It was quiet in the bar. The master poured the coffee into a cup and placed it on the counter table. He brought it in front of the new customer.

“Which would you like, apple or meat?” The master asked.

“Apple or what?”

“Meat.”

“What meat?”

“Pork or beef.”

“Then, meat please.”

The master nodded. He smiled a little for the customer. It was his service delivery. In short, it was his way of hiding his embarrassment about not knowing whether the meat was actually pork or beef.

The woman at the table stood up and walked over to the jukebox. She seemed to be choosing another song. The customer at the counter table turned and looked at her, while holding a cup in his hand.

The customer is probably a new man who has just arrived at the base. The woman has been working at the base for some time. The master could not tell which of the two was at the higher rank, but at least the man did not seem to be ranked higher. The master could not tell which one of them was older than the other at all, just from their appearance. In the first place, these people had that kind of appearance without exception. He could not tell their age. However, they are all young. They look young anyway. But, they are not children. The look in their eyes is not that of a child.

The base was a military facility where aircraft took off and landed, and it was located about a dozen kilometers away from this bar. The master had only been there once when there was a bazaar. If it had not been for that event, then he would have had no reason to go near the place. There was nothing around it. No buildings. No farmlands.

The master used to see cows and horses in this neighborhood, but now they have been replaced by machines with engines. When there were cows and horses, there were people who took care of them, so most of the customers in his bar had something to do with such jobs. They were big, tanned, and laughed out loud. The only drink they ordered was beer. Any beverage other than beer would not sell. At that time, the master made coffee just for himself. *However, since the base was built, the situation has changed drastically. Now, no one is tanned. They are all small and skinny. They are*

quiet and talk in small voices. They hardly speak. Each of them comes here quietly to drink coffee alone. They just read magazines or listen to music. They don't stay for more than half an hour. They leave immediately. They made the master wonder why they would bother to come all the way to the place.

The same song as what had been played until a moment ago started. The woman put in a coin and chose that song again. When this song was over, she would probably leave the bar. She always listened to the same song twice before she left.

The customer at the counter did not seem to be interested in the music. He picked up a pepper jar that was close at hand and lifted it up to look at it from underneath, and then he turned the saucer underneath the coffee cup upside down. Perhaps it was his hobby to look at the flipsides of various things.

“Are you a pilot?” The master asked him. It was unusual for him to ask such a question to a customer. But somehow, the customer seemed to be waiting for the master to say something.

“Yeah.” The master could barely hear his voice, but the customer nodded. Then he lifted his cup slightly, put it close to his face, and took a sip of the coffee.

Now that the meat pie was warm, the master held the plate out in front of the customer.

“It’s bitter coffee, isn’t it?” The customer commented.

“Yeah, it’s bitter.” The master replied.

“How do you make this?”

“Umm, nothing special. I just boil the whole bag in a pot.”

“Oh, after all ...” The customer was about to say something when he turned around. He appeared to be taking a look at the woman at the table. The customer turned to the master again, but there were no further words.

“After all?”

“Right. After all.”

“After all, what?” The master asked.

“After all is after all.” The customer changed the shape of his lips slightly. He

might have been smiling.

The master could not really understand the meaning of the customer's words. But there were at least a hundred things a day that he did not understand. No, there were probably more than that. *Sometimes they are mixed in with cigarette smoke, and occasionally they are lodged in the soles of my shoes. They linger at the bottom of the pockets or fall from a light bulb that is about to go out. I cannot understand most of them.*

"Who's the old man outside?" The customer asked.

"Ah, he's always there." The master answered. "Don't worry about him."

Right, that old man is another one of those things that don't make any sense, thought the master.

"Does he have anything to do with this bar?"

"No, nothing." The master shook his head. "He always comes here and stays there. He's a nuisance."

"Doesn't he ever come into this bar?"

"He doesn't have money."

"But, he seems to be drunk. How does he get the liquor?"

"I have no idea. I do not recall having sold it to him."

The drunken old man would come to the entrance of his bar at least once every three days. He often sat on the entrance steps. The master, while cleaning, would sometimes warn him that he was in the way of the business and the customers, but he would not leave. The master once yelled at him and sent him away. However, he still came back again, undeterred. The master was not worried that he would lose customers because of the old man. There were no other bars in the area to compete with. There were few customers, to begin with. It was not a situation in which such a small factor would affect his business at all.

When the song ended, the woman at the table stood up and came to the counter table. It was for paying the bill. The master handed her the coins as change. They said nothing. The woman did not look once at the man who was eating the meat pie. It was so natural as if she was not even noticing him.

The woman walked to the doorway, pulled it open, and got out. As she did so, the

master caught a fleeting glimpse of the old man's back as he was sitting on the steps.

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When the woman moved down the stairs and walked a few steps on the ground, she was called out and stopped. It was not that she was being called by name. She did not know if the old man spoke to her "Hey", "Girl", or "Look," or if he simply spat out random words.

Still, she stopped and looked back. Of course, it was not the first time that she saw the drunken old man. It was not the first time for her to talk to him, either.

"What?" She decided to ask.

Finally, the old man's gaze turned to her.

"Have you drunk alcohol in the bar?" The old man asked.

"No, I haven't."

"Why haven't you?"

"I've drunk something else."

The old man turned his head to the side and spat on the ground. Then, with a retracting gesture of his head while shrugging, he looked up at the sky. He squinted his eyes, but the sun was already gone from that direction.

"There," the old man said, pointing to the sky. "He's right there."

She looked at the sky. There was nothing.

Only the clouds were in the sky.

At least, no enemy aircraft was spotted. She was sure that her eyesight was better than the old man's. *He has got to be talking about something invisible*, she imagined.

"God exists," The old man said. "He's humongous, you know?"

"God, you say?" She asked back.

"That's right. He's much bigger than mere humans."

"Really." She nodded. "Thank you for telling me. I'm leaving now." She raised a

hand. “See you.”

“He comes down to this place occasionally. You know, he comes down, right here. His eyes glow. He runs down the road over there.” The old man kept talking, but up to that was all she could hear.

Fine sand was accumulated on the rubber of the side window. She opened the car door and climbed into the cold driver’s seat. She took another look at the old man in front of the bar. She thought that he would be in danger if he jumped out in front of her car. She started the engine. After revving up the engine once by stepping on the gas, she closed the door.

Her car stepped onto the gravel and went out toward the street. A sedan was approaching from the direction that the sun was setting into. She waited to let the sedan move past her car, but it seemed to be going into the parking lot of the bar. As the sedan slowed down, she stepped on the accelerator and pulled the car out onto the road. While looking into the rearview mirror, she accelerated the car. She could see the sedan entering the parking lot. But she could not even see the old man. Everything in her sight immediately became smaller and more distant.

The visibility ahead was good, and the sky was clear. But, that was just the upper half of the view that included the sky, and there was a shadow dominating near the ground.

She looked up at the sky, but there was still no sign of the aircraft.

No colossal God, no glowing eyes. Nothing there.

-3-

Two women walked into the bar. The light-skinned one was wearing a beige skirt with a deep slit. The other had long hair, dark skin, a short black skirt, and brown boots. Both were familiar faces. The master had heard their names before, but he could not remember them. He could hardly remember the names of his customers. Even though the overall customer count was limited, it was still larger than the number of items available on the menu.

“What the heck was that ...?” The darker woman said loudly.

“No big deal. It’s kinda cute. He might be waiting to be picked up for a ride.”

“You mean, a school bus or something?”

“He’s not in the age group for that sort of thing.”

The master approached the table that they were sitting at. He had a hunch that these customers would complain if he did not provide quick and prompt services to them by staying ahead of the game.

“What can I get for you?”

“I’ll have a beer. And nuts.”

“I’ll have black tea.”

The master gave the women a nod and left the table.

“Hey, what’s this? You want me to drive you home?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll have a beer, right?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Ah, you’ve drunk already.” The darker woman laughed. “I mean, you’ve been drinking constantly. Isn’t your voice getting hoarse?”

“I was born with this voice tone.”

“I don’t think you were born that way. See, you probably cried too much when you were a baby. You weren’t born that way, were you?”

“If you don’t know anything about my life, could you please stop talking nonsense?”

The women continued their chatter. The master returned to the counter and checked the young man. He looked back at the master. The customer had his back turned to the women, but their voices were reaching the entire bar. The master gave a slight smile to him, while trying to indicate that he was apologizing for the noise, but he was not sure if the customer got the message.

While the master was preparing beer, nuts, and black tea, there was a lot of chattering between the women. They were saying bad things about their peers, the

factory where they had their car repaired, the stains on their clothes, and so on.

The master put the glasses and cups on a tray, and then left the counter again.

“Oh, hey, do you have any whiskey?” The woman with a lighter complexion asked in a husky voice. She was the one who had ordered the beer.

“Yes, ma’am, I do.”

“Then let me have that, double.”

“Certainly.” The master nodded obediently.

“Are you already worrying about your next drink?” The darker woman asked, while letting out her breath.

The chatter between the women stopped there. After taking a sip from her beer, the woman stood up with her glass and walked to the corner of the bar. She looked into the jukebox. Relieved that the chatter had stopped for the moment, the master returned to the counter.

A song with high-pitched female vocals started to play. As long as the music was being played, everything seemed to calm down, as if it was getting stuffed inside the luggage to keep it from running wild to become a pile of mess. People, glasses, cups, bottles, and plates seemed to be protected by the soft vibrations of the music.

The master took the ordered glass of whiskey to the table.

The lighter-skinned woman had come back to the table, smiled, and accepted the glass. If she did not talk, she looked like an elegant lady. At least, she looked more so than the other woman.

She stood up, with a glass of whiskey in her hand. The master wondered if she would look into the jukebox again, but she walked out of the bar. The master walked up to the door and looked out through the glass window.

The woman handed the glass to the old man sitting on the steps, and talked to him. She was crouching in front of the old man, smiling happily at him. The old man had his face turned toward another direction, so his expression was not visible to the master. But, he was speaking as if he was bouncing around. He was apparently getting energized.

She stood up. The master hurried back to the counter.

“Is that man your grandfather?” The darker woman asked with a laugh as the lighter woman came back into the bar.

But, perhaps because of the music being played, the two women’s voices were getting somewhat inaudible, and the rest of the conversation could not be heard.

The man at the counter had already finished eating his pie, and his coffee cup seemed to be empty. He was now propped up on both elbows and smoking a cigarette, but it was getting shorter. He did not even look back at the women.

After the song was over, it got quiet. The door was opened, and the old man walked into the bar. He was holding a glass in one hand and raised his arm as if to hold it out in front of him. He was likely to be indicating that he was coming in to return the glass. The women fell silent. The man at the counter turned and looked at the old man.

The old man first stopped in front of the fair-skinned woman and bowed his head. He said nothing. The woman who just got bowed to shrugged her shoulders a little later. She did not say a word, either. The other woman covered her mouth with her hand and opened her eyes. She was looking surprised.

The old man walked over to the counter and put the glass in front of the master. Then, he bowed his head again as if he was nodding. The master made an effort not to change his expression. He felt that he should not smile at the old man. *I don’t want to show any indication of my friendliness*, he thought. Besides, he could not afford to show his angry face. He felt bad for those female customers. The master took the glass and quickly moved it to the sink.

The old man stared at the young man sitting close to him.

“Young man, you’re new here, aren’t you?” The old man asked.

“I am.” The young man nodded.

“For the thing called airplane, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“You go to heaven by riding on that, eh?”

“To the sky, rather than heaven.” The young man nodded. He appeared to smile a bit.

“Have you ever met God?” The old man asked.

“Never.” The young man was no longer looking at the old man’s face. He reached for the ashtray to put out his cigarette.

The master pushed the ashtray toward the customer and then glared hard at the old man. Finally, their eyes met.

“Well, that’s enough. Don’t bother my customer.” The master warned quietly to the old man.

“I know.” The old man widened his eyes and raised a hand. Then, he looked at the young man again. “I’m not a customer. The young lady over there gave me the liquor. I have met God. Thanks to that.”

“Thanks to that?” After putting out the cigarette, the young man looked back and asked.

“Yeah, you’ll understand it when you meet Him.”

“Meet God?”

“Yes.”

“What will I understand?”

“You will recognize that it’s God.”

“How will I understand?”

“You know, it’s like spit fire, going ‘crackle, crackle’.”

The old man smirked, with wrinkles forming all over his face.

He bowed and left the counter. He raised one hand at the women’s table, but the face was invisible. The light-complected woman raised one hand and twitched her fingers slightly. The darker one looked angry and did not move.

The old man walked out the door. He turned around once and looked at the counter, but it appeared that his vision was out of focus on anything.

“See? He’s polite.” The lighter woman whispered.

“I doubt that.” The other woman clicked her tongue.

The young customer put the payment money on the counter. The cash register was some distance away. The woman, his boss, did not pay anything there. Also, the master did not seem to have put any money in the register.

The women at the table were staring at him. They were smiling and squinting at him. It appeared as if they wanted to make comments about how they were feeling pleasant or smelling good. Obviously, they actually meant something different.

When the young man left the bar, the sun had already set, and it was starting to get dark. The old man was still sitting on the steps. He was hanging his head, and then raised his head when the young man approached him. He might have been asleep. If that was the case, the whiskey the woman had bought him seemed to have had some effect on him.

“If I sleep at such a place, I’ll catch a cold.” The old man looked up at the young man and shivered. *The temperature seems to be getting lower and lower.*

“You’d better go home now.” The young man warned the old man.

“When it gets dark, God will pass through this road. I told you that, right?”

“Why is He going through this road?”

“Hmm?” The old man tilted his head. “You know, that’s because this is such kind of street.”

“Is this a special street?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Why? As a pathway for God?” The young man asked. He thought it was a little funny, so he decided to go along with the old man’s story.

“That’s what I’m talking about. I’m grateful for that.” The old man smiled happily.

“Going through here for what?” The young man asked further.

“Who are you talking about?”

“I mean, God.”

“That’s something we don’t understand, you know. How can we, human beings, understand what God does?”

Oh well, at least this old man knows he is human, the young man thought.

Does God know that He is God?

“So is He just going to run here? Like runners do in a marathon?”

“Yeah, right, that’s it. A marathon.”

“What does His garment look like?”

“His garment? Hmm, that’s an outfit made of white cloth.”

“What do His shoes look like?”

“Oh, His shoes ...”

“Does He have shoes on in the first place? You don’t mean He’s barefoot, do you?”

“I wonder what he is wearing ...” The old man put one hand on his chin and turned his gaze to the side. “If you ask me, I certainly haven’t had a good look at Him.”

“Does He look dazzling?”

“Dazzling?”

“Does His body glow?”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Since it is at night, I imagine you can’t see Him very well.”

“His eyes glow. Two eyes.”

“Each human has two eyes, too.”

“Yes, yes. Well, I mean, He has two eyes just like humans do.”

“Is God a male? Or female?”

“Of course, He’s a male. You know, He’s God.”

“No, I don’t think God is necessarily a male.”

“His eyes are glowing yellow. And there’s fire burning at his feet.”

“Is there fire burning? Where is it burning?”

“At his feet or around them.”

“What is burning?”

“The dust is burning.”

“Dust?”

“Right. It’s dust.”

“Is there dust on God?”

“That might be oil.”

“Oil?”

“Yeah, that’s right. It seems like it is spilling from God. Maybe it is God’s sweat.”

“Does God perspire?”

“You know, it catches fire. It’s too hot. It incinerates everything.”

“Hmm, I don’t understand. Where does the said God come from?”

“Of course ...” The old man smiled. He lifted one hand slightly. He was pointing his finger upwards.

Well, I suppose that’s true. I have never heard of God popping out of the ground. According to the accepted convention, He usually exists in high places. They used to be locations that humans could not reach.

“I’d like to see Him too, just once.”

“If you wait here, you’ll get to see Him.” The old man said.

“Yeah, but I don’t have time today. I’ll try next time I see you.”

“Another time, then.” The old man nodded.

The young man walked toward his motorcycle.

He straddled the seat, started the engine, and then put on his helmet. As he looked towards the bar entrance, he saw the old man already hanging his head as if he was asleep.

If the old man sleeps, he will miss God, the young man thought. Or, is he sleeping so that

he would not miss the opportunity?

How did the old man interpret a big man jogging down the street as God? The notion of glowing eyes was certainly not normal. But, it might have been a helmet with lights on. The young man had seen it before in a coal mine. It seemed that the dust or oil spilling from the body got ignited and burned, or something like that.

Ah, that could be a big truck. Maybe the old man was referring to the backfire from the muffler. Thinking about this and that, the young man was riding the motorcycle. Before long, it got dark. The road was stretching straight ahead, sucking him into the pitch darkness. It was as if he was flying above the clouds at night. Even though the moon was not out, he could recognize the faint whiteness of the clouds. Rather than smoke, it resembled a quietly flowing river or meadow. The engine sound faded away, and the surroundings became silent. The smooth air was split to the left and right, only to be met by one road after another. *The same thing.* Now, it was gray asphalt. *What is being out of balance to cause what was supposed to be black asphalt to look whitish?*

The centerline glowed silver intermittently and swung from side to side as if it was dancing. It looked just like the streaks of bullets from a machine gun. He had a hunch that the shadow of an enemy plane was fluttering nearby. Rather, perhaps it was a hint that the enemy aircraft was blending into the darkness like a bat. The rearview mirror mold shone like a flame of dust, fine and whispering.

He had once flown alone above the clouds for hours.

There was nothing that moved.

Why doesn't God appear before me?

He thought about it even on the path in the forest.

He thought about it even when he saw the moonlight pouring from the roof of the ruins.

Why doesn't God appear before me?

Now would be the right time for Him to show up.

It was a long time ago, when he was very young, that he had thought of such a thing. If God had appeared before him even once, he would have believed in Him.

He would have been able to fight for God instead of himself.

And then.

Whatever I might have done would be no different from what I do now.

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The young man saw a red light ahead of him. It was the rear part of a car, reflecting the headlight. The vehicle was parked on the shoulder of the road. The type of vehicle looked familiar to him. He slowed down.

The woman was sitting on the hood of the car. She was his superior officer at the base. She did not even raise her hand. The young man pulled his motorcycle to a stop in front of her and removed his helmet without getting off the saddle.

“Ma’am, what’s wrong with you?” He asked.

She answered the question, but he could not hear her very well. So, he turned off the engine.

“It’s broken down.” She said, got off the hood, and walked up to him. “Let me get on the back of your motorbike.”

“Won’t your car start?”

“No. when I parked it here, the engine stopped running.”

“Why did you park your car in such a place like this?”

“Why do you think?”

“Umm, I can’t imagine why.”

“I guess so ...” She nodded slightly. Then, she looked up at the sky. “Is it because I felt like someone was coming up behind me?”

“Who was behind you?”

“I’m not sure ...” She looked back at him, and her gaze met his face with her chin still pointing up.

“There is no helmet, and with that outfit of yours, it’s going to get cold.”

“We’re almost there, aren’t we? If we walked, it wouldn’t take more than an

hour.”

That's not true. It's no less than 10 kilometers, he thought.

Anyway, since he did not seem to have any other choice, he decided to ask her to get on the backseat of the motorbike. The jacket he was wearing appeared to be more suitable for keeping her warm. *Shall I offer it to my boss?* He wondered. She was also wearing a jacket, but a skirt below it. He rethought it was her lower body that was cold, so he decided not to offer to exchange their jumpers. The only thing he could do was to resolve to ride the motorbike as slowly and safely as possible.

He started the engine and cautiously started moving.

He let the motorcycle run without speaking a word.

He was aware of the wind chill. He had not paid attention to the wind earlier, but the thought of her being hit by the chilly blast appeared to have made the switch of the internal sensor designed to feel the coldness be turned on suddenly. He slowed down to about 70 percent of the speed he had been going on at when riding his motorcycle alone. The road was still straight, and there was no light to the right or left. There were no houses in this neighborhood, no structures, no billboards. The surroundings were either woods or grasslands, but it was too dark now for the observer to discern which one was what. The road seemed to exist only beyond the headlights, and the centerline moved just slightly, like an old film.

She wrapped her hands around his body from behind and pulled herself closer to him. He had just been thinking that she should do so, even if he had not been able to tell her so. If she did not keep her body close to him, then she would be fully exposed to the wind. Was it not about time that she was beginning to feel colder?

He slowed down a little, turned around, and asked her loudly.

“Is it getting cold?”

“It's cold.” He heard her voice.

Slowly, he stopped the motorcycle.

“What's wrong?”

“You told me that it was getting cold.”

“It's cold even when we stop. It's been cold all along anyway.”

“Are you okay? Can you make it to the base?”

“I’m fine.”

He started the motorcycle again. He slowed down even more and rode slowly.

“You can go faster,” a voice was shouted behind him.

He followed the instruction and increased the speed slightly.

This boss was said to have been the top ace in the past. He had heard such rumors from his colleagues. *Sure, it may get even colder in flight. It is not so often that the heater goes out of order. Even more than that, occasionally the heater starts malfunctioning due to engine trouble. If I can’t stand the cold, I have to lower the altitude. It is very cold in the sky. Perhaps because there is none but air in the sky, there might be no such concept as temperature. Only the light that penetrates the canopy is scorching hot, but the parts that are not exposed to it are cold enough to be instantly frozen.*

He could feel with his back the warmth of her body. The conditions of someone else’s body being in contact with him was unlikely to occur in the sky.

Could it be that he was being tested in some way by her?

Maybe she was waiting there for him on purpose.

She said that the engine had stopped working, but it didn’t look like a very old car. It was a high horsepower sports car.

The motorcycle carrying them kept on going as if it was dropping into the darkness.

The feeling that something was approaching from ahead at any moment struck him.

That is ...

A bat?

Or.

Is that the giant man in white clothes?

But.

Every time he thought of it, his lips twisted in a smile, and at the same time, he

thought of the motorcycle crawling on the ground in this real world, his body being tense and stiff, and the woman's body hugging it. *They are all matters. They are all mere matters, exchanging heat through physical phenomena.*

In the rearview mirror, there was nothing but darkness.

However, the edge glowed slightly.

What is the source of light it is reflecting?

Is it a star?

The moon behind us?

Sparks from the muffler?

Is it an enemy aircraft that has somehow gotten behind us?

Or, are they the two yellow eyes of God?

Or the flames on the oil spilling from her body?

When he looked into the rearview mirror, it was already gone.

He looked down.

There were indeed fine dust-like lights twinkling on the dark ground that appeared to be flowing. It looked as if they were expressing the starry sky on the opposite side. He could wonder if he was executing the inverted flight.

His body was already as cold as a machine.

She, behind him, was also the same as a machine.

Gears, chains, and friction.

Cylinders, pistons, and explosions.

A sizzling spark appeared for a moment.

Then it was dissipating.

It was disappearing.

Shining.

Blinking.

Whispering.

It was back to the normal speed.

When he saw the tiny light of the airbase, he felt relieved.

He entered the gate, and taxied sluggishly with a droning sound to the front of the building. He turned at the rotary, and parked his motorcycle. He let out a long sigh, which sounded like what came out when a compressor was put to a halt.

She moved away from him and got off the seat, right next to the motorcycle.

He took off his helmet and looked at her. The air cooled his forehead.

“Ma’am, are you all right?” He asked.

She nodded blankly.

Then she walked toward the building, up the steps, and looked back at him. She raised one hand lightly and brought it up to her face. It seemed to be a salute.

He saluted her, even though he was still astride his motorcycle.

She walked to the inner part of the building.

There was another stairway, and he watched her ascending legs as she climbed it up.

The entrance door opened, and the legs went inside the building. It was bright for a moment, then back to darkness.

Fine sparks spilled and twinkled on the stairs.

They disappeared while whispering.

Episode 5: Heart Drain The storms too were terrifying.

The raging winds whipped the surface of the sea into living mountains of grey waters, their crests white-capped with salt froth racing before the gale.

This excerpt is from *Snowflake* by Paul Gallico

“Yes, this is Kai speaking.”

“Oh, thank goodness that the phone is connected. Did I wake you up?”

“Umm, no, that’s okay.” She reached for the light switch.

She squinted against the glare and looked at the clock. It would soon be 05:00 a.m. The gap between the curtains was already getting bright.

“Is this phone number that of your villa?”

“Yes.”

“Is this line in danger of being bugged?”

“No chance of that. Is it a primary secret? Would you like me to call you back, then?”

“No, you don’t have to do that. Anyway, come to the coordinate 08MC, ASAP.”

“What’s going on, sir?”

“K. T. is now on vacation. Do you know where he is?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Above the city, a fighter aircraft executed a ramming attack against a bomber. They both went down, and crashed into a school and a freight station. Miraculously, though, the buildings were not damaged.”

“Ramming attack?”

“I do not recall being reported that it was a usual collision.”

“Were there any civilian casualties or injuries?”

“No, no one seems to have been injured. It was at such an hour. If it had been a little later ...”

“It was an accident, wasn’t it?”

“No. It was a ramming attack.”

“Were there any witnesses?”

“That’s what I mean.”

“Who was it?”

“I haven’t received the report pertaining to that yet. Anyway, the media is already capturing the image of the aftermath of the crash site. It’ll be on TV any minute now.”

“Understood. I’ll be right there.”

Kai put the receiver back.

“What’s going on?” Takemo in the bed asked.

“It was Shimota calling. He was looking for you.”

“I’m on vacation.”

“He said that the planes crashed in the city. I have to go.”

“What did he mean by the ramming attack?”

“I think he meant a collision accident.” She started to walk towards the closet, but stopped and looked back at him. “Oh, I’m sorry, sir. I cannot leave you here alone if I am leaving the room. Could you please prepare to leave as soon as possible?”

“Uh …” The man let out a breath through his nose. “That’s a reasonable request.”

“I’ll take you to the station.”

He got up from the bed.

“Is your car a non-smoking one?”

“No, sir,” Kai replied and went into the closet.

10 minutes later, they were both sitting on the cold seats that were like ice pillows. She backed the car out of the garage. The weather was cloudy. The gray clouds were low. The temperature might have been sub-zero. Having a hot cup of coffee would have been nice, but there was no time for that. The morning hour during which she felt more dead than alive was nothing but business as usual.

They did not speak until the station came into view. She could see the bus terminal ahead. She parked the car in a relatively uncrowded area.

“It looks like I’ll be seeing you again sometime today.” He said. “Probably the first debriefing session will be held around the evening after the press conference.”

“I guess so. I hope it won’t be a big deal.”

“See you then.” Takemo raised one hand and looked away once, but then looked back at her again. “We’ll meet again, leisurely.”

Kai nodded without words.

While making sure his back disappeared from the sight, she looked in the rearview mirror and started the car. While waiting for a traffic light to change at an intersection, she could put a cigarette in her mouth and light it. The heater installed in the car was starting to kick in. As she exhaled the cigarette smoke, her head finally started to run.

She first envisioned several possibilities and ran the simulations on how to handle each one. *Basically, what is important is that the entire organization, including myself, should calm down. She was always thinking about that. This society as a whole, including me, should not let the blood boil in our heads. Yet, for some reason, the political clouts that are trying so hard to boil blood in our heads are surging. I wonder what they are. I don’t know where they originated from, but it is very strange. What merits are there for them to try to incite people so much? Riots? Coup d’etat? What kind of panic do they want?* The more she thought about it, the more the blood rushed to her head. *This is exactly the trap that they want me to fall into,* she thought as she let out another puff of smoke.

She recalled the memories about him from last night for a moment. It was not bad. *There was a solid responsive feedback,* she meant. She wondered if she was soothing herself by reminiscing about such idyllic things. *This is also exactly the trap that they want me to fall into,* she thought, while exhaling another puff of smoke.

-2-

The three of them first gathered in the small conference room of the information bureau. Two of them were male superiors, and Kai was the youngest and lowest in rank. But, they were at much lower classes than Takemo, who was called with the codename K.T.

They figured out the circumstances of the accident. The one that crashed into the elementary school was their company’s fighter aircraft. And, the one that went down into the freight station yard was an enemy ground-attack bomber. The fighter pilot ejected from the cockpit just before the crash, and dropped into the yard of a

house. He was being taken to the hospital. He was said to have suffered a broken bone, but his condition was not serious. The crews of the enemy bomber were all presumed dead. It seemed that they could not escape. There were probably three of them on board.

The crash site of the elementary school had already been shown on TV. The scene was now under the control of the police and fire department. A big hole was punched in the playground, but fortunately the building was damaged just to the extent of flying debris shattering the windows. On the other hand, the railroad tracks of the freight station were ripped from the ground, while the damage spanned a circle with a radius of 30 meters. Images from the sky above were already being broadcast. Due to the risk of further explosions, the special disposal squad was mobilized, and inevitably under the control of the company they belonged to. The area near the site was currently cordoned off from the public, and the fire department had issued an evacuation order for the area. The danger had to be removed in a few hours, or its prospect had to be announced.

First, they decided the dispatching of more special disposal squads. Even for the situation in which there were no bombs that were loaded in the bomber, it would be more convenient to announce that there were a significant number of bombs in it. It would also be better to announce the intended target of the attack, where the bomber was headed. That way, they could claim that they had no choice but to intercept it to protect what might have been targeted.

“That is the direction to the power plant,” Kai said. “Should we announce that the power plant was the intended target?”

“Yes. I think it will do. Or, the ancient palace.” The bearded boss suggested.

“I don’t think it would even bother targeting that.” The other one laughed.

The ancient palace was the remains of a castle in the city center. It was a tourist attraction, but there was no military significance to it.

“Destroying a cultural symbol is viable as a classic strategy.” Stroking his beard, the man said. “Let’s give this matter some thought. We have two hours to decide which one we should choose.”

After the meeting, Kai’s task was to go to the hospital to visit the pilot. Most of the information bureau resources were directed to deal with the press and the

political world. The pilot was injured but survived. There was, of course, talk that it would have been more convenient if the pilot had gone down with the plane. Obviously, externally, the pilot was currently under a “no visitors allowed” policy for his treatment. Other than a few doctors, no one was permitted to see him. The pilot was First Lieutenant Nayaba. He was a veteran with a career, having been on active duty for two and a half years. No further data on his history had been brought in yet.

Kai took the company’s plane from the nearest base. It was an hour-and-a-half flight. Because it was a tandem-seated reconnaissance plane, only the pilot and she were on board. The whole time they were in the air, she slept. A total of two and a half hours later, she arrived at her destination, the hospital. It was still before 09:00 a.m. Everything needed to be done in the morning. That schedule was the last thing to have been confirmed in the early morning meeting.

Entering the hospital building, Kai showed her ID to the receptionist. She was told where to go and proceeded to the back of the building. According to the first information she received, the pilot’s injuries were minor, with just broken bones. Of course, Kai would be able to talk to him. First, she would have to ask him about the circumstances of the accident. Then, what to do after that was the problem. What kind of instructions should Kai give him? She had to decide, after communicating with headquarters, of course. The easiest and the most probable course of action would be to transfer the pilot to the headquarters’ exclusive hospital later within the day.

In the lobby, there were already a few camerapersons, who seemed to be dispatched from the media agencies. They were congregated, as if they were squeezed into a space farther into the lobby. They were probably trying to stay out of the way or had been instructed to do so by the hospital.

Kai was not wearing her uniform on purpose. Her glance would not be noticed by the camerapersons, for she was wearing sunglasses. The elevator door opened at the right moment, and she got into it. Only a doctor in a white coat and Kai were inside. On the eighth floor, the door opened, and they both stepped out.

They walked down the aisle in the same direction, and the doctor walking ahead stopped in front of a door in the middle of the aisle.

“Are you, by any chance, here to see him of the airplane?” Turning to her, the doctor asked. Perhaps he did not come up with a proper noun, or he purposely avoided it.

Kai presented her ID to the doctor and greeted him.

“Doctor, would it be possible to move him from this facility?” She asked.

“Don’t worry at all. He’ll be able to walk to the place on his own.”

“If that happens, Doctor, I would appreciate your cooperation. Well, of course, I’ll have to make a formal request from my company.”

“Yes, I understand. His patient room is on the other side of the door on the right at the far end of the corridor.” After saying that, the doctor disappeared into the nearby door.

As Kai walked farther into the building, she saw a young woman in a flight suit sitting on a bench in the aisle. Kai looked at the rank indicated on her uniform. *She is a pilot.* She looked up, and their gazes met with each other. Kai had not heard that someone was present in the facility.

“I’m from the information bureau,” Kai announced, while showing her ID to the female pilot.

She stood up and gave a quick salute. Kai, too, returned the salute lightly.

“What is your name?”

“I’m Kusanagi, ma’am.”

“What are you doing here? Who sent you, under whose jurisdiction?”

“We were flying in two aircrafts. I have not received any command.”

“Did you witness the other aircraft go down?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“So ..., where did you land?”

“I found and saw an airport.”

“It’s a civilian airport, isn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Did you get any permission?”

“No ..., it was an emergency landing.”

“Did you land without permission?”

“I got permission from the control tower.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I apologize. But ..., no one tells me things like that. How badly ... is he, Nayaba, injured?” Kusanagi looked back at the nearby door. “I’m not allowed to see him.”

“No visitor is allowed,” Kai responded. “He is fine. I’m told he is alive and well. Have you contacted the airbase?”

“I have made a phone call.”

“You have been instructed to return to the base, haven’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“If so, why don’t you go back to the base?”

“I’ll do so after I see him.”

“You don’t need that.”

Kusanagi raised her eyes for a moment, and looked at Kai. It was an intense gaze. It seemed to Kai that Kusanagi was looking straight at her for the first time.

“Understood.” Kusanagi nodded slightly. Her expression did not change.

“If you have something to say to me, I’m all ears.” Kai loosened her tone. It was a strange reaction, even for herself, but somehow she felt that she should concede a little.

“He approached the enemy bomber slightly from behind to the lower-left, and brought the left wing of his fighter aircraft into contact with the tail of the enemy bomber. I think that was an excellent control.” Kusanagi said. “That was not an easy thing to do.”

“Were your fighter aircraft flying close to his?”

“It was about 600 meters away.”

“You could observe the situation well, couldn’t you?”

“I am capable of doing so.”

“I’ll let him know it was spectacular.”

“Thank you so much, ma’am.” Kusanagi bowed her head, and started to walk away down the aisle.

“Is that what you wanted to say to him?” Kai asked, toward Kusanagi’s back.

Kusanagi stopped and turned around.

“Yes, ma’am.” She nodded expressionlessly.

Kai walked over and stood in front of her. Kusanagi was slender and shorter than Kai. Kai’s gaze assumed the angle of looking down on her.

“Did you make an emergency landing just for that?” Kai kept her voice down as she asked the question. Kai did not want her to know that she was angry, but she also did not want her to think she was staying calm. It was a subtle restraint to maintain the fine balance.

Kusanagi dropped her gaze and remained silent. Kai waited. Eventually, she put her head up to look at Kai.

“I think Nayaba wanted to die.” Kusanagi said.

“Why do you think that?”

“He told me so before the flight.”

“When do you mean by the time before the flight?”

“It was last night.”

“Okay. I see. I will find out what he wanted to do. But, is that why you made the emergency landing?”

“I thought, if he were still alive, he would have killed himself,” Kusanagi answered.

Kai was a little surprised by the reply. She could only give a slight nod in silence.

“Alright. Thank you. You can go back now. Umm ..., no, wait. Can you wait for me over there? There’s a bench. I’ll talk to you again later.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Kusanagi saluted and walked away down the aisle. Kai stood there until she could no longer see her fading back.

-3-

First Lieutenant Nayaba, on the bed, was motionless like a doll with his eyes open. As Kai approached him, only his eyes caught her image at a slow speed. His face was pale, drained of color, and looked as if it were made of wax.

“I’m Kai from the information bureau.” Standing next to his bed, she identified herself. “How are you feeling?”

“There’s nothing unusual,” Nayaba answered in a low voice. “I heard my toe is broken, though.”

Kai pulled a pipe chair by the wall toward herself, and sat down on it. She got a notebook out of her bag. She crossed her legs, and took the pen out of her pocket. When Kai was ready, she looked again at the man on the bed.

“You have to report on this battle,” Kai instructed.

“Do I have to do all of it from the beginning?”

“It doesn’t matter where you start.”

“Ma’am, isn’t it just the last part you want to hear?”

“Of course, I would like to hear the most about the time you rammed into the Clothes Prop. How did that happen?”

“My fighter aircraft was out of ammunition.”

“And your consort plane?”

“I was not sure.” He shook his head horizontally.

“Only one enemy?”

“Yes, ma’am. And there were two on our side.”

“I wonder if it was really the situation in which you had to take it too far.”

“Too far? Ma’am, what do you mean by ‘too far?’” Nayaba uttered with a blank expression. Kai heard the sound of his breath leaking out of his nose. He might

have been laughing.

Kai had just heard from Kusanagi that this man wanted to die. *It may be true*, she felt. His will to live could not be observed from the outside. However, this type of personality was not uncommon among pilots.

“Were you deliberately trying to make the ramming attack against the enemy? Or was that an accident?”

“It was an attack,” Nayaba answered immediately. “I was trying to bring down the enemy.”

“Were you aware that you were flying above the city?”

“No, ma’am. I did not exactly understand where I was. It was foggy down there at the lower altitude. I thought we were still a long way from the city.”

“Did you give any thought to the possibility that the enemy aircraft was carrying bombs?”

“Of course, I thought it was. I judged that the bomber split from the squadron and was heading for the target alone.”

“You did try to prevent that from carrying the mission?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What did you think the enemy’s target was?”

“I had no idea.”

“But, did you not attempt to stop it because you thought about its possible target?”

“No, because it is my duty to bring down the enemy aircraft.”

“Downing the enemy with a ramming attack cannot be considered as a duty.”

“I apologize, ma’am.”

“Why did you go to such lengths to attack the enemy? Did you sense any danger? Did the enemy bomber fire at you?”

“Yes. My aircraft was hit on the right wing.”

“Was that just before you made your ramming attack?”

“Yes, it was.”

“That will be verified with testing the retrieved aircraft.” Kai nodded. “So you are not saying that you got mad when you got hit?”

“That’s not the case, ma’am.”

“Were you communicating with your wingmate?”

“We were in communication.”

“And, didn’t Kusanagi stop you?”

“I ordered her to wait in the airspace above me, as I rammed into it,” Nayaba answered. “After I collided with the enemy, I could not communicate with her.”

“Why did you escape?”

“Sorry?” He turned his gaze towards Kai.

Silence. There was no answer from him. His face appeared to be showing that he had no idea of what Kai’s question meant. Of course, it could have been a natural reaction. Escaping was an extremely sensible thing to do. It was a natural survival behavior of risk-avoidance.

“Okay,” Kai said. “Headquarters will decide on the course of action soon. I will pass it on to you when the order comes. Maybe in an hour, two hours at the latest.” She closed her notebook. As expected, there was nothing to write. “By any chance, if you meet anyone, or if they ask you questions, you must not say anything. Do not talk to the doctor about anything other than your injury or physical condition. Have you told anyone anything yet?”

“No, ma’am. Nothing.”

“Good. Then ...” Kai put the notebook in her bag.

“Were there any civilian casualties as a result of the crash?” Nayaba asked.

“That is something you do not have to know,” Kai answered.

“Ma’am, can I go back to the base?”

“Yes. I cannot promise you when, though.” Kai stood up. “Do you have any requests? Is there anything you want to eat or anything you want to have?”

“No, I do not. Thank you.”

Kai looked around the patient room. She searched with her eyes for anything dangerous. Of course, there were no knives or guns. There were no windows in the room, so there was no way he could jump down from them. The reason why Kai made such an observation was that Kusanagi's words still remained in her mind. However, it would be difficult to stop him from killing himself. If he wanted to die, he could do it anywhere, at any time. If only the human being had the determination and athletic ability to do so.

Kai ended up looking up at the ceiling. Two white fluorescent lights were hanging from above. He would need a rope to hang himself, but at least there was none in this room.

After leaving the room, Kai walked down the corridor to the end. There she found a fire escape stairway. She turned the knob, and the door opened easily. Anyone could go out through the door. The sun was shining brightly. The temperature was rising, but the wind was still cold. The sky was of a single color.

Kai lit a cigarette. She inhaled the smoke and looked up at the bright sky. Then Kai peered over the railing at the ground. She saw a small incinerator made of bricks. There was not a person in the vicinity. There was a parking lot outside the separation provided by the trees. The asphalt looked completely black. She put out the cigarette after four puffs. There was no time to waste.

Kai went back to the corridor and walked towards the elevator. On the way, she met someone who looked like a staff member, and asked him where she could borrow a phone. Kusanagi was sitting on a bench in the elevator hall. She seemed to be asleep. She was looking down and did not move. She had got to be tired. Kai walked quietly past her without making her notice.

There was a waiting room for the staff on the same floor. There was only one woman in a white coat. Kai showed the woman her ID and borrowed the phone. Kai asked her to get out of the room.

“Hello.” Someone picked up the phone. Kai recognized immediately that it was Takemo himself.

“This is Kai. I just met Nayaba.”

“How was he?”

“Minor injuries. He is placed in isolation for now, but I think that keeping him in this facility will turn out to be difficult. I believe that it would be better if we moved him.”

“What did he tell you?”

“He told me he attacked the target. According to him, his fighter aircraft was out of ammo, so he made a ramming attack.”

“So it was not an accident.”

“Sir, was the bomber carrying bombs?”

“At least, it erupted in flames. We cannot estimate the quantity of explosives.”

“Did they find the bodies in the bomber?”

“Three bodies. Probably, those were all of the crew members.”

“Where do you think the enemy was heading for?”

“I have no idea.”

“We’ll have to do nothing but come up with some reasons.”

“Are you trying to make Nayaba a hero?”

“Yes, sir. It does not have to be him, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“His consort plane made an emergency landing at a civilian airport. The pilot is Second Lieutenant Kusanagi.”

“I have not received that report.”

“Please confirm the information ASAP. She is here, in the hospital, now. I met her in front of the patient room.”

“Is that pilot a woman?”

“Yes, she is. I’ll ask her about how she got here.”

“And?”

“I mean, well ..., I think it would be better for us to state that she is the one who

made the ramming attack.”

“How come?”

“This is a matter of impression.”

“Impression?”

“It’s just an impression.”

“But, she was spotted at the airport, wasn’t she?”

“I will check if she was not photographed. From the looks of it, she is similar to Nayaba in build. She’s still in her flight suit, you know.”

There was a few seconds of silence.

“That’s a gamble.”

“I think the sooner you make the decision, the better.”

“All right, call me back in 10 minutes.”

-4-

10 minutes later, the instructions were given. The project was going to proceed as Kai had suggested. A microbus arrived at the hospital half an hour later, and picked up Nayaba and Kusanagi. They were asked to walk side by side and had their pictures taken by the media. Just before that, Kai went down to the lobby and, after telling that the press conference would be held in the afternoon, leaked to one of the reporters that the pilot was actually a woman. The rumor spread quickly, and the vectors of the camera lenses had to be converged into Kusanagi.

The fighter aircraft that landed at the airport was refueled, and Nayaba was commanded to pilot it to the base. Kai did not restrict the media from recording it. On the other hand, she had Kusanagi kept away from the media and transported by bus.

Just the reporters from the information bureau participated in the press conference, and the pilots were not allowed to attend it. They explained that the enemy aircraft had been on its way to bomb the target, and their mission was to prevent it. *The media and the public do not expect too much from these official announcements.*

What they want are images. Most of the recordings aired on TV later were of Kusanagi getting on the bus.

Kai had not seen Kusanagi since then. Kusanagi had not shown any interest in this staging of the fictitious storyline. She probably did not even watch TV. There were many of such type among pilots. This time, Kusanagi was ordered to be transferred and assigned to a base that was geographically far away.

One week after Kusanagi's transfer, three weeks after the incident, Nayaba committed suicide by hanging himself in his room at the base. This fact was never made public. The depth of secrecy was extreme to the level that not many people in the information bureau knew about it. When Kai heard the news, she let out a light sigh of despair, but she felt actually relieved inside her mind. She wanted to give Nayaba credit for dying in a way that did not cause any trouble for the people around him. Pilot suicides were around a dozen a year, and at least one person died every month. It was not unusual. She just could not understand why they did not choose the sky as a place to die. It was a subject that many people had debated about, but no conclusion had been reached.

As a result, a month later, this information manipulation was evaluated and deemed a success. Within the information bureau, it was believed that it was Takemo, Kai's superior, who suggested the idea. If Kai had proposed it herself at the meeting, she would have been opposed by others. *Any group in general tends to be conservative. The best choices that accompany risks can only be made by the skilled calibers of the upper management.*

Two months later, Kai was transferred to a different workplace, and was appointed as the Assistant Director of the Western Region Public Relations and Operations Department. She was the youngest female ever selected for the position. Unexpectedly, it was the same area that Second Lieutenant Kusanagi had just been transferred to.

The night she received the letter of appointment, Kai met with Takemo. After dinner at a fancy restaurant, they drank wine in a room of the same hotel. Takemo mentioned the words "promotion gift" three times, but Kai thought she had to treat it as palimony. This man would be in the company for another decade. There was a position in the information bureau that is one step higher, and that was his goal. That would be the end of the career ladder. The fact that his handling of the

accident was right on the mark this time might have enhanced his reputation. However, it would not have a major impact. The scandal with a woman under his command had got to be more threatening than that. He must not let anything happen to Kai, at least not until he stepped down. He had to be thinking about that. Therefore, she could understand that she had obtained a minimum level of job security. However, she also understood that he was afraid of getting to know her any deeper than this. The fact that she was being transferred to the western region meant that she was being kept away from him. It could mean that she had to keep low profile for a while. And, anything of this extent was like lifting one leg to go up the stairs. It was a constant source of instability, but it was an essential factor in achieving the goal.

Kai slept for a while, but woke up in the middle of the night.

Right next to her, Takemo was asleep, snoring softly. Kai quietly got out of bed, put on a gown, and moved to the sofa by the window. There was a pack of cigarettes on the table.

Kai gently lifted the curtain. The sky was pitch black, and the ground was glowing with fine details. The skyscraper right next to the hotel. Numerous windows appeared to be as small as honeycomb cells of a beehive. Moving figures within them. Red lights flickering on the rooftops. She put her face close to the glass of the windowpane, and saw the road directly below. Lanes with white lights and lanes with red lights were parallel to each other. As she lit a cigarette, the glow of the lighter was momentarily reflected on the glass in front of her. When she refocused the view, she saw her face faintly floating in the air, even though the fire went out. While exhaling the smoke, she turned around to check the room. The man in the bed was still breathing in his sleep. He was facing the wall on the other side.

I wonder if I like this man, she thought. Then, she took three puffs of smoke and exhaled. Maybe she neither liked nor disliked him. However, she was sure that she had tried to like him before. It could have stemmed from the cheesy notion that her liking him would make things easier. In the end, she just realized that it was not that simple. *But, this is good enough, isn't it?* At least, she did not end up hating him.

She looked at the windowpane again. In that space, she searched for her face.

It reminded Kai of Kusanagi she met in the hospital corridor.

That Kusanagi looked like what I used to be a little while ago.

She did not know what to do. However, she was making her move in accordance with her feelings honestly.

“We want to pretend that you had a fender bender and crashed. That is what we are going to announce to the media.” Kai explained so to Kusanagi.

“Why do you do that?”

“Because it is more convenient for us to have the pilot as a woman. With the gender issue, we can control the general public’s sentiment. We have decided that it is the best way for our company to handle the incident.”

“Ma’am, What should I do?”

“You don’t have to do anything. The information bureau will hold a press conference. All you have to do is to keep your mouth shut about this. You do not have to lie. Do not tell anyone about this.”

“But, what will happen to Nayaba?”

“I will order him to keep quiet as well. If you feel any inconvenience, be sure to get in touch with me immediately.”

“Understood.”

“Is there anything you have to complain about?”

“No.”

“This will work out in your favor.”

“What do you mean, ma’am?”

“Well, I cannot give you any specifics. But it is not going to be bad for you. Do not worry.”

“It seems to be irrelevant to my missions.”

“Yes, you are correct.”

Those were the eyes that were not looking at humans.

They were the eyes that had no interest on the ground.

They were not searching for anything here.

Sympathy, affection.

Desire, thirst.

She expected nothing on the ground.

There was a time when I was like that.

But I'm different now.

These eyes of mine are in frenzy, looking for something on the ground. I am groping in the dark, desperately searching for something that will benefit me. Am I not trying to find a chance for myself to climb up? To others, it may seem like a farcical figure.

Every morning, she encountered tired, bloodshot eyes in the mirror.

How long has this been going on?

What do I want?

Maybe, well ... this is the revenge.

I don't care if it's ridiculous.

It's the revenge against me for my being so weak that I wanted to die.

It is the only way to get rid of the guilt.

She looked at the left wrist. The mark that solidified her resolve to take revenge was still there.

She quickly turned her eyes upward. A small source of light was moving through the sky. Slowly, straight. It was not that high in the sky. Could it be a reconnaissance plane or a transport aircraft flying at this hour?

Her cigarette was getting shorter.

She snuffed it out in the ashtray.

The smell was disgusting. *Why am I smoking this stuff?*

What a disgusting woman. Why is this female still living?

She chuckled to herself. That disgusting face was floating in the space.

At her new workplace, Kai was able to use her own private room office for the first time. It was carpeted, with a shiny desk and a high-backed chair. Her new subordinate was a young man, and her boss was a hard-headed old man.

After stretching, Kai was about to receive, unpack, and start putting in order her belongings. Then, she received a phone call.

“Yes, this is Kai.”

“It’s me.” It was Takemo’s voice. “How is your new office?”

“I have not yet examined the situation in detail.” Kai said, and smiled. She could tell she was in a good mood.

“I’m sorry. That’s what I wanted to tell you, actually ...”

“Sir? What are you talking about?”

“That I sent you to such a place.”

“Such a place? Is there any problem?”

“No, there should not be any problem. If you have any problem, please let me know right away. I am sure I can help you.”

“So what else is there?”

“Yeah, well, we are far away from each other, and it is not a big city.”

“No, I have no problem with that.”

“I cannot see you anymore.”

“Oh, that is what you mean.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I feel the same.”

“I hope you are not blaming it on me.”

“No way.” Kai chuckled a bit. “I have not even thought of that. I’m very motivated now.”

“I see. I feel relieved to hear that.”

“Sir, thank you for your concern.”

“I will call you again.”

“Yes, I will as well.”

“Happy hunting.”

The phone was hung up.

She put the receiver back on the telephone set gently.

Kai was a little glad. She felt as if she could see through this man named Takemo. He was neither a threat nor an obstacle to her. A feeling of clarity over the whole outlook of her life spread through her body.

“So ...” She mumbled to herself.

Well, shall I drink coffee? But, she caught sight of the ashtray on the desk and decided to smoke a cigarette first. This was her first cigarette in the new place. When she exhaled the white smoke, she was standing by the window. Her office was on the second floor, and there was a parking lot just below. A forest surrounded the premises. Besides the dense greenery, all she could see was the gray wire mesh surrounding the facility.

The door was opened, and a cart with four cardboard boxes on it came in. It was her subordinate, Kawasaki, pushing it.

“Oh, thank you.” Kai moved closer to him.

“Ma’am, where should I put these?”

“You can put them anywhere. I’ll do the rest myself.”

“You smoke, don’t you?” He said after stopping the cart.

“Oh, shall I stop smoking?”

“No, no, not at all.”

“How can I get a cup of coffee?”

“There’s a coffee maker in the aisle, but it’s a bit thin. It’s the boss’s preference.”

“I’d rather drink bitter coffee.”

“Would you like me to brew it for you?”

“Oh, please, then. But I can’t have it brewed all the time, so I’ll find a way to

make it work.”

Kawasaki nodded while smiling and walked out of the room. Kai walked over to the cart and opened the top cardboard box by peeling off the tape.

At the top was the newspaper from the morning of her departure. At the bottom of the front page was a picture of Second Lieutenant Kusanagi. The headline read, “Shot Down Three Aircrafts.”

She was not smiling. It was a picture of her with a glare in her eyes.

Yes, those eyes, Kai thought.

Then, she slowly exhaled the smoke, and removed the smile from her own face as well.

Episode 6: Earth Born How this end was to take place, what it would be like, or where she would go, Snowflake could not tell.

This excerpt is from *Snowflake* by Paul Gallico

-1-

It had been hot enough to make him sweat, but now it was unbelievably cold. *Heater malfunctioning again,* Mashima clicked his tongue. He had told the mechanic that there was something wrong with the heater, though. This time, it seemed to have stopped completely. After confirming that he was already flying in the airspace where he could communicate, Mashima switched on the radio and waited for the green indicator to light up.

“Sorry, but I’m lowering the altitude.”

Tokino’s plane, flying diagonally to the right in front of Mashima’s, approached and lined up right next to his. Tokino seemed to be looking at Mashima.

“Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing serious. It’s just cold.”

“Roger. Lower your altitude as much as you like.”

“Thanks.”

Mashima’s aircraft was sinking into the thin clouds. Somewhere, the sounding of a light vibration could be heard intermittently. It was an unpleasant sound, but this kind of thing happened every day. He could not let that bother him. This aircraft once used to carry another pilot before him and another before that. He had the gut feeling that it was about to enter the dangerous phase of aging deterioration.

The surrounding clouds disappeared, and the ground became visible. It was a brownish grassland with some black forests located sporadically. A narrow river and a straight road. As Mashima looked back, he could see in the haze the blue mountains in the same direction as the sun. *If only the sun were ahead of me, it would have been a little warmer*, Mashima thought.

“How’s it going?” Tokino asked over the radio.

“I don’t know yet. I’ll hold on at this altitude for a while.”

“If you want, why don’t you touch down on the road?”

“Yeah, that will do. I want a hot cup of coffee.”

“We’re almost there.”

The engine sound was constant noise. *Subdued*. The air was relentlessly sticky, to the extent that the tips of the wings were shaking minutely. None of the gauges moved. It was as if he was driving a truck.

This time, the dance with the enemy was the hardest in a long time. Still, fortunately, his aircraft stayed intact. There were six enemy aircrafts, twice as many as those on Mashima’s side. At first, they could only see four on the enemy side, so they engaged in the aerial combat without hesitation. The leader, Sakashiro, brought down three of the planes, his colleague, Tokino, took care of two, and Mashima shot down the one that got Sakashiro. The result was an overwhelming six-to-one victory, but it was a pity that Sakashiro had been brought down. It had only been six months, but Mashima had been flying with him most of the time. Besides, Mashima’s role was to cover for Sakashiro’s aircraft.

This time Mashima was behind the enemy aircraft that had entered the rear of

Sakashiro's aircraft. Which would have been quicker, the enemy plane shooting at Sakashiro's plane or Mashima shooting at the adversary? Mashima looked it back several times. He was not sure.

Fire.

Right on the mark, he thought.

He broke away.

When he let the aircraft roll once and then checked the vicinity, the two smoke-belching planes appeared in the same direction. At least Mashima could not see the moment the enemy plane fired its machine gun. He asked himself if such a subtle positional interval and slight time difference mattered. *What other choice did I have? Would it have been the best?* With these thoughts in mind, he was returning. And now, he concluded, he had just barely done his part.

Mourning the lost comrade was nothing special.

He did not think that Sakashiro's decision was reckless. The six to three engagement was justified, given the initial situation. Moreover, they were in a position to make a surprise attack on the four enemy aircrafts. It was a reasonable decision. In hindsight, he could see that the situation itself was a trap that was set up by the enemy side. But, as it turned out, it had ended up being avoided, and there was no problem.

Tokino banked the aircraft wings to the right and to the left alternately. Mashima looked around the surrounding sky, but could not identify anything.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"Someone was waving a hand below me."

Mashima banked the aircraft to one side and looked at the ground. There was a white house on the side of the road, even if it was already far behind. He could see a person that was fading out of sight, but he could not tell if the person was waving the hand or not.

"Is that someone you know?"

There was no reply from Tokino's aircraft.

Mashima's altitude was down to 300. Come to think of it, it might be getting a

little less cold. That was how he felt. That's what he wanted to believe. It was only a few dozen minutes to go to the base.

After Sakashiro's fall, Mashima wondered who would be promoted to the leader this time. *I wouldn't like it if it would be me*, he thought. *Would Tokino be able to take over then? Would it be okay for me to offer him such a thing?* Once he becomes the leader, he has to take care of others. *What a hassle. It is such a drag.*

More importantly, he wanted to fly a new aircraft. It was time for an overhaul. If he continued to fly such an aircraft, he would probably go down sooner or later without being shot. One of his colleagues told him that a problem was found with the new model of aircraft that had just been under development and was causing a considerable delay in the schedule. He did not mind the delay, but he would have liked to see something done about it, such as better maintenance or replacement of parts. There was a debate as to whether just the engine alone could be replaced with a new one. It was not that the engine itself was bad, but there were many consumable parts to be replaced if such extensive maintenances were to be done.

It was unusual for him to even think about such things when he was in the sky. Maybe it was because he had dropped the altitude and gotten so close to the ground that his thought processes were back to the ground level mode.

The runway came into view ahead of him.

"You go ahead and land," Tokino said. Usually, Tokino was the one to touch down first.

"Copy that. Thank you." Mashima responded.

-2-

In the boss's room, Mashima was sitting on the sofa. His boss was still sitting at his desk. The supervising officer had made a phone call earlier. Mashima was not sure if the boss was looking at papers or what was being done now. There was a knock at the door, and Tokino entered the room. He walked up to Mashima's side, sighed, and sat down.

"This place is warm," Tokino whispered.

“It’s so warm that you die from the heat.” Mashima nodded.

The boss at the desk sat up and came over to them. They both stood up and gave a salute.

“Thank you for your time.” The boss saluted and then sat down in the chair facing them. “Which one of you was the one who confirmed Sakashiro’s end?”

“I was the one, sir,” Mashima responded.

“He did not make it out, did he?”

“No, he did not.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that.” The boss said and lit a cigarette. “Give me a brief report.”

“There were four enemy aircrafts at first,” Tokino reported.

Mashima kept quiet. He and Tokino had not talked to each other to decide who was going to explain to their boss what happened. Mashima was ahead of Tokino in terms of the career, but they were in the same rank. If Tokino had an advantage, it was his having shot down two enemy aircrafts in the latest battle, and nothing more. Or, Mashima had failed in his mission to escort Sakashiro’s plane. Still, Mashima had not the slightest discontent. Mashima preferred that Tokino would deliver the situation report. His explanation was very concise. And in the description of the crucial part, in which Sakashiro’s plane was critically hit, he explained that Mashima’s plane shot at the enemy almost simultaneously. Mashima thought this was the only difficult part for him to speak about, so he felt it was helpful to the even greater extent.

“Is there anything else to add to the report?” The boss asked Mashima.

“No, nothing in particular. If I were a little quicker, then I think I might have been able to save Sakashiro. However, in that case, the enemy aircraft would have probably disengaged before I could get a shot at it. That was quite a capable customer. If it were a one-on-one contest, then I do not think I would have been able to overcome the skills.”

“I guess the temper was getting the best of the head,” Tokino murmured in a whisper.

Whose head was he talking about? Mashima wondered. *Was he talking about me or Sakashiro?* No, *he must be talking about the enemy leader. It was understandable since he had let several of his consort planes get hit and go down.*

That was the end of the reporting session. They left their superior's office and walked down the corridor. In front of the stairway, there was a lounge, where other pilots were gathering. Mashima was feeling depressed about the notion of talking to them.

"Are you going out tonight?" Tokino asked.

"Oh, about that. I hadn't thought of that." Mashima responded. "What shall I do about a case like this?"

"What about a case?"

"I mean, it's just the two of us now."

"Hey, there's no rule in particular."

"Are you coming?" Mashima asked back.

"Hmm, if you're going out, I'll accompany you."

"That's what I wanted to say."

The two of them entered the lounge. Through the window, they could see a small courtyard. Mashima always wondered why there was such a space. If it had been turned into a room, then it would have been nice to have more indoor space. Probably, it was designed to let sunlight in and brighten the room. But, the surrounding rooms always had curtains or blinds down. In addition to blocking out the outside light, the fluorescent lights on the ceiling were turned on even during the daytime. Did the reason for doing so lie in the sake of maintaining the lower susceptibility to external changes? In any case, it was darker near the ground anyway. Compared to the airspace above the sky, it was much darker.

Fortunately, there were not that many people in the lounge. *Just six pilots.* Of course, the fact that Sakashiro had gone down should have already been known throughout the base. Everyone's face was a little gloomier than usual. It was like the weather outside. It was such a trivial, everyday event just to that extent.

In his usual tone of voice, Tokino explained the situation roughly. Occasionally

someone asked a question, and he answered it. There were no emotional topics at all. It was all about the technicalities of flight, the performance of the aircraft, and strategic decisions. It was such a serious discussion. As if they were performing a play on stage, cliché lines flew across between them. But it was not a stage play. This was what the fellows here wanted. They wanted this kind of information. They could say that this was the only thing they were interested in for the sake of their own survival. Mashima was vaguely thinking about such things. It seemed strange to him. To put it another way, he felt as if he was somewhat farther away than usual, on the day. Even though he was back at the airbase, he still felt like he was above the clouds. He wondered if he had actually been shot down at that moment. He imagined that only his soul had come back here and was listening to everyone. *Still, it would be nice*, he thought. He felt like smiling a little.

When the conversation was over, they moved to the cafeteria and had a beer. Mashima opened a new pack of cigarettes and tasted the first fresh one. By that time, Mashima finally started to feel better. All in all, he felt that the matters had been settled to make him feel that it had been a good day.

“What are we gonna do now?” Tokino came close to and asked Mashima. He was probably asking if Mashima wanted to go out or not. Tokino looked like he was going back to his room if Mashima was not going out.

“Shall we go?” Mashima responded.

“Okay.” Tokino relaxed his lips a little and tapped Mashima on the shoulder once. “See you in an hour.”

“Roger.”

-3-

A dark-skinned woman in a red metallic dress let out a high-pitched squeal when she saw Tokino. Her hair always looked wet, and Mashima always wondered if that thing hanging in the air and caressing the face would induce a creep. Mashima and Tokino parted from each other soon after. Mashima grabbed a magazine from the rack in the lobby and walked up the stairs. Maki, who was always there for him, did not come out.

Mashima went into the room he was shown to. After a while, a different woman came into the room and told him that Maki was not there.

“What do you mean by she is not here?” Mashima was lying on the bed reading a magazine. The pictures were all over the pages, and the explanatory texts were hard to read because they overlapped with the images. It was a magazine with such a design.

“Hmm, she had something. Maybe she’s sick.” The woman uttered, sitting on the bed. “Am I too terrible to take her place?”

“No, not at all. Who are you?”

“I’m Fuko. I’m not catching a cold.”

“Oh, well, what else do you catch?”

“Excuse me for not catching anything.” She pouted and tapped Mashima’s foot.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Hey, how is Mr. Sakashiro? Why isn’t he with you?”

“Uh ...” Mashima put the magazine on the side table.

“No ... Could it be that he’s dead?”

Mashima nodded.

Fuko seemed to be inhaling slowly, silently. Then she looked up at the ceiling once. She might be imagining that Sakashiro was up there.

“Really ... Oh, well ..., he’s dead.”

“Should I have told you that he was sick?”

“Huh?” Fuko, who had been looking down, looked up.

“Maybe I should have said so. I thought that to myself.”

“No, you can’t lie like that.” She smiled. “Thanks for telling me.”

“Is Maki really sick?” Mashima asked.

“Well ...” Fuko turned her eyes to the ceiling again. “Yeah, actually, you know, she’s not sick. I’m sorry. I lied to you.”

“What’s wrong with her? Is she dead?”

“No way. She’s not dead.” Fuko climbed up on the bed and got closer to him.

“Well, I don’t know much about it, but, um, it’s not that she’s gone. I think she was trying to get away from here to go somewhere else.”

“Oh ... You said she was trying to. Does it mean that did she not make it?”

“Yeah. She was found out about that and got scolded. And I’m sure she is sobbing now.”

“Where?”

“Somewhere.”

“Why was she scolded?”

“After all, if she ran away without telling them, she would be scolded, right?”

“Oh, there’s a rule about that, isn’t there?”

“People are supposed to make pledges. Even if you don’t want to make a promise, there are things you have to make a pledge for, right? And in the end, you can be scolded for that pledge later.”

“You’re right.”

“When a person dies, the promise she made disappears. That’s why she can only be scolded while she’s alive.”

“Of course, that’s how it goes.”

“I see, Mr. Sakashiro is dead. Oh my, well, I may be feeling a little sad.”

“He died in a good way.” Mashima told her.

“Oh?” Fuko, who had been leaning against him, pulled her face away and stared at him. “Were you watching the scene?”

“Not close enough, but I was flying with him.”

“What do you mean by dying in a good way?”

“Umm, yeah, well, if he dies while being airborne, it’s always a good way to die.”

“But isn’t it possible to escape by parachute?”

“Sometimes it is.”

“If he could have a better way to die, why would he try to escape?”

“Uh, it’s because he wants an even better way to die.”

Fuko seemed to be thinking silently for a while, but then she smiled like a child at a school play. She was an adult, but she could smile like a child, probably because it was her job.

-4-

In the dark room, Mashima lit a cigarette. The miraculous brightness of the lighter tried to connect time and space with him, but soon the light disappeared, and only the red heat source remained in space. However, thanks to the afterimage, when he exhaled the smoke, he could imagine the way it drifted into view.

“Are you leaving now?” He heard Fuko’s husky voice right beside him.

“No, I’m still smoking, and I also have to get dressed.”

A dim light was turned on near the floor in the room. She got up from the bed and put her legs down on the other side of the bed. She seemed to be trying to get dressed. *She’s a bit of a strange woman*, Mashima thought about Fuko. *I wonder what she is*. Unusually, she did not cling to him like other women did.

“Can I see you again?” She asked, as she was having her back to him.

“Maybe.” He let out a smoky reply, along with the cigarette smoke.

“Oh, yeah. I forgot to tell you something important. I’m probably not going to be here much longer.”

“Oh. Why?”

“I’m finally allowed to leave here.”

“You are allowed? You’ve never been able to leave before?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Aren’t you going to get scolded?”

“I don’t get scolded.”

“Oh, so, that is a good thing.”

“It’s good for me. See, I can’t keep doing this kind of job forever, can I?”

“I’m not sure about that.”

“I’m sorry.” She twisted around and looked back at him. Her face came closer to his. Her underwear, she had just put on, touched Mashima’s shoulder. It felt coarse. “Didn’t you want to hear the story like this?”

“I do. I’m interested in it.” Mashima replied. He brought his sight back to the cigarette smoke. “I haven’t thought about it that much before.”

He wondered if Maki would be able to leave this place someday. He hoped she would do so as well, soon enough. Fuko seemed to be feeling happy. He could tell by the tone of her voice.

“How can you not be scolded by them?” Mashima asked.

For some reason, it seemed strange to him that someone else becoming happy was a slight relief for him. He did not know why that was the case. *Is it because I have been trained to react that way?*

“It may sound strange, but in short, it’s all about money,” Fuko said. “If she has saved enough money, she can go anywhere she wants.”

“So, what’s next? What are you going to do?” Mashima asked.

“Well, what?”

“What are you going to do with your life after you leave here?”

“I’m going to start a shop.”

“What kind of shop?”

“Well, I’ll think about that.”

“Oh ...” He blew out the smoke. He felt it was a bit funny.

“When I open my shop, I’ll send you a letter of invitation.”

“Sending it to my place?”

“Yeah. Do you mind?”

“No, not at all. But I want you to clearly show what kind of shop it is.”

“Okay. Fair enough. That’s a problem, for sure.”

Fuko stood up and pulled on her skirt. Mashima also put out his cigarette and put on his shirt. It was still in the dead of night. But he made a promise with Tokino to go back to the base. It was almost that time.

The room stayed quiet for a while. Mashima was the one who finished changing the clothes first, while Fuko’s clothes were still on the sofa. She seemed to be fixing her makeup in the bathroom. She did not come out quickly. The lights were on now, and the whole room was bright. Mashima sat on the bed again and read the rest of the magazine. He thought about leaving the room in another 10 minutes.

There was a slight knock at the door.

It was unusual. Mashima walked to the door, unlocked it, and pulled it open. The corridor was filled with a yellowish light, and Tokino was standing a short distance away.

“Oh? Is it that time already?” Mashima asked.

“The clock is broken.” Tokino frowned.

“What clock do you mean?”

“In the room.”

Mashima was wearing a watch and looked at it.

“Am I a little early?” Tokino asked.

“No, the timing is just about right. I can leave now, too.”

“Sorry. Tell Maki that I’m sorry.” Tokino said. “I could’ve waited downstairs, but there was some commotion.”

“Commotion?”

“It looks like a minor dispute. We’d better stay out of it.”

“Really ...”

“Let’s get out from the back door.”

“All right. I’ll get ready right away.” Mashima closed the door once.

Fuko just came out of the bathroom.

“Tokino just came here to call for me, so I’m on my way,” Mashima told her.

“Oh, I’ll walk you out.” She hurriedly put on her blouse.

“No, he said there is some commotion downstairs, and we should go out through the back door.”

“Oh ... commotion? What is it?”

“See you then.” Mashima grabbed his jacket and opened the door.

Tokino was waiting for him, while leaning against the wall. Mashima walked out into the corridor, and put on his jacket while moving.

“Oh? Isn’t she Fuko?” Tokino looked into the room.

Fuko ran over to stop the door from closing. The buttons on her chest were still undone. A tattoo was visible on her white skin, through the opening.

“Hey, it’s been a long time.” She smiled back at Tokino. “Hey, how is Ms. Kusanagi?”

“I don’t know.” Tokino shook his head horizontally.

Mashima walked down the corridor, with Tokino pushing his back. There was another staircase at the back of the building. They walked it down. There was a door in a small dark hall, and that was the back entrance.

“See you again.” Fuko waved to them from the top of the stairs. “We may not see each other again, though.”

Tokino opened the door. They stepped out into the dark, cold air. A few wooden steps were leading from the door to the ground. A white light was falling from the window onto the grassy ground.

“I don’t like that woman,” Tokino said as he was walking.

“Are you talking about Fuko?”

“Yeah. Her thought processes are somewhat out of whack, aren’t they?”

“I’m not sure.” Mashima did not know what he was talking about. “She told me she’s quitting this place.”

“Oh, really?” Tokino sounded surprised. “Then it was true.”

“What do you mean?”

“I heard from another woman that Fuko got money from Ms. Kusanagi.”

“You mean Captain Kusanagi? Why?”

“I don’t know. Anyway, with that money ...”

“She can get out of here?”

“That’s how it works.”

“I don’t get it, the whole storyline.”

“It’s better if you don’t understand anything about it.”

They walked out to the front side of the building and then down the outdoor stairway further into the parking lot. Mashima looked back toward the brightly lit porch, but it was empty now.

They got into the car. Mashima sat in the driver’s seat and Tokino in the passenger seat.

“So, what was the dispute about?” Mashima asked as he started the car.

“Look, there’s the car.” Tokino pointed the finger diagonally to the front.

There were two luxury cars parked there. It was too dark to see clearly, but there seemed to be someone in the driver’s seats.

“I see.” Mashima nodded.

In other words, it seemed that several people, who could boast the social statuses to be able to make their chauffeurs wait, were visiting the place. *Pilots never get into fights on the ground. They are a different breed. I certainly don’t want to get involved*, Mashima thought.

He started the car by revving up the engine that was still not warmed up. The sound of popping gravel grains faded, and he pulled it out onto the asphalt road. The road ahead, illuminated by the headlights, was hazy, like the bottom of a body of water.

“I see. Come to think of it, Sakashiro always chose Fuko.” Tokino muttered in the passenger seat. “If he had been able to come tonight, it would have been their last night together. I wonder which one would have been more disappointed.”

If Sakashiro came here with us, then I would not have had to meet Fuko, not even once,
Mashima thought.

“So you ended up being his substitute?” Tokino said.

Mashima pondered the meaning of the comment. For a few seconds, the only thing going through his mind was the statement.

“Hey, which one do you think it was?” Tokino asked.

Was it Sakashiro or Fuko who would have been disappointed?

Mashima could not answer it.

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It was about half a month later.

When Mashima walked past the lounge, he noticed that the door was still open. Several pilots were gathering in the room. He wondered what they were talking about, so he entered the room.

As Mashima walked in, one of the pilots handed it to him. It was a postcard. It was a picture of a sandy beach landscape, printed with the style that required just two ink colors: blue and gray. There were rows of words on the back of the postcard, as if they were written by a child.

How are you all doing?

I'm doing very well.

Thank you so much.

I will write to you folks again, so you can look forward to that.

Fuko

That's how he could read it.

Just the base's address was written on the postcard, and it was addressed to “Dear all.”

She didn't write anything about the shop, Mashima thought. The other comrades did not talk about Fuko either, for the topic did not cause any buzz. They quickly moved on to other subjects of conversation. *If Tokino, a well-informed person, is there, we might be able to talk about her a little*, Mashima contemplated. He himself knew very little about Fuko, and the only comment he could get from the coworkers there was that she was a capricious woman.

Somehow, however, the postcard ended up in Mashima's possession. "You keep it," Someone told him. It was because he was the last of the pilots to see her. Without any particular refusal, he took the postcard back to his room.

The postcard was inserted into the end of the bookcase on Mashima's desk. In addition, there were already three postcards and two letters there. They had been sent from his hometown a long time ago. When Mashima put Fuko's postcard in the bookcase, he was reminded for a moment that he had such letters. He had completely forgotten what they were about, but he could not feel like taking them out and read them. *Like them, Fuko's postcard would soon be transferred to the realm of oblivion. It would never be read again*, he thought.

However, if he could no longer come back to this room, someone would have to sort out his belongings and send them home. Those letters would be returned to the people whom they were written to. Mashima imagined that Fuko's postcard would only evoke the moment's misplaced imagination, and become a meaningless piece of paper.

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Another few weeks passed, but the second postcard from Fuko never arrived. There was no mention of the fact that it had not come, and of course, Mashima never once reminisce about her.

One day, Mashima visited a bar a short distance away from the base. When he got out of his car, he noticed a sedan that he had seen before, and it was parked at an angle in the parking lot. The car was much larger than it needed to be, with a broad hood.

As he approached the bar, three women came out of the door, chattering in high-

pitched voices. When they realized that Mashima was there, they stopped talking and smiled at him. Maki's face was not there. That was all he could make out.

"Where is Mr. Tokino?" One of the women asked.

"I don't know." He replied.

"You're not with him today?"

"Nope."

"Tell him to revisit us, please. Has he been doing fine?"

"Probably."

He walked past the women and entered the bar. There were no other customers. The master was washing cups at the counter. There was no music being played. Mashima took a seat at the counter and ordered a hot cup of coffee. Just as the master started making it, the door of the bar was opened. Mashima turned around and saw one of the women that he had just talked to standing there.

"I'm sorry, but I have a favor to ask of you ..."

Mashima looked at the master. The master's eyes widened a little, and he looked at Mashima, too. Mashima silently stood up and approached the woman. She held the door open and waited, so Mashima went out. Outside the door was a wooden deck with steps. There were three steps to the ground.

"Do you know much about engines?" The woman asked.

"What do you mean?"

"It doesn't work."

"Ah ..., I see your point."

He walked over to the aforementioned car he had just passed by. There were still two women sitting in the back seat. One of them peeked out the window and waved at Mashima.

Mashima climbed into the driver's seat and tried the ignition. The cranking motor roared, but the engine did not start.

"Actually, this is Fuko's car," said the woman in the back seat.

Mashima tried again, but the result was the same. It sounded like the starter motor could not quite make a full revolution. It was probably just due to a weak battery.

“It hasn’t run out of gas, has it? We have just filled it up,” said the woman standing outside.

Mashima got out of the car and walked towards his own vehicle.

“Hey, what are you doing?” The woman followed behind him.

Mashima got into his own car and started the engine. Then he moved it right next to the side of her car. With the engine running, Mashima got out of the car and opened the trunk. Between the toolbox and the spare tire, there were jumper cables. He grabbed them. The cords were strangely stiff. The clip got caught, and the cable snapped upward.

“Hey, can it be fixed?” The woman came up to Mashima and asked him again.

This time, he stuck his face into the driver’s seat of the woman’s car and looked for the lever to open the hood.

“This might be Fuko’s cursed grudge, eh?” The woman in the car uttered.

“Should we get out of the car?” The other woman asked. That was the sanest question Mashima had heard from them so far.

“No, it doesn’t matter,” Mashima answered. He felt as if he had answered all the questions at the same time.

Mashima attached the battery clamps of the jumper cables to the battery terminals, and connected the other ends of the cords to the battery of his car. He climbed back into the driver’s seat of the woman’s car and twisted the automotive key.

The starter motor growled, and Mashima heard the sound of the engine turning. He pressed down on the gas pedal a little, and it started without a hitch.

“Wow! Amazing. It’s fixed.” The woman outside clapped her hands.

There was applause in the back seats as well.

Mashima got out of the car and disconnected the cables from the batteries. He

closed the hood, threw the cables into the trunk of his car, then reached into the driver's seat of his car through the window and shut off the engine.

"Hey, what was wrong with the car?" The woman outside asked him from the other side of the car.

"You need to change your battery."

"Battery, you say."

"Yes."

"Battery, battery," The woman repeated the word. She seemed to be trying to memorize it.

"You folks may want to keep going to the factory, or you'd better go straight home. It's best not to stop the engine on the way."

"You mean it'll stop running again?"

"Probably."

"So ... We're in trouble. It's a bad car."

"No, the only thing wrong with it is the battery."

"Thank you. You've been a big help."

Mashima raised one hand lightly once and walked toward the bar.

A few words still flew from behind him, but they were no longer relevant to him.

As Mashima entered the bar, he heard the sound of the women's car leaving. When he returned to the counter, the master placed a cup of coffee in front of him just in time impeccably. He took a sip of the hot cup, then stood up and went to the rack by the wall to get a magazine.

Mashima folded his legs on the seat and flipped through the pages of the magazine, looking at the pictures. He reached for his cup and took another sip of coffee. When he looked toward the door, he saw the dazzling outside light filtering through the glass and falling onto the floor while leaving a white impression.

He remembered the name of the woman he overheard only twice in the parking lot. For a moment, he thought of her white skin and the tattoo.

That was all.

As he took another sip of his coffee, he had forgotten everything.

Episode 7: Doll of Glory High overhead floated a soft white cloud. Was that her destination? Snowflake remembered that it was in a cloud she had been born.

This excerpt is from *Snowflake* by Paul Gallico

-1-

The woman pushed the heavy door open with her own strength. It was the first time for her. Until then, adults had opened the door for her. *I am still too small and not strong enough*, she had thought before that. On the day, there happened to be no adults nearby, so she gave it a try. When she tried to open the door by herself a long time ago, the door did not even budge. So this time, she held her breath from the start and pushed it with all her might. Then, to her surprise, it moved more easily than she had imagined.

How many times have I walked through the door before? Of course, I have grown up, and the door might have grown old and a little weak, she thought.

The smell of disinfection got saturated as she went inside, and eventually she could not sense it anymore. The light was whitish as though it was hazy, and the floor was shiny as if it was always wet. The door was only marked with a number. The white-coated staff she passed by wore glasses without exception and had blank expressions on their faces. She could recognize the non-employees because their clothes were too baggy. They were the patients. Their seemingly decolorized white skins reminded her more of plants than animals. Their mouths were slack, and they would sometimes cast a dull glance in her direction. As she got very close to them, they appeared to be ready to say something, but she did not get a chance to hear their voices. The only sound was the cold footsteps of people walking. It was as if no voice or music existed in this place.

She wrote down her name at the nurses' station and waited for a moment. A

middle-aged woman in white came out from the space behind the counter and stood before her.

“Have you caught a cold lately?” The woman asked her.

“No, ma’am.”

The woman looked at her body as if observing her. Then the woman gave a slight nod. The two of them walked out into the passage. There were two doors with keycard locks along the way. Farther down the corridor, the doors were evenly spaced on both sides, and the only way to tell them apart was by the small shiny metallic room number plates. It was a place where everything was the same in every way, and it seemed to go on forever.

“Do you want to go out?” The woman in white asked her.

“Err, I’m not sure. I don’t know what the person will say.”

It was the same number as before. The woman unlocked the door, pushed it open, and walked in. She followed the entry.

There was a small window on the back wall, quite high up. Light shone through it, making the room bright. She saw a bed on her right. There was an armchair in the center, but it was placed with its back toward her.

“How are you feeling?” The woman moved to the other side of the chair, bent her knees, and looked up at the one sitting on the chair. The woman was suddenly wearing a smile on her face, as if she was putting on a mask.

“Nothing in particular ...”

“There’s a visitor for you.”

The chair swiveled, and a white face slowly turned toward her.

“Oh, it’s you ...” That white face changed slightly.

“Do you know who this person is?” The woman in white asked.

But the person did not answer. It was the same, as usual.

The two of them walked down the corridor and out into the courtyard. The hospital staff did not come out the door. They seemed to be trusted to that extent. *Which of us is more trusted?* She wondered for a moment.

“Kannami, do you remember me?” She asked.

“I remember your face, at least.” Sitting on the bench, Kannami answered in a gentle voice.

“I am glad to hear that. I’ve been here many times, you know?”

“Many times? How many?”

“Umm.” She started to fold her fingers but gave up halfway through. “Probably, more than 10 times, I think.”

“Oh, I’ve been here for that long, haven’t I?”

“That’s right. It’s been many years.”

“Come to think of it, sometimes I notice that the seasons change.” Kannami smiled. “I can see it when I come out here. The sky is different. I mean, the height of the clouds is different.”

“Do you also notice that it is hot or cold?”

“Not a big deal.”

“What’s not a big deal?”

“I mean, whether it’s hot or cold.”

“Can you guess what it is now?”

“Now is, umm,” He looked up at the sky again. “Maybe, is it autumn?”

“Is it not cold?”

“That’s not a big deal.”

“Really ... It will soon be winter.”

“Why do you come to see me? Oh, have you come here to see me, to begin with?”

“Of course, I have.”

“Have you come here just for this?”

“Yes ...” She smiled. “I’ve come from quite far away.”

“How far from here?”

“By bus and train, well, it may take about five hours in total.”

“Five hours? Why don’t you just fly an airplane to come here?”

“I could have.” She found herself chuckling. “No, even if I do so, it wouldn’t make much difference. The airport is too far.”

“I see. Was it always that far?”

“No, it was a little closer before. But then I’ve got a job.”

“Got a job? You mean, you’ve changed your occupation?”

“No, I haven’t. It’s my first job. I am working for the first time.”

“Oh ... You do. What kind of job?”

“I work in a school now.”

“Oh, are you a teacher?”

“I am.”

“What kind of teacher are you?”

“What do you think?” She tilted her head.

Kannami, who had been looking up at the sky for a while, turned his glance toward her. He had beautiful eyes. They were crystal-clear in a way that they were not easy to obtain. She asked the question, because she wanted his gaze.

Just as she had hoped, his gaze cast a spell over her. It caused her to be enveloped in deep silence and darkness. The slight eye movement was reminiscent of something dancing in the flame, and it undoubtedly created the contrast of her fright at its brilliance.

“You’re a music teacher, right?” Kannami said in a flat voice.

“How do you know that? Did I tell you about it?”

“I’m not sure ...” Kannami turned his gaze away from her. He looked at the

window of the building. Rather, maybe what he saw was the sky reflected by the window.

She was sure that she had never told him about her employment. In fact, she could not even recall her telling him that she played the piano. The previous version of her had never liked it. Besides, it seemed to her that Kannami would not be interested in such things. That was why she had never talked about it. It was the same way with her own life. She could not like herself. She always had not been able to do so. But now, it was a little different. Playing the piano had become her job, and she had a definite feeling that she would start to like it from that point on.

“I feel weird about it myself. I can’t believe I’m a teacher now,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I thought that school teachers were, well, to put it this way, more mature. In other words, more reliable, or, well, more admirable. I don’t think I have become that kind of person yet.”

“Are you not confident in yourself?”

“Umm, yes, I am. I have confidence. That’s not what I meant. I think I’m still on the way.”

“On the way?”

“I mean, I’m incomplete.”

“I see ...” Kannami nodded a bit. He even seemed to relax his mouth slightly.

There was silence for a while. She was staring at Kannami’s profile. His eyes never turned toward her again. She gave up on appreciating his crystal-clear eyes and looked up at the sky. It was like she were inside a gigantic blue light bulb. There was no wind, and the sky was as clear as if there were no air.

“How is your health these days?” She asked.

Kannami kept gazing at the sky. His eyes were not squinting. *It is not too bright to him.*

“Very good. Actually, I might be able to get out of here soon.”

“Oh, really?”

“I had such an opportunity once before and was kind of looking forward to it. But that time, I ended up just moving to another hospital,” Kannami spoke.

“Do you remember that?”

“I do. For some reason, I do remember that. I wonder why? Maybe I was just shocked by that much, to the extent that I have not forgotten it.” He chuckled funnily, shifted his posture, and crossed his legs. He put his hands on his knees, closed his eyes, and then made a nodding gesture. “So this time, I’m trying not to get my hopes up too high. It’s impossible. That can’t be. That’s what I tell myself.”

“You’ll get out of here, I believe.”

“I hope so.”

“It would be wonderful.”

“You think so?”

“After you get out of here, where are you going?”

“Umm, I have no idea.”

“Where do you wanna go?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t have much idea.”

“What are you gonna do?” She asked.

The reply did not come back to her.

The word “airplane” was what she tried not to mention, so she could not ask him about it. When the word came out of Kannami’s mouth just once, she felt slightly nervous. But it also sounded like another word that had nothing to do with him at all. She had the impression, at least, that he had been pulled away from it so hopelessly by years of treatment or simply by that much of long timespan.

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The woman arrived at the station at the same time as usual and bought a ticket for the train that was leaving at the same time as usual. However, the destination was far away. *It would be late at night when she arrives.* After shopping at a kiosk, she boarded the train and took her reserved seat. It was a window seat. An older

woman was sitting next to her, with her wrinkled hands resting on a neatly woven woolen lap blanket. The seat for two across from her was empty. But sooner or later, someone would sit there. She put her bag at her feet.

The train started to move immediately. She was sitting facing the direction opposite of forward movement. Still, she was staring out the window. The train was running through a low part of the city that was like a canal. She could see trees and the roofs of buildings high up on both sides. Every once in a while, the train went through under bridges, on which she could see people peeking out at the train. Gradually, the land around the railroad was getting lower and lower. As the train went out into the suburbs, the plains spread out into the distance. The sun that was up on the opposite side of the train made the landscape look clear and beautiful from her point of view.

She was just looking at the scenery vacuously and was not thinking about anything in particular, but tears began to fall from her eyes. When she touched her cheek with the fingers, she was surprised to realize that she was crying. She looked at the old lady next to her. She was a little relieved to see that the elderly one seemed to be asleep. She turned her head toward the window again and decided to think slowly and carefully.

I must not rush in. Do not get excited.

By the way, why am I crying?

Just the thought of it made her feel as if her entire body was going to turn cold in an instant. The tension ran through her. Silence reverberated. She closed her eyes. The tears would not stop, so she pulled out a handkerchief and held it to her eyes and nose. Breathing slowly and consciously, she concentrated on stopping the tears.

She knew that there was no way to stop the tears except for to think of that scene. She was not crying because she was feeling sad. Her eyes welled up with tears before that was being recalled. It was a sign of the moment before she was reminded. And when she recalled it, the tears would stop. That was what she always did. It was what she did over and over again.

In her memory, she was walking through a crowd of people, with her elder sister taking her hand to lead her. She insisted to her elder sister several times that she could walk independently without her hand being pulled and guided. She hated lack

of freedom. But when many adults stampeded by her, she got a little scared. Sometimes her body was bumped into others. Everyone was indifferent to her, and she was like a piece of driftwood floating down the river.

Her elder sister never let go of her hand. That was really reassuring and made her feel glad. But she had never told the elder sister that she was pleased. Not even once. She had a feeling that once she spoke such words, it would be the end of everything, and even she would disappear. *The current existence of what I am is being protected by magic, but such words of mine would break the spell*, she believed. It was because she once had such dreams when she was much younger.

Her sister was kind enough to walk slowly. The sister must have been paying attention to her. Several brightly lit light bulbs were hung and decorated. There were simple shops that were built of round timber. Overwhelming quantity of sounds were mixed together, and it was loud. She could hear human voices, music, and the sound of an engine, perhaps that of a generator. There was the echo of a horn from far away. The noise of something popping. It sounded like drums being beaten. Even though she was occasionally startled and looked in the potential direction of the acoustical propagation, she could not tell which source the sound was coming from.

Most of the items lined up in the shops were food. They were either plants or animal carcasses. There were smells of burning spices and oil in the air. She did not want to get too close to them. Her elder sister seemed to be feeling the same way, so they walked as far away from the stench sources as possible. Inevitably, they ended up walking in the middle of the street. It was also the least crowded place occasionally. She walked along, looking at the faces of the people she passed by. Everyone was having red faces. They were probably drunk. No one had a whiter face than her elder sister's.

“Hey, sis, why have we come to such a place?” She asked.

“Oh, what?” Her elder sister brought the face closer to hers.

“I asked you the reason why we are here.”

“Oh ... Didn't I tell you about it?”

“I am yet to hear it.”

“I’m looking for someone.” The elder sister answered. “It’s my job.”

Come to think of it, she thought she had heard something like that from her elder sister. Still, she felt that her sister coming to the market to look for someone was strange, so she figured that there had to be a different reason. But she decided not to ask anything more about it.

Her sister stopped in front of a shop with many containers made of bamboo. She had no idea what they were designed to contain. They varied in size but were almost identical in shape. An old man in shiny black clothes was holding a smoking pipe and sitting on a chair. Her elder sister took a small piece of paper from the pocket and held it out in front of the old man. She was looking at it from below. She could only see the back of the paper, though. Thanks to the bright bulbs shining light on the paper from the opposite side, she could see words printed on it. *Is this my sister’s destination for the day?*

The old man stared at the elder sister’s face for a few seconds with only one eye wide open. Then he turned his attention toward her and stared at her. She thought about lowering her head. She tried to bow, but she did not have enough mental leeway to do so. The old man’s face was so terrifying that it made her stiffen.

The old man looked at the big sister again. Then he nodded without words.

He stood up and walked into the back of the shop. The sisters followed him. They walked into a very dark room. There was only one candle with a small flame flickering.

“Why do you bring this little girl here? Is she a lucky charm or something for you?”

“Where is the one? I was told to ask you that.”

“It’s apparently difficult to hide such things.”

“Please tell me.”

“He’s with a woman. I can tell you where he is. That’s what you people refer to as principle. I know that principle is more important than people. However ...”

“However?”

“Do not kill the woman, please. That’s the principle of our side.”

“Kill her?”

“You’re going to kill her, aren’t you?”

“No, I will not. I promise.”

“Please don’t kill that woman. She’s a really good person.”

“Understood.”

“This girl is also a really good one, isn’t she?” The old man pointed his finger in her direction. “Cute beings are innocent.”

The old man applied the smoking pipe to his mouth.

In an instant, white smoke filled the vicinity.

The next scene was at the stairway of a building.

The white fluorescent lights were humming. The rusty door of the fire hydrant was tilted. There was no one in sight. However, there was a definite sign of a living person lurking behind the piles of wooden boxes or over the iron fence at the end of the area. The feeling that something was about to move began to drift in, while blending into the darkness despite being saturated. The warm air from downstairs was coming up from the stairwell. The air was filled with a strange rhythmical music, quietly and intermittently. She was holding her older sister’s hand tightly. She wondered when the sister would let go of the hand. She imagined that the sister would leave her and disappear at any moment. It was the kind of place where she could not believe what she could usually believe.

Her elder sister’s hand was cold.

That hand let her go.

She tried to grab the hand again, but she could not reach it. Her big sister stood still and did not move for a while. But, when the elder sister turned, looked at her, lowering herself by bending the knees, and brought the face close to hers.

“Stay here. Do not go anywhere.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll be right back.”

“Please, don’t leave me.”

“Be a good girl and wait here.”

“Are you sure you’ll come back?”

“I promise.”

She nodded and backed away. She put her back against the wall. It was a cold wall. As she looked up, she saw a thick pillar. The darkness was seeping into its hollows. The ceiling was made of bare steel frames. There was a skylight high above, but its glass was foggy as if it was rotten.

The sister was walking up the short flight of stairs. The hand that was gripping the railing was the same left hand that was once connected with her hand earlier. She could not see her sister’s right hand, which seemed to be holding something.

There was a door that was standing in front of them. Her sister pushed the center of the round thing next to it. In the distance, she heard the sound of a bell ringing. The sound alone startled her, and she pushed herself farther into the darkness. *I’ll just stay here and hide. Good kids shouldn’t be afraid of this kind of thing. Don’t worry. That’s okay. When it comes down to it, just close my eyes, and it will go away. Shut my eyes, think of the piano keys, and play my favorite song. As long as I can do that, I’ll be fine. Nothing will happen to me.*

The bell rang in the distance again. Her heartbeat danced as though it was creating the resonance. The lights in the aisle trembled as if they were about to go out. Eventually, there was a small noise, and the door opened slightly.

“Who are you?” A woman’s voice could be heard.

“I’m here to see Kurita.”

“But, who the heck are you?”

There was silence for a while. Then the door opened wide this time, and a young man emerged from inside. He walked out and closed the door behind him.

“How did you find this place?” He said. “Did you come alone?”

“What will you do? Do you want to come back with me?” Her elder sister asked him.

“Umm,” He groaned and then made a short sigh. “No, I can’t,” he said, while shaking his head slightly. “Let’s end this now.”

“How?”

“I have a favor to ask of you.” He said and then whispered in a low voice.

“Ma’am, please shoot me here. You are carrying a gun, aren’t you?”

“At such a place?”

“This is the right place.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I’m fortunate to be shot by you.”

“How come?”

“I’m not sure ...” He seemed to laugh a little. “But, I guess, perhaps you have come here with that in mind. Am I wrong?”

“It is my mission to bring you back.”

“That’s impossible. I don’t want to go back. Even if I do, it’s not likely that I can fly.”

The two of them became quiet there.

Silence.

The air mixed with rhythm, and the darkness spilled over with premonition.

“Do you insist so, no matter what?”

“I’m sorry. I know I’m being selfish.”

“That’s not good ...” The sister looked at her for a moment.

“Is there anything wrong?” The man also looked toward where she was.

She was hiding behind a pillar. It was in the darkness, so they might not be able to recognize her presence.

“A child is there. I don’t want her to see it.”

“Ah ... Okay.” He nodded. “We are going that way.” He pointed in one direction.

“After you shoot me, you can use the emergency staircase to get out.”

They went down the stairs to reach the end of the corridor. The shadows were moving, but soon they were out of sight.

Their voices could no longer be heard.

Time.

Space.

She was holding her breath.

It was as if everything had stopped with that.

She felt a moment of pressure, like a gust of wind.

Then came the sound of gunfire.

She let out a breath.

Footsteps.

The big sister came running toward her.

Extending the hand.

Toward her.

She clutched the hand.

“We are leaving now.”

The two ran down the corridor.

She heard a door open behind her.

Also, another sound.

When they opened the door and went out to the emergency staircase, a woman's short scream echoed. They ran down the spiral stairway. She was almost getting dizzy. She could see the steel steps, the surfaces of which were engraved with convex and concave patterns that were aligned diagonally. The paint was peeled off, and the gloss was somewhere between black and silver. The rusted paint on the handrails was curled up. She was looking at just the sister's boots. Her body was light, almost as if she had been pulled up and lifted. There was a door at the bottom of the stairs, and the sisters went out.

A man was standing there. The big sister must have been startled. She stopped and held her breath. She hid behind the elder sister, who pointed the gun she was holding in one hand at the man.

“Don’t panic. Please get on this.” The man said.

It was a vehicle with what looked like bicycle tires attached on the sides. It was connected to a scooter in front, and the man sat astride it.

“Quickly.”

The older sister climbed into it, and then pulled her up. The scooter towed the cart, on which the sisters were, and started to drive away. The smell of exhaust fumes and a rumbling vibration filled the air.

The sisters hugged each other as they sank into the seat. It had been a long time since the elder sister embraced her like that. *When was it?* It was so long ago that she could not remember. She seemed to be trembling. She thought at the time that she was scared, but she realized much later that it might have been her sister who was trembling.

The cart sped through the dark alleys. Soon they were on a busy street, with cars and motorcycles running nearby. When they stopped at a traffic light, the man driving the scooter turned and looked back at the sisters. He showed them his white teeth. He was smiling. *Why can he smile in such a situation?*

The elder sister put a cigarette in the mouth and lit it. When the big sister exhaled a long puff of smoke, she could feel the older sister’s body shuddering as if something was poking her.

“Did you kill that man?” She asked, close to the elder sister’s ear.

The big sister was silent, while nodding slightly. The elder sister’s eyes were still looking to the front. The older sister was not smiling at all, but just her mouth relaxed a little. It might have been the result or the resistance of attempting to show her willpower.

The car started running again. The sound of horns and engines surrounded them, and span around dizzyingly like a whirlpool.

“That was legitimate.” The elder sister whispered to her.

She nodded. She understood what the statement meant. She knew that much. The big sister was usually in the business of killing people. She understood that there was such a job in the world. But it was not usually done in a place this close. It was

rather a deal in a higher place, in the sky. She had not known that it was possible to kill someone in such an ordinary town, in her presence.

Maybe it is not an everyday occurrence, she imagined. There has got to be some kind of trouble that put them in this critical situation. That is likely to be the case. At least, that is not what my sister wanted. This cannot be the objective.

“That man. I know him.” She said. It was something which she had been wondering whether to say or not. But, she could not keep quiet anymore. That would not be good for her elder sister. If she kept quiet and showed concern for the elder sister, then it would be like admitting that it was wrong and end up being rude to the big sister.

“Of course. I’m sorry.” The older sister then clamped her lips shut.

“Why are you apologizing to me? That person was never my friend. Besides, he was asking you to do that.”

“Yes.”

“It was noble.”

“It was a beautiful end, characteristic to him.”

“No, I was referring to you, my sister.”

“I had no choice.”

“Was he a good person?”

“He was.” Her sister nodded and turned the face in another direction.

They slowed down, and drove into the market. Eventually, the car came to a halt. She could see a row of stalls nearby. The place seemed to be the back side of a busy street. A man in black was standing by a row of gas cylinders. He was the same old man they had met a moment ago.

The elder sister got out of the car. She, too, was able to get out with her own strength.

“Thank you so much. I appreciate that you arranged the car for us.” The big sister bowed to the old man.

“Yeah. Thanks are mutual.” The old man said. “You spared the girl.”

“I never had any intention of killing her in the first place.”

“Really.” The old man smiled. Then he turned his smiling face toward her. “Oh, you’re a pretty girl. Are you all right? Have you ever had any scary dreams?”

“Dreams?” She asked back. “I do have scary dreams.”

“You do, then ...” The old man shoved his hands into his pocket. He held out his hand toward her. On the palm of his hand was a piece of candy. “Go ahead and eat this.”

“When am I supposed to eat it? Before I go to bed?” She asked. “If I do that, I’ll get tooth cavities.”

“Any time will do. You only have to eat it once before you die.”

“Is it just once because I only have one?”

“Right ... Just once.” The old man showed his white teeth.

Where has that candy gone?

She had no memory of eating it. When her mother was dying in a hospital, the last thing she said was that she wanted to eat candy. She had deposited candy into her dry mouth. She remembered that.

Actually, she had not had any scary dreams since meeting the old man.

Instead, she had more and more sorrowful dreams. She often dreamed of her big sister killing that man. And each time, tears flowed. But she was not afraid of it. She had to be feeling sad because she was shedding tears. In fact, she did not cry when she had the same experience at the actual scene. It was probably because she was indeed scared. *When I am scared, I do not feel sad. On such an occasion, there is no time to be saddened. Sorrow causes a feeling of far greater happiness than fright does.*

Another thing. She had a question that she had not realized at the moment. Why did the elder sister take her there? If she remembered right, it had been during her school vacation. She had to be out of the dormitory for a while. The older sister had come to pick her up. That was what she remembered. And the sisters took an uncharacteristically rare trip. They went to several different cities and stayed in hotels for many days. But, the elder sister was doing it for work. It was to find and kill him.

Maybe she should have waited at the hotel that day. *I wonder if I was selfish enough to ask my big sister to take me out?* She did not remember much about it. Maybe the sister wanted to get her to meet him. It was not until much later that she came to the realization of that possibility.

However, there was never the chance.

That was not my sister's sin, she thought.

That was what he had asked for. It was his wish that she granted him. She had accepted it because she understood that his wishes should be respected. In other words, it was the proof that the big sister understood him to that extent.

After thinking that far ahead, she could finally stop the tears. It did not take long. In a very short time, so many thoughts could actually go through her mind. It had been repeated over and over again. It would surely be repeated in the future.

From the varied landscape which unfolded as the train traveled, she brought her focus back to the glass in front of her. Before she knew it, many droplets of water were running down the glass. It seemed to have started to rain.

She was tapped on the shoulder.

She turned the head in that direction. The old lady next to her was smiling and looking at her. The lady lifted one hand slightly. There was a piece of candy on it.

“Oh, thank you.” She took it.

The old woman smiled and said nothing.

If I eat it, will my sorrowful dreams disappear?

-4-

Six months had passed in a blink of an eye.

She was so busy with the new job that she could not visit the hospital even once. Summer had passed, and the evening breeze was getting shockingly cold. She was able to take a few days off, so she took the train early in the morning with a large bag. It was not the usual route. The destination was different. The distance was about the same as usual, but the direction was completely different. It was the first

time for her to visit the place, so she was a little excited. She wanted to enjoy the view from the train window, but she had stayed up late in the previous night, so she closed her eyes. Fortunately, she did not have any sorrowful dreams. In the bag at her feet was a cardigan that she had knitted little by little and finished just in time the night before. That was the main gift.

As she left the station building, the sun was shining brightly. Even if there were few tall buildings around the station, it was abound in many people and cars. A tall woman was standing right next to the line at the cab stand. The figure was silhouetted against the sun behind it, but she knew immediately that it was Kai. On the day before, she had called Kai and promised to meet her. Kai noticed the one to meet first, and raised her hand.

She quickened her steps and bowed to greet Kai.

“Right on time,” Kai said, while taking off the sunglasses. “You’re carrying a big bag. What’s in it?”

“It’s full of souvenirs.” She answered.

“Oh, I see. That kind of idea, hmm, I certainly didn’t have that thought. That’s novel.”

“How has Kannami been?” She asked.

“Fine.”

“How is he now?”

“He’s, umm, not really different. Same old.”

Kannami had left the hospital and come to this town. It was because Kai was here. She wondered what kind of life he was leading now. She had called him once, but she could not understand what he said. It was always hard to understand what he was saying.

They walked toward the parking lot. On the way, Kai turned around and looked at her as they walked.

“Well, you’ve grown up into an adult.”

“Have I?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t expect you to become such a lady.” Kai was walking beside her. “How’s your work going?”

“Umm, I’m getting by. I’m busy, though.”

“I was hoping that you would come join the company and work for us.” Kai smiled.

“I apologize, ma’am.”

“No, that’s okay. Sorry. Don’t worry about it.”

She had been recruited by Kai before. However, she had absolutely no intention of getting hired. Rather, she could not quite believe that Kai was serious about it. Even now, of course, she did not believe so. *It has got to be just a diplomatic gesture*, she thought.

They got into a moss green station wagon. It was a big car. She fastened the seatbelt in the passenger seat.

“About 20 minutes,” Kai said after starting the engine. “It won’t take long.”

“It’s close, isn’t it?”

“Yes. But you can’t get there without using a car. You know, there is almost no train in this city.”

“So, why not by bus?”

“There is no bus either. If you walk, well, it will take you about four to five hours to get anywhere.”

“How does Kannami get around?”

“He rides a motorcycle.”

“Oh ...” She nodded. *I see*, she thought.

They arrived at a hilly area on the outskirts of the town. There was a small gate a little farther down the trail and a lawn garden. The building was a one-story wooden structure. It was painted dark blue. Just the rails, stiles, and muntins of the window were white. The window was left open.

Kannami’s face was there. It appeared that he heard the sound of a car and put the head out of the window.

“I’m going to get some coffee. I’m out of it.” Kai, in the driver’s seat, said. “You can go ahead and get off.”

“Oh, yes.” She nodded, and then looked at Kai.

“Don’t worry.”

“I won’t.”

She opened the door, jumped out, and went through the gate. She ran up the gentle incline to the porch. The front door opened, and Kannami stepped out. He was wearing a white shirt and white pants, looking like a sailor.

She hugged Kannami.

There was a familiar scent that brought back memories.

What is this? It is like looking up at the sky.

She had known it since she was a little girl.

It was a scent that she had always known all along.

“Thank you for coming from so far away.” Kannami’s voice sounded in her ear. It was the usual calm, monotonous voice.

“I have been longing to see you.” She said. “I’m sorry I haven’t been able to come here more often.”

“That’s no problem at all.”

The two of them went inside the house. There was a sofa by the window, and they sat down side by side on it.

“So? How’s life here?”

“Not bad.”

“What are you up to these days?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what do you do all day long?”

“Well, various things.”

“Yes, of course.” She chuckled. “I would like you to tell me what you do.”

“Umm ... I don’t go out often.”

“Don’t you get bored?”

“Compared to when I was in the hospital, I have a lot more to do here. Today, I fixed the door over there.” Kannami pointed his finger at it. “That door did not close tightly. I took off its metallic parts, struck them with a hammer, and then ...”

She turned her attention to the backdoor. It was dark around that vicinity. She looked back at Kannami again. He was sitting right next to her. He had one arm on the back of the couch. He was folding one of his legs to hug it. His face was somewhat downcast, and his lips were in the shape of a slight smile. His eyes were fixed on her. His pupils, which she seemed to be drawn to, did not move even slightly.

She realized for the first time that she was already physically bigger than he was. This made her shiver and feel numb as if the sensation was welling up in the mind. She felt a vague congregation of stimulation, like fine sparks flying to all directions in different parts of her body.

“You’re about to cry,” Kannami said. “Don’t cry.”

She nodded without words. Then she forced herself to smile.

“You have something to say to me, don’t you?”

“I have only one request.” She said. Then she took a deep breath. “But it doesn’t have to be now. It can be any time.”

“Okay ... I’m listening now.”

“Please, for me ... don’t get on any more aircrafts.” She spoke at once. It was a statement that required courage. With those words, her tears welled up, and distorted everything in front of her as if it were melting. But she held back and did not close her eyes. *I mustn’t run away.*

“I knew you would say that.” Kannami tilted his head a little.

Silence.

Tears rolled down her cheek. Kannami touched it with his hand.

“Please don’t cry anymore. That’s my request to you.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“That’s okay.”

Silence.

“Probably ...” Kannami looked upward. Was he looking at the ceiling or the thing beyond it? “You’re my rock. As long as you’re here, I believe I’ll be okay.”

“You don’t fly anymore?”

“I don’t think they’ll let me fly anymore.”

“Never? Even until I become an old woman?”

“That’s okay, so I don’t want you to worry about me.”

She kissed his hand, which was touching her cheek.

She leaned in toward, got closer to him, and made contact with the adorable lips.

“That’s okay, so I don’t want you to cry anymore.”

“Sorry, yes, so ... I’m all right.”

“Now, I want you to show me what’s in your bag. I don’t think there is any young lady with such a big bag. I wonder what’s in it.”

“Of course, I should show you.” She stood up.

She opened the bag and took out a cardigan first.

“Oh ... For me?”

“Is it still a little warm in here?”

“No, it’s not.” Kannami took it and quickly put his arms through it.

“I knitted that for my elder sister.”

“What?” Kannami turned to her. “Your elder sister?”

“No ...” She giggled. “I changed my mind about halfway through.”

She had become mature enough to tell a lie so easily.

Episode 8: Ash on the Sky When, much later, she returned to her senses, it was to find herself trickling

down the side of the blackened building, all soiled and dirtied from the soot and cinders.

This excerpt is from *Snowflake* by Paul Gallico

-1-

There was a straight road leading over the hill. It seemed that the same road continued to the hill beyond. It looked straight when it was viewed from the sky, but the road was curved in response to the gentle undulations of the land. So, it was actually not a straight line. *A person driving a car can keep going without turning the steering wheel, but this is not the case when flying an airplane. In other words, a car cannot get away from the inconvenience of the road. Nevertheless, the scenery changes while the car is running. I don't get bored compared to when it is stationary.* Right now, she was feeling the boredom and inconveniences. Strangely enough, she did not feel dissatisfied in the least.

She parked the car on the side of the road and was sitting on its hood. Her feet were on the bumper. The sunlight was so intense that she took off her jacket. It made her skin tingle and ache. But it was not hot. It was still cold enough for her to see her own breath in the morning. Besides, it could be described as mellow sunshine compared to when it was up in the sky.

She looked up at the sky. She took off the sunglasses she had been wearing. The sky was monotonously blue, and there were no clouds high in the sky. There was no flying object in sight. She had just seen a black bird flying just a few moments before.

Cars were rarely seen. Three cars had passed by so far, but none of them stopped for her. Maybe that was because she was smoking. Now she was refraining from smoking. She saw the fourth car in the distance. So, she got off the hood, stepped forward a little, and waited there. The approaching car was a white minivan. She raised her hand, and the car slowed down. There was only one person in the car. It was a man with a black beard. Slowing down did not necessarily mean that the car would stop. The driver might just observe her and decide to leave the vicinity. However, the car came to a stop beside her. Its window was open.

“What’s wrong?” The man in the driver’s seat leaned over to the passenger seat and asked her.

“Sir, could you give me a ride to any place with a phone?”

“Out of gas? Or some breakdown?”

“Breakdown.”

“Shall I take a look?”

“The gas is still in the tank, and the cranking motor runs, but the engine won’t start. Since it hasn’t exploded, I think the carburetor has got the problem,” she explained.

“Oh, I see. If so, it might not work. Alright. Get in. Where’s your stuff?”

“Hold on a second. I’m on my way.”

She ran to her car and pulled out her bag from the passenger seat. Then she folded up the map on the dashboard and shoved it into the pocket of the bag.

The man opened the rear door of the minivan and moved his stuff out of the way. There were a couple of toolboxes on the passenger seat, and it was not available for her to sit on. Instead, he decided to let her ride in the back seat.

“Thank you so much.” She got into his car. The man closed the door, which was designed to slide, for her.

The man got back in the driver’s seat, looked back once, smirked, and started the car.

“If you walk from here, well, you won’t make it to the city, even by night.” The man said with a laugh. “You’ve got your life saved.”

“I appreciate your help.”

“I saw one truck getting stuck a little earlier. Maybe it’s just one of those days.”

“What kind of day is it?”

“Umm, maybe it’s the moon’s gravitational pull or something.”

“Did you not give that person a ride?”

“No, the person was in the middle of fixing the car. I guess that the things were

expected to be under control. Well, I didn't want to interfere with the ongoing business. Come to think of it, young lady, you seem to know a lot about cars."

"No, I don't know much. And I can't fix it myself.

The man looked back and gave her a glance.

"You are a young lady. Am I not right?" He asked to make sure.

She nodded and made an effort to smile at him.

"Ah, sorry. You have short hair, so at first, I thought you were a man."

"If I were a man, would you have not let me get in your car?"

"No, that's not what I meant." The man laughed out loud. "There are all kinds of men and women, you know."

There are many types of bears as well. Same for wolves. But he wouldn't let them in his car. Of course, she did not comment on such a thing.

"By the way, where were you going?" The man asked.

She only told him the direction of her destination but did not tell him exactly where she was going because she herself did not really know. Next, he asked her how old she was, and she told him a lie. Then he asked her about the occupation. She wondered why she was being asked so many questions. Since he was giving her a ride, she could not make complaints. For him, he probably wanted to feel a little sense of security, now that he was having an unknown being in his car. No, it was more like he liked to dig out someone's lives that were buried in places that he had nothing to do with. *There are many people like that. It's probably the same kind of preference as digging up fossils and ruins.*

"Now, I'm unemployed." She replied. "I'm looking for a job."

"Now? So, what were you doing before? A student?"

"Umm, I got on airplanes."

"Really ..." The man stared at her again for a few seconds. The road was straight, and there was not a single car in front or behind them. No human or animal was likely to jump out into the way. "You were on airplanes, so were you an attendant of a passenger plane?"

“Um, no, not exactly. But, well, that’s the way it is, or something like that.”

“Why did you quit that job?”

“I had a health issue.”

“Ah, I see. I suppose the job must be really hard. You have to go up so high every day. You must feel like a fluffy mess all the time. Right, isn’t it supposed to affect your blood pressure and stuff around your physical condition? I don’t know much about it, though.”

“Yes, I suppose.”

Then the man started talking about himself. For her, this was a very easy situation. All she had to do was just keep on chiming in.

The man told her that he once worked for a trading company and moved from place to place overseas. His last assignment was to a tropical island that was turned into a resort area. His story was more detailed than necessary, but in any case, he married a woman on the island and quit his job. He lived there for a while, but the woman got sick and died, so he returned to his hometown. Thus the story went.

The city came into view, and the traffic got more intense gradually. There was a large factory, and perhaps because of that, large trailers were running around. There was also a huge sign for a drive-in restaurant and a row of warehouse-like buildings.

At a place where the train station could be seen, she got out of the car and parted ways with the man. The man gave her his business card. He told her that he would be happy to help her if she ever had trouble finding a job. She thanked him and watched him drive away. She saw a trash can a short distance away and wondered if she should throw away his business card, but decided to put it in her pocket anyway. She got into a phone booth and called the car rental office first. She explained that the car she had rented broke down and was no longer running, and then gave them the approximate location of the car she had left behind. She then asked if she could rent a car here in the city.

“Unfortunately, there is none of our chain store in that city.”

“So, what should I do? I can’t even pay you.” She said.

“Which place are you staying at today?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

She heard that there was a branch shop of the car rental company in front of the station in the neighboring city. They agreed that she would try to reach the shop, or call again later if she failed to do so.

On her walk in the direction of the station, she entered a glass-walled place. She had not eaten anything since the morning. She was not feeling particularly hungry, but she thought she might get some information from the staff.

Inside the café, there were just counter seats. There were about 10 customers, and it was crowded in the back. She sat down on the seat closest to the entrance. After waiting for a while, a man in a white apron walked toward her. She ordered a cup of coffee and asked him if any food was available. He held out a menu. She read the words for a while, but from what she could see, there were only two kinds of sandwiches and a meat pie. *He could have just given that much of information verbally*, she thought.

“Well, I’ll have meat pie, please.”

A white cup was placed in front of her, and she sipped at the hot, black liquid. There was no taste, but the aroma was faintly seductive. For a moment, it reminded her of the woman who had supposedly died on the tropical southern island, and then the image was gone.

-2-

When she asked how to get to the next town, the manager of the café kindly said that he would ask someone to drive her to the destination.

“Just a moment,” the manager said and moved to the cash register. He seemed to be busy.

She spread out the map on the countertop. It was a map for the entire local region, so it only showed the railroads and major roads. Still, she could get the confirmation of where she was currently. She also learned which direction the mountains were in. However, she was on the ground at that point, so it did not matter.

She sipped the coffee, which had already cooled down, and smoked a cigarette. It was the third of the cigarettes she had had after entering the café. The number of customers had decreased by about half since she entered the place. The manager was talking to a customer at the innermost part of the counter. The customer then looked at her. He was wearing something like a blue work garment. But it was not the kind of working wear that were blackened with oil like those worn by mechanics. The manager came back toward her.

“That man is going to the next town. He says he can give you a ride.”

“Thank you.” She nodded and then bowed to the man.

The man in the work clothes immediately walked toward her.

“What’s the matter?”

“I was driving a rental car to try to reach this city, but it broke down in the middle of the trip.”

“That sounds terrible.” The man looked at his watch and uttered. “Shall we go, then?”

She paid the bill at the cash register and left the café. They got into a small truck in the parking lot. The rear of the truck was a container, and she could not see what the contents were. The name of the company, written on the body of the car, bore the spelling that meant “right and bright.” She thought she had heard that name somewhere before. The car started and got onto the road.

“It would take about an hour and a half.” The man said.

“Is it that close?”

“It’s almost non-stop on the bypass.”

“Thank you for your help.”

“Although you look young, you’re not underage, are you?”

“No, I’m not.”

“If I let a runaway in my car, I don’t know what people will say to me later.” The man laughed a little.

“I’m not anything like that.”

“What do you do for a living?”

Talking about the job is what we're going to end up coming down to, she thought. It was exactly what she expected. Why do people always want to talk about their jobs? Maybe it is because that is the only way for them to judge others. It is certainly more practical than asking questions about religions or ancestry, though.

“I am currently unemployed. I've retired from my long-time job.”

“Oh ...” While looking ahead, the man made a gesture of shrugging his shoulders. “Long time, how long?”

“Umm, I don't really remember that, though. I guess it was five to six years, maybe a little longer.”

“I like the fact that you don't remember.” The man laughed. “What's your job?”

“It was related to airplanes.”

“Airplanes? Well, the same for me, too.”

“Oh, what kind of work do you do?”

“I sell parts. Parts for engines, pressure piping, stuff like that.”

“Like plugs?”

“Not plugs, though. They are more like materials. Titanium springs, for example.”

“Yeah, that's it. I know there are such things.” She recalled the information.

“Sasakura mentioned it.”

“Sasakura?”

“Yes. He's a mechanic.”

“So, what kind of work did you do?”

“I was a pilot.”

“Pilot?”

The man's eyes widened with surprise. Then he looked at her face. But he was driving, so he quickly turned his face to look forward. Once again, he looked at her. This time, his gaze was what quickly scanned her entire existence.

“Were you a pilot, you say? Might you be ...? Oh, no, I'd rather not ask you this.”

“I’ve already quit that, so it’s fine with me.”

“Oh, but, yeah ... I still think that it is a bad idea.” The man smiled wryly, then suddenly turned serious. He continued to stare ahead.

The car merged into the bypass flow and was picking up speed. The driver hardly had to move the steering wheel or the gas pedal.

“Well, I’ve got the great one in my car, haven’t I?” The man said and exhaled through his mouth.

“I’m sorry.” She apologized to him.

She should have just kept quiet about herself. But, it was the result of her trying to force herself to be sociable and talk to him as a courtesy for his giving her a ride.

After a few moments of silence, the only sound was that of the car running, throbbing at her feet. The sound of the engine was almost inaudible. There was no whizzing sound of the wind. It was quiet.

She closed her eyes for a moment. It was not like she was going to fall asleep. Rather, she was feeling the resistance in shutting her eyes.

Then she tried to remember something.

She had a very vivid memory.

However, her memories were just what had happened relatively recently. They were not of distant past, but only about a year before. Only the area was colorful and orderly, like freshly bought pastel crayons. It amazed her that she could pull those memories out of her mind. She had not gotten used to it yet, to the point that it still made her nervous every time she opened the imaginary lid. How could ordinary people have such complex memories from birth, and then build them up to be even more complex and bizarre? It was so unbelievable to her.

She was reminded of what the doctor once told to her. She remembered it vividly as well.

“Memory, in short, is the same mechanism as aging. In the same way that our skins wrinkle, we humans memorize things. Remembering something is a function that is accomplished by aging. So, aging is a program that has been actively incorporated in the process of evolution, and life has acquired the ability to age in

order to survive. This is because having the memory is the best weapon we have. To live and carve memories, life forms have chosen to die.”

According to his theory, her brain, which had been treated, was now aging. Until then, it had not aged. While she was growing, she was not aging. Her cells were constantly being replaced with new ones. So, the scars called memories were healed, and no wrinkles were engraved. The past had been erased, and she was only seeking new experiences.

But it did not matter to her. Now, that was not important anymore. The only thing that was clear was that she was no longer the same person as what she had used to be.

No, that's not true.

From the beginning, my own self has been an illusion. Everything is in a constant state of change. That is natural. It is natural that yesterday's self and today's self are different creatures. It is natural for things to be different from what they were before. To keep changing, not to accumulate, and not to build are the acts of providence. Plants wither in the winter and sprout new buds in the spring. They repeat the same things over and over again, but they are not exactly identical to each other. They are always renewed, all the time.

So ...

Renewing our cells to stay young, losing our memories due to that process, and losing our memories by aging and dying, in the end, are all the same nature. It's just the difference between annuals and perennials. Either way, they will eventually disappear. Some things will be passed on for a little while, and some things will not. Isn't that all there is to it?

Thinking this way made her feel a little relaxed and better.

It's strange. It has never occurred to me before that something like this would make me feel down. Could this be the state of becoming an adult? Could it be that this is the preparation for death? This is similar to the feeling of air friction and floating when falling to the ground. It is an illusion that I am floating. But it's the type of floating sensation that comes only from falling.

My past self and my current self. The biggest difference between them was that she no longer flew airplanes. She used to want to fly so much, but now, somehow, she felt that everything was empty to her. She had the feeling that if she could reach the sky again, these clouds would be cleared out of the way. However, at least, she felt like

she was stable now. It was the same sensation as feeling that her body was getting heavier. It was not a bad feeling. It was just that it has been too light up to the present. It was as if her past self had been designed to do nothing but fly.

Ah, that person ... Who was that?

A woman. Yes, it was a woman.

It might have been a dream, but that woman brought me back to my childhood again. And that woman enabled her to fly again. In return, her memories became fainter and fainter. She lost her grip on reality. The lives of many people began to intrude into her mind. The stories she heard from people, the things she saw in her dreams, and the tales she watched in movies, were all mixed up with her life, while always bubbling.

Yes, bubbles.

Countless fine bubbles.

The shapes were interesting, and once she spent a long time to stare at them.

They expanded, and then disappeared.

Iridescence.

Fine.

Supplement and termination.

Aggregation and disaggregation.

Everything was a bubble.

She was her fixed self only when she was on the aircraft. It was clear and bright. Shapes and shadows stayed.

Only at that time.

Only during the flight.

In the sky.

Dancing.

Hovering.

Laughing.

She laughed heartily.

Fun.

Nostalgic.

She felt like it was a long time ago.

It's like a rut.

Like a geological stratum.

But the ground is still filled with bubbles.

She saw only illusions.

The people around her were all made of bubbles.

All of them would collapse if she touched them.

Oh ... Yes, there was another woman.

She could almost recall that woman's face.

It's strange.

The woman had a face like that of the mother.

The kind that made her want to be pampered by it.

It was a nostalgic scent.

The woman's head was bleeding.

Why?

Another woman also came to her mind.

The woman also had a motherly demeanor.

She had always had angry eyes.

But, she was gentle.

That woman came to pick her up when she left the hospital. The woman had taken her in when she had nowhere else to go. She wondered if her aging had something to do with the fact that she could remember things so well to that extent.

She arrived at the city in the evening and got out of the car at a busy intersection. She just shook the driver's hand one last time. There was hardly any conversation after that talk, and the car kept on running while they listened to the radio. He seemed to be a sincere man, to the level that she could easily envision how he would shape his own life from that point on. *I'm really an engineer*, he told her. *It is all right for you to still think of yourself as an engineer*, she thought. However, she understood that there were some things that she could not easily accept, even for herself, if someone asked her about her still being a pilot.

She found the car rental office and went inside. There was a woman in the office with a lot of makeup, and the woman was not told that the car she rented had broken down. When she explained that she wanted to rent a replacement car, the woman could not understand the situation at all.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm just here to answer the phone. The person in charge will be back soon, so please come back again a little while later," The woman said.

The woman might have been instructed to say the same thing to any customer who came in. She asked when the person in charge would be back, but the woman replied that she did not know. She had no choice but to leave the office and look for a place to stay in the city that day.

Maybe because it was that time of day, many people were walking around in the city. The place appeared to be a large city. Without exception, everyone was walking straight and at a brisk pace. She was the only one who was looking around. There were many skyscrapers and numerous billboards. By looking at them one by one, she searched for a place where she could stay.

The first hotel seemed a bit expensive, and she was told that there was no room available. So she went to a nearby hotel that was referred to her. It was a four-story building sandwiched between large buildings, and the atmosphere in the lobby was that of a typical apartment complex. Perhaps the clerk at the first hotel judged that this hotel was more appropriate for her, based on her clothes. She opened the barred door and walked in. There was a counter with a brass bell on it. She rang it and waited for a while, but nothing happened. She rang the bell again.

There was a sound behind her, and she turned to see a fat middle-aged woman coming down the stairs.

“Are you the guest?” The woman asked over the railing, without even smiling.

“Yes, I am. Is there any room available?”

“Yes, we do. But, how old are you? Do you have a driver’s license?”

She took out her ID card from the pocket. “Here.”

The woman took it and walked into the counter. She put on the glasses and looked at it closely with her eyebrows knitted. The woman turned the gaze to her several times over the glasses.

“Oh ...” The woman pursed her mouth and shrugged the shoulders.

“Is anything wrong?”

“No ...” The woman handed the ID card back to her. “That’s alright. Okay. No problem. Just one moment.” The woman smiled a little.

The procedure was very simple. All she had to do was write her name. The woman led the new guest to a small elevator. It was so plainly built that she wondered if it was a freight elevator. She went up to the fourth floor, the top floor, and her room was at the end of a dark corridor. The woman opened the wooden door for her.

The woman entered the room before her, opened the curtains and the windows, then opened the bathroom door as well and peeked inside to check something. The woman gave her a brief explanation of the facilities. They went outside the room, and she was told that the emergency exit was at the other end of the corridor.

“If you have any questions, call the front desk.”

“Thank you so much.”

She took some change out of her pocket and tipped the woman. The woman smiled, received it, and walked out the door. The woman was mumbling something to herself, but she could not hear what it was about.

She looked out the window, which was facing the main street. There were many cars and a mass of people walking on the sidewalks on both sides. Even when she

looked up, she could not see much of the sky because the adjacent buildings were so close. The blue of the sky was getting a little darker. It seemed that sunset was near.

She lay down on the bed and unfolded the map. It was a new map. The car rental office she had visited earlier had a map of the city, so she picked it up. *If I can rent a car tomorrow, I will leave as soon as possible*, she had already decided.

In the meantime, she fell asleep.

She had a dream.

It was a dream in which she shot someone.

One of them was a woman.

The woman was crossing herself in the dark.

The other was a man.

The yellow neon light shone on him from below.

They had both asked her to shoot them.

She pulled the trigger.

Without hesitation.

Yes, even a slight delay in timing would result in her own crash.

Fire before you even think about it!

She pulled the control stick.

Breaking away.

She rolled, flew inverted, and plunged into the clouds.

Like a leaf.

Hovering.

Dancing.

She held her breath.

Inhaling, and then, exhaling.

Still, she brought her face close to the cold canopy and looked around.

Check the enemy's position. She instantly predicted and envisioned the enemy's trajectory. It was in the space of interlocking curves.

The world she saw and the world she imagined. They intersected.

Push up the throttle.

Pull the control stick backward to move the elevators.

Her aircraft pointed straight up.

The surroundings were covered in white.

But, then it flew into the blue sky eventually.

It went straight up. Going upward, climbing up, and ascending.

The glorious sun appeared to revolve around her.

Rolling, rolling, and rolling.

Where is the enemy?

It's gone.

It's not there anymore.

Nowhere to be found.

It's just me.

I'm alone.

I am the sole survivor.

Even the black smoke was already gone.

It's beautiful.

There was nothing murky in this place.

Everything had disappeared.

Beautiful.

None but air.

She slowly brought back the throttle.

The propeller roared beneath her.

The sound of the wind became lower-pitched.

The speed of the aircraft was quickly lost.

It stalled and fell.

Gravity disappeared, and it became one with the aircraft.

Whatever exists does exist.

Whatever exists falls.

The vicinity around her cracked and shook wildly.

It was falling.

Into the white clouds again.

Onto the gray ground again.

There's no one.

No one is flying anymore.

No one plays with me anymore.

No one dances with me anymore.

Checking the gauges.

Fuel, oil pressure, oil temperature, altitude.

The needles slowly went off the scale.

What is happening?

What's the matter with you all?

Why don't you fly?

Why don't you come here?

You know, Boomerang is flying.

Why don't you come here to shoot me down?

Aren't you going to shoot me down?

Breaking through the clouds, and sinking into the dark sky.

The ground was rainy.

It was dull as if it were submerging underwater.

She lowered the altitude and flew over the forest.

Right ...

The two persons asked her to shoot them.

So ...

They were those whom she really loved.

They were more precious to her than those whom she encountered in the sky.

Then, she could respect them.

They were such people.

She remembered that.

They were valuable, important, and precious to her.

Despite that, why has she shot and killed them?

She did not know the reason.

Did I respect their will more than my own sentiment?

Did I really?

Have I even thought about it?

Wait.

There was another one.

Someone had told her to shoot the one ...

“Shoot me with the gun.”

“Is it your order?”

My own voice wakes me up.

When she ran the hand over the forehead to comb the hair, she found herself sweating. Still, her body was cold. She could feel it when she touched her shoulder. It was as cold as metal.

The dream was rapidly slipping away.

Did I kill someone?

It might have been such a dream.

No memory of it.

Still, I feel like someone screamed my name.

Right.

That's me.

That was myself.

Why was I there?

Toward that myself.

The muzzle of the gun to myself.

To point the muzzle in the direction.

A momentary memory of pulling the trigger.

Gunshot.

Gunpowder.

Recoil.

White smoke.

Silence.

Air.

A slight movement.

Heartbeats.

Silence.

Moving in to check what had happened.

The arm was hanging down from the chair.

Walking around the desk and kneeling down beside the figure.

It was herself, bleeding from the chest, with eyes closed.

That's me.

That's what I am.

Shaking the head.

To shake it off.

She stood up and put the feet in the slippers. She did so cautiously. She stared at the feet and breathed for a moment.

Moving to the bathroom, and looking into the mirror.

Suddenly, tears were falling.

I'm glad.

Oh my ...

I'm really glad.

I'm glad I am what I am.

It's me.

It's my own self.

The heartbeat slowed down slightly, and the breathing became easier.

Taking a deep breath.

That's okay. I'm alive.

I'm still alive.

-4-

On the following day, she woke up early in the morning. It was bright outside the window, and the air in the room was already warm. When she took the elevator down to the first floor, she saw the same woman she had met yesterday at the reception desk. The woman was wearing glasses and working on documents. When she asked if there was a place where she could eat, the woman glared at her over the spectacles and told her it was right next door.

She walked out of the hotel. On the first floor of the adjacent building was a café. She went in and ordered a breakfast set menu. A few men who were apparently businesspersons were reading newspapers, but no one was looking at her. *Indifferent*

to others is the good thing about being in an urban area, she thought.

After breakfast, she walked to the car rental office. The sky was blue. The weather was just right, and it was refreshing. She walked, occasionally looking up at the sky. She only looked at it vaguely. She was not attempting to find the aircraft anymore.

It was as if the sky did not exist.

It was as if a sky that was different from the one she had seen before had enveloped this world entirely.

When she arrived at the office, there was a different clerk from the one who was there the day before. It was a middle-aged man, and he could understand the information pertaining to her explanation immediately. He told her that the broken-down car had already been towed and retrieved. She was told that a new car would be prepared for her, so she agreed to come back in an hour with her luggage.

She went back to the hotel and took a shower in the room. She washed her hair as well. Her hair had grown probably the longest it had ever been in her life. *It is somewhat bothersome, but I can live with it. Human beings are designed so that each of them feels right and comfortable with such a heavy head.* She thought of such a strange idea, the reason for which she did not know.

She packed up her things and checked the map again. Her hair was still a little wet, but she left the room.

On the first floor, the hotel woman was mopping in the corridor. *Does this person do all the work?* She wondered. She checked out and paid the bill.

“Where are you going?” The woman asked her, smiling uncharacteristically.

She showed the woman the map.

“I’m going to drive this way.”

“How far?”

“Err, I’m not sure.”

“Then why that road?”

She took the receipt. Without answering the woman’s question, she left the hotel. She returned to the car rental office just an hour after she left the very place. She

ended up renting a small sedan, which still looked new. According to the office, she had already paid for a week's rent in advance when she had rented the previous car. The difference in payment for the disabled car and the replacement car came back to her. It seemed that this car was cheaper than the previous one. She wondered how it could be cheaper than a broken car. *It is good to use a car because I can easily switch cars like this*, she thought.

"Be careful, ma'am." The man said to her as she was leaving the office.

What should I be careful of? No one is going to attack me. There is no danger to me, even if a car that I don't know comes near me. She got into the car and drove off.

She drove along the crowded main street for a while and then got on the national highway at the outskirts of a town. It seemed to be a bypass, and she could drive through high places without stopping at traffic lights. On her way, she switched on the radio, after the thought came to her mind. She tuned to a radio station that did not feature any human talking on it. She rolled down the window about halfway and drove on. The road was mostly straight, and the flow of traffic was smooth. She felt so good that she wanted to shake her body to the rhythm.

When she woke up in the middle of the night, she was afraid of the dream.

Yet, in the morning, she forgot all about it.

Once she had an unpleasant dream, the impact of the next one would be softened.

By recalling it and shedding tears once, it would disappear.

She felt like it was getting purified gradually.

What is?

She wondered what it was.

A heart?

What is the mind?

In short, is it the memory of the brain?

If so, then it's a wrinkle in the brain.

The wrinkles may be trying to hide something small, by wrapping it. A memory, in other words,

is something that has been hidden inside the body in this way. It is held and tucked away so quietly that it becomes impossible to be remembered.

By the time the sun was directly overhead, the music on the radio started to suffer from intermittent reception. She tried to find another radio station, but there was too much noise everywhere. She switched off the radio and kept driving. Only once did she stop by at a rest area and buy a drink. It was cider in a bottle. She thought it was funny that she would drink such a thing, but it certainly tasted nostalgically familiar. It was as if she had drunk it when she was a child. She had already eaten breakfast substantially, so she was not feeling hungry. She checked the map again. She was already on this road, and could tell that she was on the right course. She just wanted to confirm the current coordinate on the map.

She had no idea where her destination was.

She just believed that it had to be up ahead on the road.

She continued to drive again in the afternoon. It was a tedious driving compared to piloting an aircraft, but she strangely did not feel sleepy. After all, just by steering a little bit, she could be seriously injured in no time for sure. It seemed to her that the situation of driving an automobile on ground was much more dangerous than a cruise flight at high altitude.

The number of cars on the road had decreased. The road, which had started out as a two-lane road, was now a single lane. The road became increasingly straighter, and she could see the mountains in the distance ahead. To the left and right, beige farm fields and bare rocky wastelands occasionally entered the view alternately. There were a few small buildings here and there, but no sign of city in sight. However, if this car broke down now, it would probably present no problem. This road had more traffic than the road that she used on the previous day. Besides, some of the buildings along the road showed signs of being inhabited.

A signboard in the far distance caught her eye. She checked its spelling, as she got closer to it. She slowed down and parked the car in front of the shop.

She felt her heart beating a little faster. That was unusual. She turned off the engine.

“Oh ...” She uttered, and looked at the building.

There was not a single car in the parking lot. *Is this place closed?* There was no sign that indicated so. It was dark in the window, and she could not see what was inside.

She got out of the car and closed the door.

The wind shook her hair. She touched her hair to flick it aside. It was already completely dry.

As she walked toward the building, the door opened, and a woman was standing there.

The two of them looked at each other.

“Ah ... You have actually come, haven’t you?” Her voice was husky as if her throat was hoarse.

“I have.” Her voice was so small that it might not have reached the woman.

“Did you recognize this place by the sign?”

“I’m glad that I did not end up missing it and passing by here.”

The woman ran up to her. She was caught immediately and was hugged.

“I’m so glad. I can’t believe it. You have really come. I never thought I’d see you again ... I wasn’t expecting this at all. Oh, thank God.”

“Fuko.”

“I’m delighted.” The woman pulled her face away and stared at her. “Do you remember?”

“I do.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Are you really okay?”

“Now, everything’s fine.”

“Hey, come on in. Aren’t you hungry?”

“Umm, yeah ... I might be.”

The woman walked into the restaurant. She walked up the steps and turned

around at the door to see the sign by the street. The sign read “Fooco.”

A large trailer truck passed by on the road, blowing a cloud of dust. The ground level seemed to be dry. It was as if the ashes from the sky had fallen and settled on the surface.

The interior design of the restaurant was done in country style, with wooden frames crisscrossing on the ceiling. At the counter, the woman looked at her and showed white teeth. There was no other customer. It was just the two of them.

“What do you want to eat?”

“Anything will do.”

Then the woman stopped moving, while keeping the eyes on her.

She sat down on the seat at the counter.

They looked at each other.

“You haven’t changed, have you?”

“Neither have you.”

“I’ve changed. I’m getting older, aren’t I?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Thank you. I’m flattered, even if it may be just a compliment.”

She took out a cigarette and lit it. She let out white smoke. But, Fuko was still gazing into her.

“Can you stay here tonight?”

“Yeah, I can. I don’t have to rush and leave here.”

“Really?” The woman put her palms together in front of her chest. “Oh, do you remember that? You know, we went to an unknown city, didn’t we?”

“What city was that?”

“Don’t you remember that?”

“No.”

“We parted at the bus stop.”

“Did we?”

“That was like a dream.”

“But that wasn’t a dream, was it?”

Tears rolled down the woman’s cheeks.

But the woman smiled, while not bothering to wipe them away.

“This is like a dream.”

“Yes ... Like a dream, everything is.”

This book was first published by Chuokoron-Shinsha in Japan in 2008 and translated in 2022 for The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books.

The Interview About Sky Eclipse with Dr. MORI, Hiroshi B (Chief Editor of The BBB): Today, to commemorate the completion of the English edition of “Sky Eclipse,” the final volume and the only short story collection in the series, we would like to interview the author Dr. MORI, Hiroshi. This is the last time we can ask you about this series, so we want to make sure we do not miss anything. Dr. MORI, we always appreciate your cooperation. I am looking forward to interviewing you again today.

MORI, Hiroshi: Finally, we have come this far. Thank you so much indeed. I did not do anything in particular. It was Mr. Seiryoin who was having a hard time. I am sure it consumed a lot of energy and time. It is not something that can be done by many people so easily.

B: I think we have come this far thanks to Dr. Mori’s constant and warm support. Whenever I have questions about the English translation, you always answer them immediately. You have helped me so much. I am very fortunate to be

able to translate into English in an environment where I can ask questions to the author at any time, and I am always grateful for that.

“The Sky Crawlers” series was originally planned to be completed with five novels, but due to the delay in the completion of the movie version of “The Sky Crawlers,” the publisher asked you to write a short story collection (this book, “Sky Eclipse.”) Dr. MORI said so in the interview at the end of the English edition of “None But Air.” You have stated that you always come up with the title first and then start writing novels around it. Do you also think of the title for the short story collection first and then come up with the title for each short story? Or, did you conceive of the collection title after writing several short stories in it?

MORI: As always, the title was the first thing I thought of. Somehow, a system of imaginative production seemed to have developed in my mind. According to that, once the title is decided, the story will sprout out naturally. In the case of writing novels, the order of this sequence is rarely reversed. For essays, I sometimes think of the title afterward, though. In the case of this work, I felt that continuing the story beyond the novels would damage what had been a good ending (of the work that was completed as designed.) So, I tried to make multiple short stories with different characters, perspectives, and times. Then, I resolved to place them around and in the gaps of what I had written so far. Therefore, in a nutshell, this may be a supplementary content. I was a little unsure about this point. I did not write them because I did not need them in the first place. That was why I was worried that the additional stories would turn out to be superfluous. However, I could see from the Internet and other sources that many people said they still “did not understand” the contents of the previously released novels, so I decided to write the short stories, thinking that it would be okay to show some explanatory parts or at least give some hints.

B: You always start your work with a title, and your short story collection was no exception to that style. I am understanding once again that, in your case, the writing of a novel begins when you decide on a title.

I think many readers will associate the title of this book, “Sky Eclipse,” with a solar or lunar eclipse. The title is very striking in that the book lacks the “Sky” element, the most important stage in this series. The original book and the paperback version of this work also possess the impact of pitch-black covers that

remind the readers of a solar or lunar eclipse. I wonder if it was a harvesting experience for the author, as a creator, to have this short story collection, which takes place in a place other than the sky, added to the series at the end, despite the fact that the series has used the sky as its main stage until then.

MORI: Well, honestly speaking, I think it would have been the same for me whether I wrote this short story collection or not. Because everything had existed in my mind even before I wrote it. At first, it was one of the possibilities that could exist. By actually writing these stories, they became real (i.e., fixed), and other possibilities that were not output disappeared in my mind. As for me, that is the essence of “eclipse.” Writing a story is the act of erasing the possibilities in my mind. There is loss, not harvesting, in writing. So, for me, it’s not very enjoyable. It is better to keep everything in my head, so that I can keep many possibilities alive. For the readers, however, it is the opposite. I am a writer by trade, so it is a way for me to give a part of myself away.

There is another meaning to that word. Lack of sky means that the sky is closed, so it describes life on earth. With that, what has obviously changed is the perspective. The narrators of the stories are the people living on the ground. People who once lived in the sky have grown up and are now standing on earth.

B: I see. I imagined that the title “Sky Eclipse” contains the nuance of “stories on earth,” but it is a shocking discovery that the word “Eclipse” has the meaning of “the disappearance of stories that are not output.” We the readers can only know the stories that have been output, so I feel the possibility of stories that have disappeared somewhere seems to have increased the significance of the presence. You mean that there were many more stories in your brain before the short stories in this book were written.

This short story compilation contains eight short stories, which you have output. When you were asked to write a short story collection, did the publisher ask you to write eight stories in all? Or, if you had written several stories that complemented the main novels in the series, would the result have been the total of eight stories? The main characters change from one short story to the next, so I naturally felt that there was a necessity for eight stories in order to take a complete round of the main characters to cover them all.

MORI: I didn’t decide from the beginning how many short stories I would write,

but since I am writing stories for turning them into a book, I always keep the word count in mind when I write. It is the same whether it is for writing a novel or a short story. Printed books are constrained by the number of pages on paper, and so is the writing. That's why I ended up with eight stories. I had decided from the beginning to make short stories and wrote them at a length that was easy to represent. In the first place, I like to read short stories. The ideas and descriptions are sharper in short stories. I can read and write them while having the awareness of high intensity. However, short stories do not sell well in Japan, so I have no choice but to write long texts mainly.

B: Indeed, I have the impression that the short stories written by Dr. Mori seem to be more sharply pronounced than the various scenes that make up your longer-texted novels. Some of the short stories in this collection were first published in magazines, while others were written exclusively for this book. All of them have an excerpt from Paul Gallico's "Snowflake" at the beginning of each story. When you are deciding on which quotes to use for the short story compilation, which is a mixture of originally written texts and stories that were brought from magazines, was the process any different from that for selecting the excerpts to be used in long-texted novels? Also, why did you choose "Snowflake" as the source of quotes to accompany the special short story collection "Sky Eclipse"?

MORI: I do not have an answer to why I used this quote. I myself do not know the answer. Besides, the sequence is the other way around. I decided to borrow those quotes first, and then developed such short stories around them. Textual quotations are like background music to me, like a melody that runs through the whole thing, and they also make the story coherent. When I finished the whole thing I felt that the quote was very good, meaning that I could develop the story along the melody.

B: You said in a previous interview that you intuitively choose books, from which you pick the quotes to use in your novels. Thanks to your analogy of background music, I can understand more clearly the effects of quotations in your novels. If I think of it as background music, the fact that the quotations sharing the common source of reference certainly has the effect of creating a sense of unity in the impression.

The BBB published "Seven Stories," Dr. MORI's first English short story

collection, in 2016. But at that time, we did not have an interview section at the end of the book yet. So, for the first time, I would like to take this opportunity to ask you about your short stories. You said earlier that you like reading short stories, and you have said several times that you prefer short stories to long novels as a reader. Is that preference still the same? As a reader and author, what is the difference between novels and short stories for you, Dr. MORI?

MORI: In the past, when I used to read fictions, I liked short stories. Nowadays, I do not read novels of any length anymore. Probably because I was a slow reader as a child, I read only what I could read in the shortest time possible. With short stories, you have to use your mind to imagine what kind of world and people they represent. This is the most exciting part. I think people who like novels or series are not good at this act of imagining, and I observe that such people constitute the majority of novel fans, especially in Japan. For this reason, even in a short story collection, if the characters are scattered, or if it is a series of unrelated stories, people will ask, “What’s the point of this short story collection?” However, I like short stories that are not related at all, that have no sense of unity, that have large fluctuations of contents, and that are scattered. I feel that the ability of the writer comes out in those fluctuations, and it is also the talent of the ideas. I once wished to write something like that myself, but in the end, readers did not seem to want it, so I withdrew from the proposition early. It is my job, and I cannot be selfish enough just to do what I want to do.

B: Personally, I have a strong desire to read your short stories again. Still, I understand that in the Japanese publishing market, you choose to prioritize novels as a part of the business. In the future, I hope that the number of readers of “Seven Stories” will increase even more overseas and that they will request more of your short stories.

There are many short story compilations in the world, and as you said, some of them feature quite a wide variety of stories. You also like to listen to music, and I think it is true that the key to a short story collection is how much of variety there is in it, just as music albums that are considered musical masterpieces feature wide varieties of music tracks. When you were writing this short story collection “Sky Eclipse,” were there any particular points that you were conscious of, such as putting together short stories with as many different directions as possible, or

keeping the overall theme of the collection consistent?

MORI: For short story compilations in general, it would be better to create stories with as many different directions as possible so that the range of variation is extensive. This short story collection is part of “The Sky Crawlers” series and is based on the same worldview as the novels, so the directions cannot be varied in that way. However, I tried to change the directions of the stories as much as I could so that the fireworks could spread in all different ways. The reason for making short stories lies in its “instantaneity” like fireworks. I do not pay much attention to such things as overall theme. Since they share the same worldview and characters, the theme will inevitably be the same. I have never been conscious of themes when I write novels. I do not have a desire to make an appeal to anyone, and I do not have a motive to make an issue out of anything. People often talk about themes, but I think it is just the matter of reading and interpreting them in any way.

B: This short story collection includes an episode titled “Spit Fire,” which describes a moment like a spark. I am well aware that Dr. MORI is not fixated to individual works, whether they are novels or short stories. But if you allow me to ask, which of the eight short stories in “Sky Eclipse” holds a special place in your heart, and why?

MORI: Sorry about the predictable answer. I do not have a particular favorite episode. I can think of individual scenes, but they are so vague that I wonder in which episodes they were included. To begin with, I think the whole of “The Sky Crawlers” series is structured like a short story collection, and there is little continuity in the entire storyline. If you ask me which novel I am most attached to, I cannot answer you, nor can I tell you which chapter of the novel I am most attached to. Many scenes in the stories just come to my mind. I feel that it is enough if the readers say that they remember some of the scenes. Incidentally, I am not attached to any of the characters in my works. I do not even have feelings of love or hate for them.

B: I see. Indeed, whether in a novel or a short story, the individual scenes, rather than the story as a whole, leave a strong impression on us readers. I myself cannot always tell instantly which novel contains some of my favorite scenes in the series. But, that is not a problem at all when recalling them in terms of individual scenes. When I think about it that way, I realize that the concept of novels or short stories

itself is just a formality.

By the way, as I have mentioned several times in the interviews at the end of the previous English editions of this series, each novel in “The Sky Crawlers” series had very impressive and poetic foreword (opening remarks) at the beginning of each volume. I am sure it is intentional that this short story collection does not have the foreword section. What were your thoughts on the decision to leave it out?

MORI: The biggest reason is that the perspectives of the story have changed. That is to say, it is no longer the story of “The Sky Crawlers” series. The poem at the beginning of each novel was a part of the story, and it was like a cry from the heart of the viewpoint characters. In this short story collection, the individual episodes are already far away from the poems, and we are looking at the stories from the positions, at which the voices can no longer reach us. There is only silence, in which nothing can be heard.

B: Your answer makes a lot of sense to me. As I have expected, you had a clear reason in your mind, didn’t you?

As you mentioned at the beginning of today’s interview session, I feel that this short story collection complements the various aspects of the story that cannot be fully understood just by reading the novels in the series. Do you think that you were able to provide just the right amount of explanation, neither too much nor too little?

In the interview at the end of the English edition of “Flutter Into Life,” you said, “In a way, I think it might have been like adding a fifth wheel or gilding a lily.” In contrast, at the end of the English edition of the novel “The Sky Crawlers,” you said, “As a series, I have managed to develop all the way to the end as planned.”

MORI: For the novels in the series, I could write exactly what I wanted. As for this short story collection, I think I could have done without them. Still, there are many different kinds of readers, and my opinion does not necessarily apply to everyone. Some people may feel that the series should have been without the short story compilation, while others may be glad that the short stories are there to stay.

I am sure that the readers have their own interpretations after reading the five novels. To those interpretations, did I add something that would “confirm” them, or did I add something that would “deny” them? I would imagine that there were

probably more “negatives” of “denial.” I tried to write as much as I could to present the “counter-evidence” so that it would not be unnecessary “superfluity.” That was the basic design of this short story collection. Because to present the evidence that “affirms” the interpretation is the religious way, and to present the evidence that “denies” the interpretation is the scientific method.

B: The readers perceive the contents of the books in very different ways, so it seems that the reaction may vary quite a bit from person to person. It is very informative to hear that you presented the “counter-evidence” in a scientific way. I would like to re-read the series again from that perspective.

I think many Japanese readers will agree with me that “The Sky Crawlers” series is distinctive among Dr. Mori’s more than 350 book titles because of its unique theme of airplanes. Also, it was your “first work to be made into a movie” and also your “first novels to be translated into English.” Now that the English version of “The Sky Crawlers” series has finally concluded, what are your thoughts on this series?

MORI: I feel fortunate to have written this series fairly early in my career as a writer. I do not have any particular attachment to airplanes, but I guess you can say that they are symbolic because of the combination of images of them flying around freely.

I created it with the idea of honestly outputting what I was imagining, but at the root of it was the prediction of resignation, “No one will understand it anyway.” Surprisingly, however, it became a movie and the books sold well, and in the end, it taught me a lesson that I should give it a try anyway.

In addition, the series has been translated into English and is now being passed on to the rest of the world. It is a very strange feeling. It was a good reminder that there are many strange things in this world. However, that does not mean you can aim for the same thing. Another lesson I learned is that I made a hit because I did not try to do so intentionally.

B: I think it is because “The Sky Crawlers,” the first novel, possesses the power of the literary work. Mysteriously enough, Mr. Mamoru Oshii, who later directed the film version, came across “The Sky Crawlers” by chance. If it had not been for that encounter, I probably would not have been able to translate this series into English.

Lastly, let me talk with you about the future. Thanks to the cooperation of Dr. Mori, we will have continued translating the works at The BBB into English for ten years in 2022. The BBB would not have been possible without your help, so I cannot express my gratitude enough. Thank you so much. For the past ten years, The BBB has been struggling against the current situation in which almost no Japanese novels are translated into English. In the meantime, the most common request we have received from overseas readers is “Please translate Dr. MORI’s debut novel and masterpiece ‘The Perfect Insider’ into English!”

After nearly two years of negotiations with Kodansha, who owns the publishing rights to the English version of the book, and with the help of Dr. Mori’s advice, we will finally be able to publish the English version of “The Perfect Insider” in 2022, when The BBB celebrates its 10th anniversary. The Japanese version of “The Perfect Insider” is a historical masterpiece representing the Japanese mystery genre and has sold over 900,000 copies (as of January 2022). At the same time, it also has a great significance as “the origin and magnum opus of the MORI Mystery,” which has sold a total of 17 million copies. Since your debut as a writer in 1996, when you published “The Perfect Insider,” Dr. Mori has always been conscious of your works being published in English. Could you tell us how you are feeling now before the English version of your debut novel “The Perfect Insider” is finally published?

MORI: Congratulations to The BBB on its 10th anniversary. Continuation of the mission is great, and the fact that you are expanding the scope of your activities is wonderful as well. I am also very pleased about the English translation of “The Perfect Insider.” It has been published in several Asian countries but never in the English language. At the time I wrote the novel, I imagined that I would like it to be read outside of Japan if possible, so in that sense, it is a dream come true. We live in an age where computers can translate in any language, but there is still a big difference between the computer translating a book and the specialist, such as you, translating it. It has taken me a quarter of a century to get to this point. And, in a way, I was having the feeling that it was now or never. You may not understand what I mean by that, but for me, it is good timing. That feeling is the strongest for me right now.

B: When I heard that you were feeling the inevitability in the timing of the English version of “The Perfect Insider” being born, I also felt that it was the right

time, and was very encouraged. We both celebrated the 25th anniversary of our writing debuts last year (2021), and the birth of the English version of “The Perfect Insider” in the year that The BBB celebrates its 10th anniversary is truly a strange coincidence of destiny.

Thank you so much for sharing with us today such a valuable account filled with many “insights” and “learnings.” I have received permission from Dr. Mori to include an interview section like this at the end of the English edition of “The Perfect Insider.” I hope you, dear readers, will look forward to savoring the masterpiece as a follow-up to “The Sky Crawlers” series. Dr. Mori, we would like to thank you in advance for your cooperation with us in delivering the English version of “The Perfect Insider” as well!

This interview was conducted in January 2022, exclusively for The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books.