

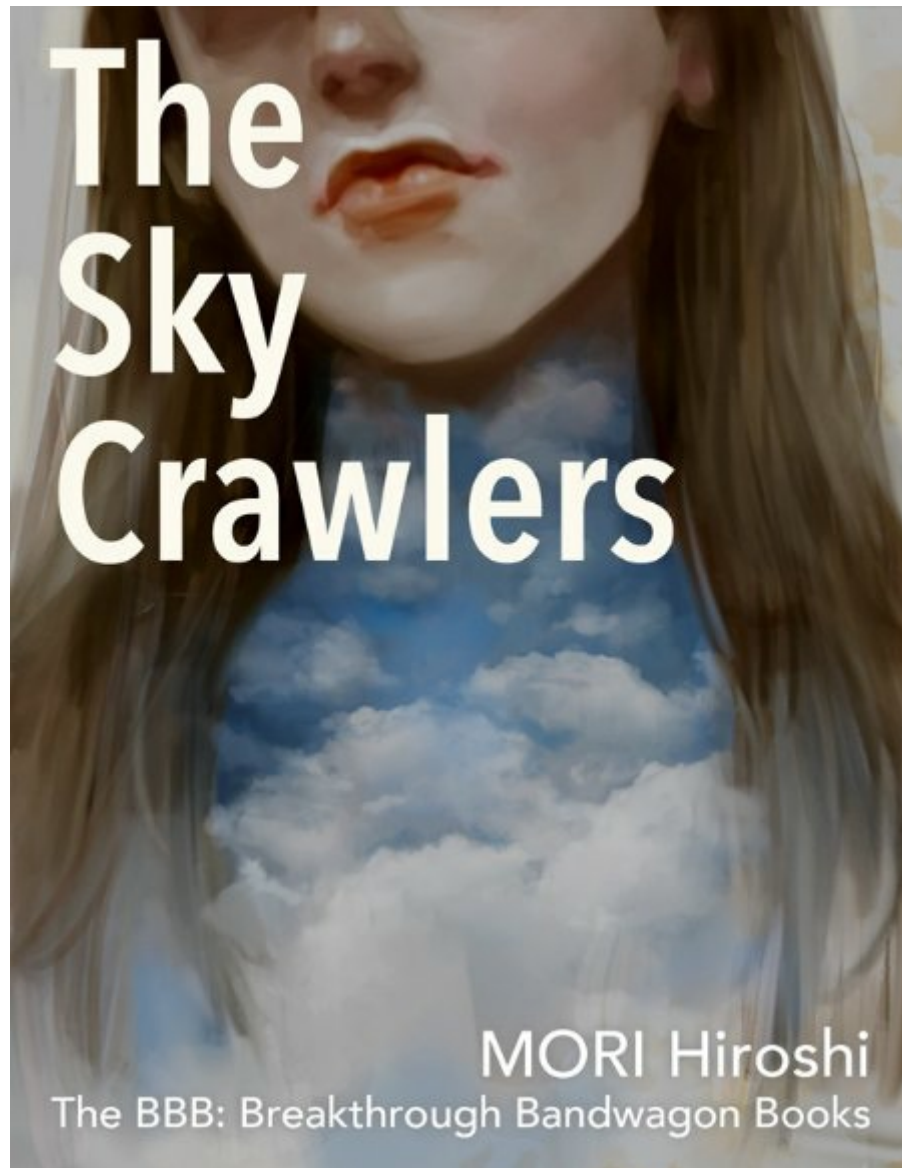


The Sky Crawlers

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The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books

The Sky Crawlers



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Foreword

I will devote this to adults who do not know wars.

These are the three mistakes that they make:

They believe that children were born from them.

They want to think that they know more than children do.

They hope that children will become the same beings as they are in the future.

The ridiculousness of such perspectives is more miserable than wars are.

The Sky Crawlers

“I didn’t tell them when they were actually going to die, though. That’s a very false rumor,” Teddy said. “could have, but I knew that in their hearts they really didn’t want to know. I mean I knew that even though they teach Religion and Philosophy and all, they’re still pretty afraid to die.” Teddy sat, or reclined, in silence for a minute. “It’s so silly,” he said. “All you do is get the heck out of your body when you die. My gosh, everybody’s done it thousands and thousands of times. Just because they don’t remember it doesn’t mean they haven’t done it. It’s so silly.”

This excerpt is from *Teddy*, a short story included in *Nine Stories* (written by J. D. Salinger)

Prologue

In the dream, I am fighting to guard my precious person. She is the last physicist in the world. With the loss of her brain, a part of our civilization or history will be tranquilly terminated. It is a sure interpretation. It is because the very worth of the humankind exists in her head. We are trying to fight against that.

We?

I mean, the two of us; I and she.

I never thought that there was any other human being in this world.

The two of us are running away through underground passages. We are trying to get away from the attacking enemies as far away from them as possible and are trying to survive together for so long as we can. We do not even have enough time to talk to each other. I have not had time for recalling the reason why we have gotten ourselves into this situation. I just ... I just want to do something for her, who is frightened. I cannot bear to hear her crying. The emotion proudly cries for its eternal pain more than any other remaining scars on my body do. I think I myself am ready to die at any time. In the first place, I have never been afraid of my death. If she were to be caught by the enemies, I would have committed suicide immediately without any hesitation.

Even so, I ask her why she is afraid to such an extent. With a really grim expression, she replies like this: "That means I wouldn't be able to be with you ... I'm afraid of being alone."

Really.

Neither of us has been afraid of death.

To begin with, living itself is the possibility in which we might have to part with someone. Because we live, we feel fear. However, life and death never have the same meaning. I mean, when I die, I part even with myself. So, whom the dead body, or the shadow in this world, lives with or parts ways with is entirely meaningless.

With myself?

Who is myself?

Such a notion is the arrogance that a living being thinks.

It is an illusion that only a living one is deceived into imagining.

It is an irregular, fragmented, and literally desperate lie.

“What do you think if we die here together?”

In the middle of a dark underground passage, I speak of the proposition.

As expected, she easily accepts it. Rather than despair, I think of it as a far more familiar and more optimistic decision.

“Bye.” I say.

“Thanks.” She smiles.

I point the gun toward her head, and pull the trigger.

A single shot.

Gun smoke.

Sweet fragrance of gunpowder.

Then.

After I finish observing her slowly falling down.

I close my eyes and stop my breath.

Farewell, the eternity.

Hey, air. Hey, space.

Call my name, if you can call my name.

Recalling the textile pattern.

There is a small stain at the edge of mandala.

Swimming.

Dancing.

And, crawling.

In this way ..., I escape from the dream.

Since I know the way to awake myself from a dream, I sometimes use the

method. I have to be aware of the fact that I am in a dream. It is the condition. Each time I want to escape, it is always a dream. That is very convenient for me. I have never thought so in my real life. Probably, she must have known the same method. A moment before she was shot by me, she might have escaped. It is only my wish, though ...

Even after I wake up, she remains in my mind for a short while. It is not her figure, her voice, or her scent. It is her existence itself. So, it cannot be reduced to words or signals. Therefore, it is dispersed rapidly and starts to fade away. Even so, it is wonderful dissipation, compared to the ridiculousness of containing the impressions within someone's figure, voice, or scent.

My pulse is rapid, and I am sweating.

An imminent world is intruding before long. They have been considering my mind their residence.

In this unbelievably ridiculous reality, there is no enemy that would even try to fight directly against my name. I do not have a physicist girlfriend. I have yet to love someone in person and to kill someone with my own hands.

Who am I?

I try to recall it.

The act of recalling itself is the proof of my curse.

I am a pilot, who has just been assigned here today.

Piloting a fighter plane is my job.

Therefore, I cannot say that I have never killed anyone indirectly. Yes, I have done it indirectly.

Almost all the differences in this world are about whether they are direct or indirect.

My breathing has calmed down a little.

I get up while throwing the blanket aside. I put my feet from the bed on the floor. I feel that my head is as heavy as mud. But, my body has stopped shivering already. The floor is sarcastically cold. I slip my feet into the shoes placed on the floor. I do not believe in a miracle in which my shoes are neatly placed at the right place when

I wake up in the middle of the night. I feel strange about the fact that I always wake up in the same world. Or, are we added some sort of “augmentative procedure” with which we are forced into believing that we always wake up in the same world? Magical needles might have been implanted inside our bodies when we were born.

I stand up. The opaque-glass windows are dimly bright. The dawn seems to be approaching. I have been sleeping in a solid bunk bed and another man is sleeping on top of the same bunk bed. Although I cannot see his face, I can hear his regular breathing. I have not asked him his name. I need not ask what I will know sooner or later. He is much bigger than I am. I have yet to know what kind of human being he is. The situation in which I am sleeping this close to an unknown person right above me does not make me feel too comfortable. Obviously, it is a special situation. I guess many people cannot accept such a special condition like this. Luckily, I never mind such a matter. I can sleep anywhere and eat anything. That is about the only asset that I possess.

I occasionally wake up like this, and cannot go back to sleep afterwards. It is one of my malfunctions.

I hear a subtle, rhythmical sound. At first, I mistake that for the buzzing of an insect. If that is the case, then it is continuing for an unnaturally long time.

I stand up, put on a windbreaker, and get out of the room. I walk through a dark corridor, which looks like a muffler stained with carbon, and open a door leading to the courtyard. Despite its heavy weight, the door opens smoothly.

The air is chilly. It is comfortable for me, and appropriate for the night.

I can hear the sound a little more clearly. It sounds like a motor. Since I have forgotten to take a look at a clock in the room to see what time it is, I look up at the sky to observe the constellations that I am familiar with. Now, I know what time it is. This is the method that I learned in my childhood. I estimate that it is about 04:00 a.m.

While walking along a concrete wall, I find a dazzling light in the distance. It is from the direction of a hangar.

I get closer to it a little more. The shutter is partially raised to make it half open. It is the backside of the hangar, which appears to be used as a carry-in delivery entrance for trucks. The light is leaking from the opening.

I bend my body to pass under the shutter and get inside. The hangar is very huge. Only the part near the entrance is bright, whereas the most other parts of the facility are dominated by the monstrous darkness. The ceiling is as dark as the night sky and high above the floor as well, while the ceiling is only different from the night sky in a way that it is starless.

A lamp and a spotlight. I figure out that the motor sound is coming from a compressor placed nearby a wall. At the brightest part of the room, a man is standing. He is wearing a white, oil-stained jumpsuit, and is holding a ratcheting socket wrench in his hand. He is also wearing goggles, probably for welding. In front of him, a straight-eight engine is suspended in the air with the support from a chain hoist and a crane. Is he in the middle of the process of putting it down? Or, has he just lifted it up? Although a cart is on the floor, the engine is not on it yet. The nearest aircraft is about 10 meters away from us, into the deeper part of the hangar. Its cowlings are already removed and the engine compartment at the rear-end is exposed. Its frame, punched with circular holes, is reflecting the dull light. It appears that the engine of the aircraft has been unloaded.

As I am approaching the plane, he finally notices me.

“Hey, good morning.” He smiles gently while lifting the goggles upward. He is still looking young.

“Have you been working all night?” I ask.

“Do I know you?”

“I was just assigned to this post yesterday.”

“Oh, then, this is the one you will get on.”

“Is this mine?” Again, I take a look at the aircraft in the deeper part of the hangar.

The man lifts the goggles all the way to his forehead, and gazes at me. Then, he searches the pocket of his jumpsuit, picks up a cigarette, and lights it by striking a match.

“Smoking is not allowed here, is it?” I ask. I can smell gasoline in the vicinity.

“Do you like aluminum?” He speaks, after exhaling the smoke with vigor. “It’s thoroughly persistent. Despite the property, it melts easily.”

“It’s a type of alloy, correct?”

“Even though it becomes an alloy, its twisted characteristic stays the same.” He grins. I can see his white front teeth.

“By the way ..., umm, what are you doing now?” I ask him an important question. I should have the right to ask him anything about the plane that I am assigned to aviate, I think.

“You may not want to ask that.”

“What do you mean?”

“You sometimes gain the advantage when you do not know your limit.”

“I wonder how having any advantage at times can possibly help me ...” I laugh.

“I mean, you can free yourself from the burden. Isn’t it true?”

“Freeing myself? Even if that is the case, I see no point to that. It is not that I run a marathon or participate in some sports like that.” I say jokingly, adding a little friendliness to the tone.

“Acts of killing, right?” He exhales the smoke.

“No ..., it’s just my job.”

“Killing is a job for the assassin, you say?”

“Yeah ...” I take a look at a container nearby, just so that I can take my eyes off from him. “May I sit down here?”

“It’s not under my jurisdiction.” He looks sideways at me and nods.

“Whose jurisdiction?”

“The jurisdiction of the one who wants to sit down on it.”

“What kind of person is the boss of this facility?”

“I think you should go back to your room soon to get more sleep. In short, I mean ... You know, my advice.”

“Thanks. You look like you are repairing the engine, though ... Am I not right?” I ask him, while sitting down, “What’s the problem? I think I should learn that from you.”

“Well, I’m not sure.”

“Please provide me with information.”

“Have you ever experienced the aviation of aircrafts that are of the same type as this one?”

“Several times, even though they were not armed with weapons.” I answer.

Its type was Sanka Mark B. The latest model, Mark D is scheduled to enter the service shortly. I have had some experiences of aviating the unarmed versions for test flights and scouting missions. I do not remember it too well. I mean, I remember the feel of the airplane very well, but do not recall specifically the missions I had to accomplish. If my memory is correct, it was when I belonged to the previous company.

“Do you know by how much it can be loaded with?”

“My guess is that it is 35 percent.”

“Thirty.”

It is the weight ratio of weapons and ammunition to the entire aircraft.

“It’s heavy.” I utter.

“It just lacks the power. This engine can’t generate more power than that. It does not work well at around 6,000, the crucial value.”

“It is the problem of engine breathing, isn’t it?”

“It’s because the intake route switches over. That’s not a problem if you know it.”

“I have enough experience to know that. I know the secret technique of closing the throttle once at that moment.”

“Hey, who told you that?”

I do not answer the question. The one who taught me that is a very precious being for me. I have made a vow to speak the name only when I see the one, face to face.

“Everyone should know that.” I reply abruptly.

“Right. All of those who are alive know that. If they do not know that, then they

are not alive now.” He is not smiling.

“Then, what are you repairing?” I am getting back to where we were a moment ago.

“I am making the engine actually breathe in the middle of its breathing problem.” He smiles again, while showing his white teeth. “Here.” He points at the side of the valve. “I am making sure that, at the very moment of the switching over of the intake route, the pressure is released through this hole. The intake is momentarily delayed. A simple modification. I mean, the secret technique you just mentioned a moment ago is now deemed unnecessary.”

“Aren’t you adding an unnecessary modification?” I become a bit worried.

“Hey ..., never close the throttle for the sake of solving the engine breathing issue. Thrust it up in a single burst.”

“Many have been killed by doing so.” I utter in a cold tone.

“Right. That is the reason why I have just modified the engine so that you won’t be beaten. Believe it.”

“Believe what?”

“Your luck.”

“I have never been beaten. I don’t need the modification. Could you please put it back to the original condition?”

“No. I have already punched the hole.”

I tut, and then sigh.

I have been having a bad hunch, as if I were becoming a seal stranded on a floe of drift ice.

In the first place, this assignment is not the one with the better workplace conditions and incentives. It is almost equivalent to being told that this is the place to die. Of course, I know the faces of the ones who want that to be the case for me. In addition, I do not think that I have made no mistake. I am reminded of the fact that all of my friends who had learned of my situation said nothing to me when they sent me off. They were taciturn like roots of an aged huge tree.

“Trust me. Give the engine the extra thrust in a moment expressly, when the nose of the aircraft is pitching upward.”

“Yeah,” I respond bluntly.

I will rarely experience such a situation.

More than that, when I am in the moment, the chance is that I will have forgotten all the advices. Words will die a moment before the human’s death.

However, I would probably rather have faith in his words than I believe in my own luck. I am thinking so at the time.

Episode 1: Cowling

The mouse, I've been sure for years, limps home from the site of the burning ferris wheel with a brand-new, airtight plan for killing the cat.

This excerpt is from *De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period*, a short story included in *Nine Stories* (written by J. D. Salinger)

-1-

I salute in front of the white desk that belongs to Suito Kusanagi. Her room, located on the second floor of an office building, faces a runway. With the window shades closed, I cannot see outside the room at the time. On the wall, framed pictures and documents are arranged neatly. I guess they are probably the proofs of her achievements, many of which are decorated with conspicuous silver stars and gold leaves. Come to think of it, this room would suit only those who have a hobby of displaying such evidences of the past, or those who do not hesitate to perform this kind of ritual. As a result, I think that I cannot possibly serve in this type of occupation. Or, those who require her to proudly show off the trophies to them might be secretly spying her from somewhere. I do not have the way of knowing whether it is true or not. I vaguely imagine such things. Beside that, I can barely understand, judging from the smell of cigarettes, that this boss is a smoker. I have decided to conclude that it is a good start at that point since I have made it my habit not to put any trust in a non-smoking boss. I would at least need this level of challenge to contend with every day.

“Yuichi Kannami.” She stands up, and hands me a sheet of paper. She is trying to make her voice carry the cool, calm, and collected tone by intelligently controlling the pronunciation of the words. Contrarily, it sounds attractive with its stoic characteristics like those of a cactus. “Here is the letter of appointment. The first command will come in the morning. Enter the stand-by mode.”

“Roger.”

I give up on observing her, and quickly browses the document. At the bottom of the typed template sentences, I find numbers which has just been written a moment ago. It is the password for me. In a moment, I memorize that.

“How is Tokino doing?” Kusanagi asks, while turning over the page in a notebook on the desk.

“Tokino? Who?” I ask her back with my back straightened.

Kusanagi slowly looks up, and raises her hand up to her glasses even more slowly. Her expression is hardly changed, but the moment of silence obviously indicates her state of being shocked. More correctly, it is a startled reaction with a bit of exasperation.

“I mean Tokino, your roommate,” says Kusanagi.

“Oh, he was sleeping in the bed.” I answer.

“Is he still sleeping even now?”

“Now that I am in this room, there is no way for me to know his current situation. I can at least tell you that, he was sleeping when I woke up and got out of the room.”

“Why did you not wake him up?”

“There is no reason for me to wake him up.”

“Why?” She raises her chin and squints, which gives me the impression that she is finally getting angry. Even so, the change is very subtle. She always has the facial expression that is looking angry to start with.

“Let me correct my statement. At the time, I did not have the reason to wake him up. However, even though I am only speculating ..., I recognize that there is now a reason. So, I will just go back to the room to wake him up, if necessary.”

While standing straight behind the desk, Kusanagi is glaring at me.

“I am ready to accept the command that you are about to issue to me.” I add.

“Didn’t anyone tell you to team up with Tokino?”

“No. However, even if I was told to do so, I would not have waken him up. After all, I did not even know that the name of the person in my room was Tokino, even this morning. Things would have been the same anyway. I mean, he is my ...”

“Okay, okay.” Kusanagi interrupts my explanation. She nods slightly without showing any expression, and takes a glance at her wristwatch. “Come back here in

10 minutes. Okay, done. Leave this room.”

“Got it.” I salute, and get out of the room.

I read my wristwatch to make sure. Shall I get back to my room? (The living quarter is located in the adjacent building.) Or, will I smoke in a lounge room on the first floor? While thinking about what to do next, I am climbing down the stairway.

I hear the door opening behind me, and I see Suito Kusanagi running down the stairs. I make way for her on the landing of the stairway. Kusanagi passes by me without looking at me, pushes the glass door in the lobby, and gets out of the building. She is walking with her back straightened up. It is as if a pair of drawing compasses are walking.

I enter the lounge and light a cigarette. Since I can see the courtyard through the huge windows, I am not taking a seat, and see Kusanagi walking toward the billet. At the moment, I notice that she is wearing a short skirt. I am thinking that it is looking like a nostalgic scenery, for some reason.

In the lounge, several sets of yellowed vinyl sofas and low tables are placed. At the innermost part of the room by a window, a man is spreading open a newspaper. The hair is unusually gray, and he is wearing a pair of small glasses. He moves only his eyes to glance at me, and then looks down at the newspaper again. He puts his hand on the back of his head to touch his disheveled hair, and frowns. I wait for him to say something for a short while, for he appears to be ready to say something. But he does not lift his head while keeping himself silent. I walk to an ashtray and pretend to drop cigarette ash on it. I have just lit the cigarette, and I do not have to do that. I am just making the move to create a chance to start the conversation with him.

“I am Kannami, and I have just been assigned to this base since yesterday.” I say so, because I am thinking that greeting him would not cause me to suffer from any loss. Every time I think about this kind of thing, I feel that I have managed to live for an unexpectedly long time.

“Hello.” The man raises his head. “Ms. Kusanagi seems to have been getting angry, though.”

“Umm ... Yeah ...” I look outside the windows. But, she is nowhere to be seen

anymore. Due to the reflection of the glasses, I cannot see the interior of the billet. “I think she was angry because Mr. Tokino did not wake up earlier.”

“Oh ...” The man is showing a disappointed look. “That is all, eh?”

“Even if I come here, um ..., no one would give me explanations, right?”

“What explanations?” He asks me while looking at the newspaper that is spread open on the table.

“I mean, for example, about what kind of people are here ... about what missions they are engaged in ... Various things like that ...”

“Wanna know such things?”

“Are you a pilot?” I ask. I am treating this as a slight joke, because it is obvious, judging from his clothes.

“I’m Yudagawa.” He raises his head and says so. He shows a momentary, fake smile like a camera flash. “It has been three years since I came here. You, umm ..., say the name again?”

“Kannami.”

“Okay, Kannami.” Yudagawa nods. He inserts his hand into a pocket and takes out a cigarette and a lighter. “Ah, got it. I have heard of you.”

“How many pilots work here?” I ask him another question because I do not want to talk about whatever he has heard about me.

“As of late, the number of pilots that are assigned here on a regular basis is four.”

“Including me?”

“Right ...”

“Recently?”

“Yeah, recently.”

“Only four?”

“Yeah, only four.” Holding the lit cigarette in his hand, Yudagawa exhales a thin streak of smoke. “Including the beautiful Ms. Kusanagi, the number of those who can fly is five.”

“But this is a relatively huge base, right?” I look outside the windows, but runways cannot be seen from the lounge because they are located on the opposite side of the building. In front of me is the two-story billet. On the left are a part of a hangar and a factory. On the right are a gate, and a warehouse. Beyond a steel fence, there is a plain meadow across the street, along with a bank of a river with an iron bridge of a railway line and a black forest in the distance. Such things remain stationary outside the windows. Nothing moves. There seems to be no wind today. It may rain in the afternoon.

With a cigarette in his mouth, Yudagawa resumes reading the newspaper in silence. He is probably implying the end of exchanging necessary information.

There is nothing else to do but to get closer to the windows and look outside. After a while, Kusanagi gets out of the billet. While throwing out her chest and walking tall, she comes straight back through the courtyard. I read my wristwatch. Not even five minutes have passed yet. As my cigarette gets shorter, I put it away by stubbing it out against the edge of the ashtray. I feel like smoking another cigarette. But, I recognize that this is the proof of my feeling tense. I take a deep breath only with the air (with no smoke). I am saving another cigarette this time around.

Tokino appears in the courtyard, and is walking toward the office building. He has just changed his clothes. His shirt is not buttoned. I walk to the lobby right when he has just entered this office building.

“Good morning.” I greet to Tokino.

“Morning.” He replies with his face frowning painfully.

“I guess that you are waken up by Ms. Kusanagi, correct?”

“Oh, was that her?” Tokino nods, while yawning. “I didn’t have enough time to see who it was. By the way ..., who are you?”

“I’m Kannami, your roommate.”

“Oh ...,” Tokino squints a little and takes a glance at my entire body. “Then, use the bottom of the bunk bed.”

“I have used it already.” I reply.

“Oh ... I didn’t notice that.”

Last night, Tokino should have seen me. He came back in the middle of the night. I heard the sound of a motorcycle engine, and then the footsteps approaching me. I got out of the bed to greet the comrade sharing the same room. However, he looked exhausted to the level that he could barely give back a silent nod to my words. Then, he took away the clothes and climbed to the top of the bunk bed quickly. The impression that I had of him was that he was rather taciturn, but he might have been just drunk. In short, he does not seem to remember what happened last night. He did not look that much heavily drunk at all.

“You look like you are feeling sick.” I speak to him.

“Well, I am not feeling too good.” He replies. He gives off a slight smile, and after that he shakes his head. “Let’s go.”

He starts walking, and I follow him. In the middle of the stairs, Tokino looks back at me just once.

“I’m Tokino, by the way.” He extends his hand toward me, when we reach the landing. His hand is far bigger than mine.

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The cockpit of Sanka Mark B is not spacious. It best suits my rather small frame. Compared to Mark A, an earlier version, in respect of its shape, its cowling is relatively low and the rear end of its canopy is swelled. It drastically improves its visibility both on the front and the rear sides. I can definitely say that this influence is enormous. Beside that, two automatic cannons, which are mounted on left and right wings on both sides of Mark A, are now mounted at the bottom of the fuselage for Mark B. I have heard that it is a desperate measure in order to make the wings thinner. Due to the unexpected improvement of the moment of inertia, rolling movement, which has already been good enough to be called a ‘windmill’, has shown further refinement. This feature of the improvement is welcomed by the pilots most. Generally speaking, those who do not fly planes value catalogue data (statistics) of weapons, whereas those who fly planes tend to give top priority to how light the handling of the control stick is. The former seriously worry that an airplane crashes due to the lack of the pilot’s skill, and the latter always fear that a pilot dies due to the lack of the performance of the airplane. Since the first airplane in the history took off, this gap of mentality has been widening and not been

narrowing.

I am flying behind Tokino's aircraft, while maintaining a slightly higher altitude with respect to him. Clouds are preventing me from seeing the ground.

Below me is pure white, above me is blue, and at the zenith is the sun.

The vibration of the engine I am feeling from behind is comfortable to me. It is my favorite frequency. It is as if I am given a massage. I have yet to try the engine breathing I heard about from Sasakura, the mechanic, this morning. It is 13:12 now.

Each time I fly, I listen to music. Honestly, I want to turn up the volume to the extent that I cannot hear any other sounds. But, I should not do that while on duty. Of course, I would get in trouble if I fail to hear the radio communication transmissions. Besides, other than that, I have to be able to catch any sounds because they are very important information for me. Abnormal sound from the engine, fuselage, and airframe. The sound from the linkage of the steering mechanisms. Buzzing sound of the propellers. Signals from the instrument panel. So, the music that I listen to should be set at a low volume. The tranquil melody works as a trigger. All I have to do is to pay attention to the sound coming over the music.

If anything, I prefer loud music. But, it cannot be helped. I sometimes think I occasionally get the opportunity to be able to listen to the loud music as I like on my way back from a solo scouting mission. So, I put such type of music media in my flight bag. I have yet to get the opportunity to listen to it so far. I have already made up my mind to listen to it when I am cornered to the level that I can do nothing about anything. In that case, I hope I can die before the playback of the music media ends.

The cloud below me is globular like a bubble. The cloud above me is gray and flat. I fly straight between them.

Since the takeoff, I have heard Tokino's voice through my earphones just once. The communication is coming in, just when the landing gears are retracted. I am in the middle of the slow climb to the clouds.

"Do not tell me ... This is not your first experience, is it?" He asks so abruptly.

"What do you mean ... by 'this'? This mission? Or, this aircraft?"

“Aircraft.”

“This is not the first time for me to aviate Mark B.” I reply.

“Then, you know the engine breathing, don’t you?” Tokino asks.

“We should not talk through the radio communication.”

“Okay.”

After that, there is no radio communication anymore for the time being.

To engage in the mission according to the plan, we fly toward west-southwest. The temperature at the ground level is close to 30 degrees Celsius, so I want to soar in the open sky as soon as I can. It is my first flight in a week. The brightness of the sun in the sky is as usual. My face reflected on the polycarbonate surface of the instrument panel looks relieved for some reason. I may have to take my time occasionally to recognize my own presence.

It is getting very cold, before I know it. I feel the chill around my knees. But, my physical health condition is in a very good shape.

It is the first time in two months to aviate this type of aircraft.

I soon notice that this ranks the highest among the Mark Bs that I have ever piloted. I guess the previous pilot of this particular aircraft was such a tidy person. The interior of this aircraft is as neat and clean as the one displayed in a museum. I mean, no trace of stickers used for attaching photographs, no scratches of anyone’s initials, no marks for counting something, or no scribbling of modified versions of phrases by poets. Can it be that the mechanic crew named Sasakura has cleaned it up? No, he would never do that. Mechanics usually do not get their hands on a cockpit. Like a human’s stomach, this space is outside the plane from their point of view.

Come to think of it, I did not smell any human odor when I entered the cockpit. No trace of artificial perfume, either. I like it that way because I dislike that sort of thing. Only for that reason, I have come to like this aircraft. In many cases, I end up getting a headache in anyone else’s aircraft because of the pilot’s odor. I just cannot stand anyone else’s aircraft even more than somebody else’s car, clothes, rooms, or beds. Why? It is because I cannot just switch to a different aircraft or get out of the cockpit in the middle of the flight.

Tokino's airplane slightly shakes its wings twice.

He seems to be thinking of descending. I start to wonder if we have already been flying for so long, and I read the clock.

I am sinking into the cloud. I close the throttle to keep some distance from Tokino's aircraft. My aircraft vibrates a little. A slight feeling of floating. I love this particular sensation beyond description that I experience when descending. I feel good. It is as if various relationships are getting vague, or as if the things surrounding me are getting away from me. I want to keep falling endlessly, toward the center of the Earth ... I always associate such thing with one another. All of my coworkers often say that they love the acceleration on their backs when ascending. I think differently, the opposite. I can feel that I am released from something when I am descending more strongly than when I am ascending. Probably, I feel that I am being released from the inconveniences of living in this world. For any living creatures, nothing can be bigger restraints than that.

"From my point of view, you seem to want to die. Is that right?"

I wonder who has said so.

Ah ... It's Amano. He was such a clown. When did his aircraft crash? ... Was it in summer two years ago, if I remember correctly? While crashing, he said to everyone, something like this: "Tell the auntie in the cafeteria that Amano ran away."

As I recall that, it is making me snigger. He was not the type of guy who could say such an elegant joke. Probably, it was the best one he had been thinking about and preparing for quite a long time.

I have just passed through the cloud. A black forest appears faintly. Amano probably saw such a black forest, I think. "Even though the Earth is approaching straight, it is strange that there is no hole ..." He might have thought so.

Immediately after the cloud has disappeared, I can search for Tokino's aircraft. He is at the higher altitude than I am. There is quite a distance between us. He is shaking the wings again. He seems to be concerned about me. I chuckle alone again. Contrary to the previous impression of him, he is such type of guy unexpectedly. That's really none of his business, I think.

I fly above the forest for a while. Then, I see a large river. I lower the altitude, and then direct the vector toward the upstream part of the river along the riverfront. Both sides of the river are adjacent to flat plain lands. In the distance, I see farmlands or meadows. White houses are sparsely located here and there. However, visibility is hazy due to light rain. I cannot see anything in the distance.

There should be a dam, then a lake. Our scouting target is located near the vicinity. Almost one hour has passed after we took off from the base.

Eighty percent of my attention is concentrated on the upper sky above us. Paying attention to the lower sky below us is Tokino's duty.

The canopy is getting wet. I look to the side, and find a vapor trail forming around the edge of the wing and streaming backward.

I lower the altitude even more. Probably because of the aftermath of the heavy rain, the river appears to be swollen. The soil-colored surface of the water is getting closer to me. I descend to the elevation that is a little higher than both of the riverbanks. It is a dangerous altitude if a bridge is within the vicinity. The throttle is hardly closed. If I do not hold it down, the aircraft tends to float due to the ground effect. I think that the number of raindrops hitting the canopy has increased. I swallow the saliva, and then the volume of sound surrounding me increases suddenly.

Tokino's aircraft is flying in front of me on the right. Its cockpit is hidden behind the misty canopy, and the figure of the pilot is invisible.

The mountain is approaching. The width of the river is gradually narrowing.

The engine sound is stable. It sounds lyrical. It is the proof that we have a skilled mechanic. I know what is really precious. There is nothing more valuable than a skilled mechanic. You have nothing to lose by making him your lover.

The engine sound of my aircraft is overlapping with the sound from Tokino's aircraft. Smooth sound. The sound is as comfortable to my ears as the touch of a smooth blanket.

I look back toward the higher altitude, the sky to the upper rear, several times. Fortunately, the sky is not too blindingly bright. The ground below us appears to be getting elevated. It is like the growth of the black forest is raising the ground level.

It is as if I were traveling backward in the history toward the ancient times. There is no house or no road around the vicinity.

The river gently curves to the right.

Tokino leans the main wing sideways. I also lower the right wing. Every time I engage in a maneuver like this, I feel as if I were playing with a bobsled. In fact, I have never even skied. I have flown above the snow, but I have never touched it with my hands. My comrades say, in chorus, "If I were to crash, I would much rather do so on the snow." I am not sure why they would say so, because I do not know what snow is.

Over the edge of the lowered wing, I see the mud-colored surface of the water. The sand of a sandbank is whiter than the river.

As planned, the dam appears in front of us.

Since I have expected it to be white, I am surprised by the fact that it is far more blackish than anticipated. Several streaks of black stripes are lined up on the surface vertically. I put the boost on the throttle a bit. I slightly put the control stick to the left to make the wings horizontally level.

I wait for Tokino's ascent.

It is still a horizontal flight. Moreover, its speed is not increasing.

There is only about 300 meters of distance between him and the dam.

It is about time that he would raise the pitch of the aircraft.

However, Tokino has yet to start ascending. The dam is closing on and getting closer. I study the landscapes on both sides of the dam. It is too narrow for us to turn to the left or to the right.

Still, he is flying straight.

Is he sleeping? I think so in a moment.

He was looking like he was suffering from a hangover this morning ...

Oh, no.

This is the limit.

When I try to pull the control stick, Tokino lowers the right wing a little. He is

revving up the engine. The reaction torque is causing the aircraft to tilt.

I too push up the throttle lever at once.

Tokino raises the nose of his aircraft. The aircraft is still leaning to the right. Is he taking the reaction torque into account? He is intending to ascend diagonally.

Needless to say, I remember the issue pertaining to the engine breathing.

I am adding my strength to my left hand on the throttle lever, but I have just decided to have faith in it and let go of the throttle lever.

What is 'it' that I am having faith in?

What am I believing in? I think so, with a little delay.

The engine starts racing in a few seconds. In the middle, the engine breathes once. The interval is so short that no human can control it for sure. *Splendid*, I feel.

The engine roars frantically.

The aircraft vibrates.

The vapor trail streams out from the nose.

I feel the acceleration on my back, see the cloudy sky in front of me, and wonder why I wish for nothing in a situation like this.

The angle is so steep that I feel as if I were climbing the concrete dam.

Although the velocity is decreasing, I am still barely ascending. Indeed, this is heavy, for sure. If the engine had a little more power, then the awkward time like this would have been reduced.

I fly over the dam and keep ascending. Of course, I adjust the attitude to a far more gentle angle.

I shake the aircraft, and look at the surface of the lake.

The surface in the distance is green. It seems to lead to the farthest part.

A road is to the right. I find a railway beyond the road.

I see a factory, located even farther.

While viewing the landscape, I ascend higher.

Before the velocity gets insufficient, I dare to control the aileron boldly and perform the inverted flight. With a half-roll, I regain the level flight.

I take a deep breath.

Tokino's aircraft is still flying inverted at the higher altitude.

Again, I look down at the target.

I cannot find anything that is moving. No trace of humans. No cars.

As of now, we have not been shot from below. Attacks from underneath can indeed get nasty.

The absence of attacks is the proof that there is nothing in the target.

It means that we have come here to make sure so.

I always feel this way. I realize that I end up feeling disappointed for some reason, even though I should feel relieved when I encounter nothing in a scouting task like this. The aggressive side of me seems to live around my right hand that is gripping the control stick. He rails at me, *I wanted to blast this baby*. I am feeling the urge to take my glove off to see his face.

After making turns and drawing large circles, we are heading for the factory. Tokino is now flying normally. Executing an inverted flight for more than 10 seconds with this particular type of aircraft is dangerous. Its fuel system just cannot catch up on the maneuver. The fact that its mechanism is more fragile than humans is a situation that the one who is aviating the plane should feel comfortable about.

As far as my observation can tell, the factory does not seem to be in operation. I heard that the plant is designed for processing minerals. I find long belt conveyors, but cannot tell whether they actually work.

"Shall we go back?" I hear Tokino's voice through the radio.

"Okay. Let's do so." I reply.

After seeing the cockpit of Tokino's aircraft beside me, I look to the upper-rear direction toward the higher sky.

At that moment, I find three black dots floating in the gray part of the cloud.

That is very close. Their velocities are fast enough to catch up on us. We can do nothing but dodge the first attack.

Tokino's aircraft turns to the right, so I am almost diving to the left. While skimming over the surface of the lake at full-throttle, I am looking for a nearby coordinate to escape to. If I choose to ascend without much thoughts, I will lose the velocity and be shot down.

I look back over and over again.

What are the types of the enemy aircrafts?

They have yet to shoot. Are they attempting to dive from the higher altitude?

The rain is getting a bit more torrential. We are getting lucky.

Although the aircraft is trembling slightly due to the vibration of the engine, I have not found any malfunctioning yet. I check the indicators for oil pressure and fuel, one by one. I get prepared to discard the drop tank.

I look back again. I do not see them nearby.

I take a deep breath slowly.

I turn off the music.

"Okay, let's do it?" I utter.

I relax my shoulders.

Get my waist slightly up in the air.

I straighten up in the seat.

Slowly.

I move my knees.

In the meantime, I look around.

Ahead of me, a fish is jumping out of the river. No, that is not what is really happening. The enemies are shooting the machine guns. The sound follows with a delay. As expected, they are coming from above.

I dump the drop tank. I pull the control stick, while timing it with the reaction caused by the detachment of the tank.

I am ascending while rolling. I am not steering the rudder. I let the torque roll the aircraft. By doing this, I have no blind spot. I can locate their positions.

Unfortunately, there are two aircrafts.

They start shooting.

They are lunging at me.

I turn the nose of my aircraft to the closer of the enemy aircrafts to decrease the projected area.

However, it is already too close for me to shoot.

One enemy aircraft and I pass by each other.

Then, another one gets closer to me after that.

They look like they are good friends to each other.

As it has turned out, I am receiving no substantial attack.

While keeping my aircraft level, I start the spinning maneuver.

One of the enemy crafts descends a little too much, and tries to make a turn. Such a mistake involving the braking maneuver like that might turn out to be fatal. The other one ascends swiftly and is already getting ready for the second wave. This pilot seems to be more skilled. I am confirming that both of the enemy aircrafts are twin-engine Rainbows. They are superior to Sankas in respect of the velocities at low altitudes. Our advantage lies in the turning performances. However, the relationship between the velocities and turning performances is like that between banana flesh and banana peel. I mean, once a banana fruit is peeled, the only thing that matters is the interior.

Now, here it comes.

The other plane is taking too much time beneath me. Its life would be saved, if it ran away now.

Rolling to the left.

The wind sounds like a flute uncharacteristically. A beautiful sound.

It starts shooting at me.

I close the throttle and pull the elevator input with full strength. I grit my teeth to withstand the g force. After counting to three, I race the engine. The aircraft stalls once while pitching upward, it revolves like an acrobatic backward flip. Only a few pilots can pull this off. Also, only few aircrafts can withstand this acrobatic maneuver.

My combatively aggressive right hand unlocks the machine guns.

“May I shoot?” It asks me.

I plant my right foot firmly and steer the rudder. My aircraft is falling while sliding diagonally. Then, as I have calculated, the enemy craft from above passes by me. The opponent is lowering the flaps. Even though the pilot seems to be thinking that it is putting on the brake, I just send him an advisory message telepathically, “You are going a bit too fast.” I look at the left side, which is the direction that is opposite from the enemy plane that I am currently dealing with, and I notice that the other enemy plane is below me. I hold my breath.

“You may shoot. Go ahead.”

My right hand shoots the machine gun.

Control the ailerons to roll to the left. Flaps are deflected down. Elevators are steered to go up (deflected downward).

I break away to the left.

In the meantime, I ascend rapidly, to gain the altitude.

It has got to be the bull’s eye, but the target is still flying. There seems to be no damage inflicted. I just hope that the pilot is now scared a little bit. It is soon getting out of my sight.

The other slower enemy plane is ascending while turning. Is the pilot scared? I surely do not want to think so, though.

I am also ascending more.

Shall I escape into the cloud? No, it is a bit hard. I won’t be able to reach the cloud. Besides, I do not need such a safety net. I have decided to pretend to escape and turn over.

I check the instrument panel. The engine is working well.

I look back and confirm the enemy gradually closing in on my tail. I intentionally control the amplitude of my oscillation in order to have him follow me. I do not see the other enemy. That is the main concern for me. It has not ascended, maybe because it is suffering from some kind of damage.

In four seconds, the closer enemy will shoot me.

One, two, three.

I roll over to the right and then am inverted.

At the same time, I press the rudder pedal all the way down.

Snap roll.

In a moment, the enemy appears in front of me.

My right hand shoots the gun for the brief moment.

My left hand turns down the throttle.

I use both of my feet to fully reverse the rudder direction.

I follow through with the torque, and the aircraft stalls.

Finally, the other enemy has arrived.

Yes. That's the way you do it. You are today's main attraction, after all.

I roll over to the right. I point the nose of my aircraft downward.

I look back.

Where is the slower enemy?

I am still descending while rolling.

In the meantime, I am viewing several directions. Although I am looking into the distance, I cannot find Tokino's aircraft. I know how far the dam is from me. I see one aircraft below me. *What is it doing?*

The aircraft creaks.

The black smoke passes by me only for a brief moment.

Whose smoke? Not mine.

I lower the left wing, and I enter the normal turning.

At last, I can breathe.

I am confirming both of the two enemy planes. *Which one of them is issuing the smoke?*

Throttle up.

Pull the control stick.

“Well, then ...”

I inhale the air deeply.

Then, I stop.

Roll over to the left.

I position myself in front of the ascending enemy. I then roll over to the right.

He starts shooting at me.

Down.

Roll.

I draw a narrow loop by deploying full flaps.

The movement of the enemy plane clearly lacks the sharpness. I suspect that parts of it have received damages. It happened when I first shot him.

This battle has already been decided.

I see the bottom of the aircraft from below.

Fire.

I escape from the vicinity with the right turn.

I confirm that the enemy is spitting fire.

I look for the other, slower enemy.

I look upward, just in case. Then, I roll over to assume the inverted flight and search below toward the ground.

While railing black smoke, the slower one is skimming over the surface of the lake. The shooting that I executed earlier seems to have hit this one also. In short, I have already won the respective battles in the initial phases. Just in case, I look

around. There is no other enemy.

I pull the control stick to deflect the elevators, and then dive.

In the middle of the maneuver, I see the aircraft spitting fire crashing into the lake. It seems that the pilot has failed to escape from the cockpit.

How pitiful. I can come up with the expression. But probably, I am not really thinking that way. It is not my real intention, as if it were the message written with chocolate sauce drizzled on cake.

Whether it is piloted by a human or not, whatever is being downed is an aircraft. I cannot afford to invest my time on worrying about the aircraft's visceral organs.

I approach from behind the other aircraft that is spewing the black smoke. Since its velocity is decreasing, it is the prime target. I catch up with it in a moment.

Just when my right hand is ready to shoot, the enemy plane lowers the right wing and the tip touches the surface of the lake. After the splashes, the aircraft spins around like a boomerang.

I circle around the nearby vicinity and confirm the crash. In the end, it stops with the nose of the fuselage tilted downward and dipped in water. I wonder for how long it will stay afloat. The pilot in the cockpit does not seem to be moving. Half of its canopy has already sunken. Maybe, he is waiting for me to leave.

I am leaving the area, and head for the dam. I pitch the nose of the aircraft upward, and gradually gain the altitude.

“They do not know who I am.” I utter to myself. Probably, my right hand is speaking.

Sweat is running down my forehead.

I take off the goggles once and rub my eyes with my left hand.

I check the fuel, the oil pressure, and the oil temperature. Then, I slightly shake various controllers (such as sticks and levers), just in case. There is no malfunctioning recognized on the aircraft. The engine roaring behind me is in good condition, as usual. The improvement over the engine breathing is splendid. *I have to tell the mechanic crew about that*, I think so. I am glad that I am blessed with a good aircraft. I am feeling comfortable about everything.

I fly over the factory, our scouting target, to the downstream side of the dam.

Neither Tokino's aircraft nor enemy is within sight. The visibility is very low, no thanks to the rain.

When Tokino's aircraft ascended rapidly in this vicinity in the initial phase, was he testing me? Or, was he giving me a chance to check the characteristics of the engine breathing? In the first place, is this modification implemented on Tokino's aircraft as well?

Anyway, it is good for me that I learned of the timing at that time, because the enemies appeared right after that. It was important for me to be able to move around, while not minding the throttle. It is as if the aircraft had lost 10 kilograms off its body weight.

All I have to do is to go back. No enemy would come from the front.

I have decided to fly above the clouds.

"Hey, are you okay?" I hear Tokino's voice through the earphones.

"I'm here." I reply.

"Where?"

"I am leaving the target, and flying southward. I am approaching Point 2 shortly after."

"Got it. I will be waiting at the higher altitude."

It seems that Tokino is safe and sound. He is ahead of me.

For a while, I am heading straight south above the clouds. I locate Tokino's aircraft in a couple of minutes.

"Did you get hit?" Tokino asks.

"No, not at all." I reply.

"How many did you bring down?"

"Two."

Tokino is not saying anything about what he dealt with. I think he had to face the tougher situation. Probably, the most skilled among the three enemies attacked him

alone.

I like the one who does not speak of too many unnecessary things. *He might be a good guy.* That is how I evaluate my comrade.

When I land on the base with more than 30 percent of fuel left in the tank, it is 15:44.

-4-

Kusanagi is saying nothing in particular. She is looking like a mailperson throwing letters into mailboxes. She is showing an indifferent look as if in saying it is just another daily routine whether things are working out well or not. Probably, she is right. This airbase is closer to the front line than where I was stationed previously. It is far better than being sarcastically praised by having my shoulder being tapped with cheesy grins.

Sitting side by side in front of Kusanagi's desk, Tokino and I are reporting the situation.

"Umm, are we planning to bomb the dam?" Tokino asks. Asking such a question is basically prohibited.

"No." Kusanagi shakes her head. Obviously, she is saying no more.

For some reason, she says nothing to me all the way to the end of the reporting session. She could have said something diplomatically, such as, "How do you like your new aircraft?", or "Is there anything you need?" But, nothing at all. Although I am a little disappointed, I feel better this way, come to think about it. I am now feeling that I have wasted time and energy by getting prepared mentally for her words.

After taking a shower, I go down to the cafeteria room and find Tokino drinking beer. He has not changed his clothes yet. I know someone has just taken off from the base since I just heard the engine sound earlier. I have heard in earlier conversations that there are four pilots, so probably the other two are currently flying on a mission. It is getting dark outside. Even though my heart gets heavy when thinking about night shifts, the participants get proportionally more handsome bonuses accordingly, and the chance of their encountering enemies in the dark is low. There are quite a few of those who think that it is such a good deal.

Usually, I do not drink a lot. If anything, I am not a heavy drinker. However, on the first day of the deployment to the new base, we have just shot down three enemies, the two of which were brought down by my aircraft. In addition, my comrade is waiting for me while having already started on drinking ... Under such a circumstance, if I do not drink, then I would not be able to blame others for accusing me of being as sociable as a load of packages tied to the top part of a sled of an arctic expedition team. Of course, I do not dislike the taste of alcohol. I like to get drunk. Besides, it is necessary for me to forget various issues. So, I know that the act of creating time during which I do not recall anything by drinking alcohol is meaningful to a certain extent. It is like bubbles in an aquarium containing tropical fish. They just bubble up and vanish. I think it is a smart way for someone to live comfortably. But it is obvious that the very act of living itself is not so pleasant. No matter how many bubbles go up and pop, it is also obvious that it won't make much difference. With no exception, drinkers know that.

I take a bottle of beer out of the refrigerator, and approach Tokino's table with a glass in my hand.

"Would you mind if I take a seat and drink close to you?" I ask politely.

"You are already close enough." Tokino curves his lips.

"Within firing range?"

"The fridge is not working too well, is it?"

There are three empty beer bottles on the table, but his facial expression is not showing any sign of getting drunk.

I pour beer into a glass, and down half my glass in one gulp.

"Well, it is chilly enough." I pour the rest of what remains in the bottle into Tokino's glass.

"Oh ... You are a reliable tandem partner. That was a big help." Tokino says so calmly. "How did you manage to shoot down two enemy planes? If I were you, I would have run away."

"Compliments?"

"Hey ..." He winks.

“You made a quick work on your opponent, too.”

“It’s a fluke. My opponent was an amateur.”

“Modesty?”

“I guess ...” Tokino nods. “Modesty. That is the first time I hear that word in a long while.”

“Same for me. Both of them were novices.” I gulp down beer, and sigh. “If they were professionals, I would be swimming by now.”

“Can you swim?”

“No, I have never swum in my life.” I laugh. “I hate water. I don’t like it frozen, either.”

“Do you dislike refrigerators as well?”

“Umm.” I look back at the refrigerator. “She’s not bad.”

“She is fair-skinned and glam.”

“Shall I bring more beer?”

“Yeah. Fermented water is my favorite.” While saying so, Tokino attempts to pour beer into his glass, but the bottle is empty. “Tut!” He clucks his tongue, stands up, and walks to the refrigerator. *Was he listening to me?*

“Where did you previously belong to?” While opening the refrigerator door, Tokino looks at me.

“Well ...” I smile. “In the abdomen of my mother.”

Tokino has his lips curved even more, and looks up at the ceiling once. I feel that it is quite an honor to have my joke understood. That is the way it has got to be, for it is for beginners.

“It is the last bottle for tonight.” He gets back to the table with the beer bottle.

“I’ve got enough.”

“Are you humbly declining the offer?”

“Humbly? What a nostalgic word.”

Tokino’s hair is longer than mine. His body is far bigger as well. His hands are

also huge and rugged. *It is somewhat like a hand of a skeleton*, I think.

“When you are firing shots, do you feel good?” While putting his lips on the glass once, Tokino asks.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you feel as if the bullets you have shot are absorbed into the target’s body?”

“No.” I answer. I am looking up at the ceiling. “I don’t see the enemy when shooting bullets.”

“You don’t see, you say?” Tokino frowns.

“That’s a waste of my time.” I drink up the rest of the beer.

“When you shoot, do you pray, or something?”

“No ..., I search for the next target. If I have time to see the bullet trajectory, I should look around and see behind me. I get more benefits by doing so.”

“Hmm, you think so ...” He nods. “That sounds nice. That makes sense. I will do that myself next time. But, you did not learn that in military school, did you? They taught you to gaze into the enemy, didn’t they? Didn’t the manuals mention things like, ‘Such tenacity would decide the victor of the battle?’”

There is no way that such spiritualistic things are written on the text.

“If the bullets do not hit the target, that shouldn’t be a problem.” I sigh. “It does not matter, as long as it does not fire back at me.”

“Is it nonsense that you are saying?”

“I don’t think so ...”

While doing this job, my body has learned several things naturally. Among them, that method of attack that I implement is one of the few ways that I can express with mere words. I mean, as soon as I intend to shoot the machine gun at the target, I should already be seeing the next target by that time. It is very simple at the surface of the words. In short, seeing the immediate target which I am just about to fire at is a complete waste of time. Such a defenseless moment is too much of a risk for the pilot. After realizing that from my experience, I have been feeling better. I

have learned not to panic in the middle of dogfights. I do not stop my maneuvers anymore, and can make everything flow smoothly. As a result, I can lessen my fatigue and stress. I can say it is an esoteric technique that I have formulated. However, whomever I talk with about this issue, almost no one takes what I say seriously.

“How about going out tonight?” Tokino suddenly changes the subject. Even though no one else is in the cafeteria, he puts his head near me and whispers in a low voice.

“Where to?” I ask. Of course, I think I can approximately guess what he wants to mean.

“You know, as a formality, introducing you is ...” He is pausing his statement.

“Is, what?”

“I mean, my duty. Probably, I think.”

“Is that where you were last night?”

“No ...” Tokino shakes his head sideways once. But his eyes are glaring at me for a while.

-5-

We have easily got permission to leave the base. As I hop on the back of Tokino’s large-sized motorbike behind his back, we are driving on a straight road that connects the base with a downtown. Although I am wearing my flight suit, it is very cold due to my body being air-cooled. Even so, I do not dislike the feeling of my body being cooled, because from that I feel the ecstasy of my getting closer to the moment of death.

In the middle of the way, we ride on a bank and cross an iron bridge. The river around here has almost no water. Tall weeds are overgrown, and are spread wide under the bridge. When the wind blows, the sheet of weeds ripples like waves as if they were pretending to be the surface of water.

I am wearing goggles and a leather hat. I think its belt on my chin might be leaving the mark, and it bothers me.

The sky is dark blue. The orange moon is floating and wavering to our right. I feel

the urge for turning toward the direction to shoot it down. Whatever vehicle I get on, I always feel the impulse to check what is behind my back. I have to speak many times to myself, who keeps on trying to watch my back, *You do not have to do that now.*

The engine of Tokino's motorbike is straight-twin. I have never driven such a large two-wheeled vehicle. If it falls down on its side, I probably won't be able to stand it right back up with my strength. The strokes from the engine camshaft are tuned at a comfortably high frequency, and are sounding sexy. The revolution is so smooth as if it is still leaving extra leeway. The way the sound in the exhaust pipe sometimes grumbles like a fretful child is somewhat cute.

The motorbike slips into the parking lot of a drive-in diner, which has a bright yellow neon sign. I see several flat houses around the place. After Tokino's motorbike becomes quiet, the songs of insects silently seeps into my ears. A bug zapper is buzzing and discharging sparks at the entrance. Bugs are occasionally colliding with the bug zapper, and are making the faint zapping sounds sporadically. A huge truck towing a trailer is parked across the street. It is too big to enter the parking lot. I feel somewhat uneasy when such an object is too close to me because it would be an easy target from the sky.

"What is this place?" I ask while taking off my goggles.

"Meat pies are delicious here." Tokino says. "Aren't you hungry?"

On a brick terrace, which is one step higher than the asphalt ground, an elderly man with dirty clothes is sitting. Holding a bottle in a paper bag, he is staring at us.

We push a glass door and get inside. The place is filled with cigarette smoke and slow-tempo rock 'n' roll music, the mixture ratio of which is probably 4 to 6. I feel somewhat of the pressure. Tokino is whispering something to an old man standing behind the bar counter. Then, he signals to me with his eyes. We walk to the inner part on the right side, and reach a table at the corner. We see the terrace, brightly lit with yellow neon, and a pitch-black parking lot through the glass of the windows. Only a silhouette of the huge trailer on the road can be barely seen.

I do not know where she has been, but a woman wearing a white apron appears. She is standing beside the table, flips over the pages of a memo pad, and holds a pencil to jot down something. It must be a proper gesture to indicate that she is coming here without saying a word to take our orders.

“Beer for me, and a meat pie for him.” Tokino orders.

“Coffee, please.” I order, while lighting a cigarette.

She is jotting down the orders without saying anything.

After finishing it, she looks at us and widens her eyes.

“That’s all.” Tokino says.

I see the waitress leaving the table, and then ask in a low voice. “Is this the place where you should bring me to?”

“Here is Point 1.” Tokino snorts. Then, he looks back, surveys the diner once, and then looks at me. “There are such things as proper procedures for things to do. You just saw the old man drinking outside, right?”

“Yeah. He was drinking. Why doesn’t he get in?”

“He drinks water.” Tokino picks up a cigarette, too. “At this point, there is no longer any difference between water and alcohol for him. He says something runs on the road, and runs past him. He is always waiting for it, just like that.”

“What passes him by?”

“I’m not sure ...” Tokino exhales smoke, and throws a match into the ashtray. “God, maybe.”

“Happy life.” I smile.

“At least, happier than ours.” Tokino utters.

In every town, there are old men who are waiting for something. For some reason, children wait for nothing. Am I waiting for something? No, of course, there is nothing for me to wait for. In short, I am a child. Yes ..., I am a child, literally speaking. I guess I will remain this way forever. I can bet anyone so.

Drinks and a meat pie are brought to the table. The pie is on an oversized, white plastic plate. It is frightfully settled down, as if it has been on the plate since last night. The coffee is slightly lacking in enough intellect and heat, but its bitterness is sufficient. If anything, it is my favorite taste.

While viewing the bottles arranged in the bar counter, I see a familiar face in a mirror nearby. As I do not have any acquaintance in this downtown, I am a little

surprised.

The one who is getting inside the diner is Sasakura, the mechanic. He is turning up the collar of a gray jumpsuit, wearing a white cap deep. He is walking toward us while sticking his head out to his front like dinosaurs would do.

“Hey ...” With his hands in the pockets, Sasakura smiles slightly. Also, his expression is looking as if his face is twitching. He is also looking as if he is winking. I wonder if his face is paralyzed. But, it might be just another illusion that I am seeing.

“The condition of the aircraft was good. It was superb.” I tell him. “I was going to thank you, but you were not in the factory.”

“I was sleeping.” Sasakura replies. “There was no drop tank, and the cowling was ... though ...”

I cannot catch the last part of his statement. It is not because the music is too loud. Instead, it has to do with the way he speaks.

“Three cats.” Tokino answers. “Why don’t you take a seat here?”

“Ah, no, thanks. My companion will soon come here.” Without changing his expression, Sasakura declines the offer from Tokino. “How is it going for you?”

“I am waiting for my companion, too.”

“That is not what I meant. I mean, about your engine.” Sasakura gets one of his eyes squinted.

“Oh, well. You mean my engine.”

“On medium speed, did you not feel it was loose?”

“I think it’s so-so.” Tokino answers.

“Loose, or too much choking? Which was it?”

“I’m not sure under today’s weather condition. I will wait and see, to observe how it goes a little more.”

“Please do so.” Sasakura replies. He looks at me. “Are you also waiting for someone?”

“I’m not sure ...” I shrug in an exaggerated fashion on purpose.

“Three cats.” Tokino laughs.

Sasakura walks toward the opposite side of the diner. Because this place is shaped like the letter L (viewed from above), we cannot see the other end over the corner. I wonder slightly what type of person his companion would be. But, I take my attention away from the interest in the subject within two seconds, and look outside. I just want to check out how Sasakura has just gotten to this place. Probably, by motorbike or by car. But, I do not recognize such things in the parking lot. To begin with, I have not heard that sort of sound.

“Decent guy.” Tokino says. Is it how he evaluates Sasakura?

Before I know it, the music has now changed to blues.

-6-

A big sedan is entering the parking lot. The width of its hood is as huge as a living room, and it is decorated with an ornament like a vertical fin on the rear end. It is a stupid and useless design that has no functional purpose. The ones who are getting out of the car are two young women. One is wearing a black short skirt and the other one is in a white, long one-piece dress. Tokino changes his facial expressions when he sees them. So, I understand what is up with this. As expected, after entering the diner, the two women find Tokino, and are approaching us.

“Good evening, Naofumi.” The woman with a black miniskirt greets with both of her hands open in front of her chest. Several silver rings are glittering.

The woman in a white one-piece dress is standing, while she seems to be glaring at me.

“This guy is Kannami, a newcomer.” Tokino introduces me to the ladies.

“How are you, Kannami?” The girl with a black skirt smiles.

“Compared to when?” I reply with the edge of my lips raised a little.

The woman in a black miniskirt is Kusumi. She has long, straight hair and her face reminds me of chocolate. The other woman in a white one-piece dress is Fuko. Her hair is short and pink. She has an owl tattoo on her chest. Her voice is so husky that at first I thought she was catching a cold.

The ladies drink beer. Small green labels are on the bottles. I have never seen or

heard of such a brand. When we are about to be done with listening to the third song, Tokino stands up and we are going outside. He seems to have decided to make it on him tonight, and he is paying at the register. Then, he asks me.

“How did you like it?”

“Like what?”

“Meat pie.”

“Oh ...” I nod. “Speaking of which, I have eaten it a long time ago.”

Tokino bursts into laughter. The ladies behind me are also chuckling. They seem to think that I just said a joke. I did not really mean that. I was merely telling them that I really ate a meat pie long time ago and the taste is similar to the one I have just eaten tonight. Things have certain, proper orders to execute. Each time I try to neatly explain things in the correct order, I usually fail. However, meat pies in general are often crushed like defeated boxers. I guess they are irreplaceable. I soon give up on sharing information with them in the early going, and stop recalling various memories. I am not in such a mood tonight.

We hop on that huge sedan. I wonder why such wide cars have been manufactured. Indeed, I am not sure of what the designer was thinking. Fuko puts Kusumi on the driver’s seat, Tokino on the passenger’s seat, and then me on the back seat. She then sits beside me. The car rubs the road with its front end (bumper), its bottom, and its rear end (back fender) one by one. Additionally, the tires are making a screeching noise, the muffler is emitting an explosive sound, and the car accelerates gradually. Too many ceremonies with no substance. Probably, this car packs as much as 700 horsepower. I am suspecting that it is funneling the power to some sort of secret purposes. For example, a screw or a propeller might be rotating on the back of the car. Or, a circular saw installed on the bottom of the car might be rotating to cut the pavement of the road. Judging from the way the engine is generating the sound, it is an eight-cylinder engine. However, once Kusumi reaches for the car stereo and pushes a switch, nothing can be heard anymore as if we are entering the Earth’s atmosphere.

The road runs straight. Lights pass by us on both sides of the road, just about when I almost forget about their presences. Only the vicinities around the lights are vaguely glowing in purple. The drumbeats vibrating my abdomen are about to break

the speakers. The scent of perfume from Fuko, who is leaning on me, is about to make my head ache. The owl tattoo on her chest is glaring at me, as if it is cursing the tranquility of the forest which it had been living in.

We stray off the road, enter the forest, and finally climb up a stone-paved slope as if we were advancing in a pool of mud. Between square columns on both sides is a trim steel fence. In the headlights, the fence slowly opens inward. Beyond that, the forest continues for a while. We say nothing. I inhale the fresh air coming through the windows. Of course, I might be just deceived into believing that it is fresh. An illuminated mansion appears, whose entrance our car approaches along the curving road. It looks like a vacation cottage of a rich man. I have seen a mansion like this in a movie just once in the past. It was on fire in the final scene of the movie.

“How do you like it?” Tokino looks back and asks me.

“About what?” I ask back.

“You have also been here a long time ago, right?” Tokino asks, and laughs. I guess that he is intending it to be some sort of joke.

“I’m not sure.” Just for the formality of it, I laugh back at him.

After getting off the car, we walk through a large door, which a doorman dressed up pretentiously is opening for us, and enter the lobby. Three women are looking at us over the railing on the second floor of the open ceiling space. In my imagination, I shoot machine guns to take care of the three immediately. On the right side of the lobby is a carpeted space. It leads to the inner part. Although it is too dark in the deeper part, I can see a part of a counter bar. I hear human voices from the direction.

I pick up a cigarette and light it. I did not smoke in the car. At that point, I have already stopped thinking about anything. It makes me wonder why I can do that.

“Then, later.” Tokino whispers.

“Later? What? What do you mean by that?”

“Unless something happens, we will get back together. It is what the relationship between you and me is about.”

“Is there any chance of something happening?” I ask, just in case. I do not think

that my face is showing a smile.

“Fuko will tell you about it.”

“About what?”

“Why don’t you ask her?”

“Why would I do that?”

Tokino does not answer, and climbs up the stairs with Kusumi as if they were getting entangled with each other.

“Would you like to have something to drink?” Fuko is standing beside me.

“Yes, if it is not alcoholic.” I reply.

“You mean juice, or something like that?” She widens her eyes. She seems to be startled by something. “What would you like?”

“Anything but vegetables.”

“Vegetables?” Fuko smiles, by showing her white teeth.

She raises a hand to gesture for me to wait, and walks toward the inner part.

One of the women on the second floor is saying something to me, who is left in the lobby. Quite regrettably, I do not understand the language. Probably, it is because she was shot down by me a moment ago. The woman next to her is planting both of her elbows on the railing, and both of her hands are cupping her cheeks. The third one climbs down to the middle of the stairway, sits down on the stair, and crosses her legs. She might be wanting to show off the new pair of her stockings. However, I have almost no knowledge of the functionality for stockings.

“How is Suito?” That woman on the stairway asks.

Because an ashtray is within the vicinity, I approach the base of the stairway a little. While dropping the ash, I look at the woman on the stairs again.

“Suito? Who?” I ask.

She is laughing, and does not answer.

Does she mean Suito Kusanagi? I do not know any other person with that name. I am reminded of her desk I saw this morning for the first time. Such a neat, clean,

and accurate desk must be unusual. It is like an aircraft carrier.

Fuko is getting back. She is holding in her hand a glass filled with red liquid in her hand.

“Tomatoes? I’m sorry, but I don’t like tomatoes.”

“No, orange.”

“Orange?”

Even though I am shocked, I tentatively take a sip. It really tastes like orange. The woman on the stairs laughs.

“Are you afraid of tomatoes?” Fuko leans her head sideways, while showing that she is amused.

“Tomatoes are vegetables.” I answer.

Fuko turns around, and is about to climb up the stairs. “You are getting on the way.” Fuko warns to the woman in the middle of the stairway. Fuko looks back at me, so I follow her. The woman who has just moved back to the wall on the stairway, greets me, “Welcome, boy.” to me, who is walking by.

-7-

“If you are here, then it means that Jinroh is dead. Right?” Fuko, sitting on the bed, says.

“I’m not sure ...” I reply. “Because I don’t know who Jinroh is.”

“Jinroh said basically the same thing on his first day.”

“How long had he been here?” After putting on a shirt, I light the first cigarette in a long time, and walk toward the window. I first see the sky. It is my most favorite of things outside.

“For about half a year.”

The courtyard surrounded by this U-shaped building is being illuminated. It seems to be covered with white sand. A strange pattern is drawn on it, and modern-looking stone lanterns are placed. Over the courtyard is a bamboo forest. I am not sure how far it stretches. I do not think it is natural, though.

“Would you like to drink something?”

“I want coffee, if it is available.”

“No problem. Sure thing.”

Fuko gets up from the bed, and walks to the cabinet.

“For how long has Tokino been here?” I ask.

“About a year, I think.” Fuko answers without looking at me.

“And you? How long?”

Fuko slowly looks back at me and smiles, while biting her lips.

“‘And you?’ You ask me. You mean, me? ‘That’s funny ...’”

“Oh really?” I lean my head sideways with a serious look. “I think only you and I are here.”

“You are saying ‘you and I’ ...” Fuko chuckles and looks away. “Like a child.”

I look outside the window again. The sky is clear. The stars are vividly clear. It is as if there is another sky above the cloud.

“Are you getting angry?” Fuko whispers.

I look back at her. She is gazing at me with a serious look on her face.

“Why?” I ask back.

“Are you getting angry, because I just said ‘Like a child.’ ...?”

“I’m a child.” I utter, and then smile.

That is the way it is, because I am a professional pilot. It is a profession that adults cannot take. Does she think that such a remark would make me angry? Or, perhaps, late Jinroh used to get angry with this sort of thing. That has got to be it. I can get angry if I try. That is what I am thinking, while I am tracing the logic backward.

I mean, it goes like this: They regard becoming adults as an ability. They think that staying young and remaining to be children are considered to be the lack of the ability to become adults. If they make the stand on the issue, based on the logic, they can look down on the children like us. That is the basis for such a mechanism

of the society, I guess.

However, is it not that becoming adults is equivalent to aging, climbing down the mountain, and approaching the bottom of a gorge named death.

I am just wondering ...

Are people really afraid of death?

I always think about it, while casting doubts on it. I used to think about it when I was observing my parents, adults, and elderly people close to me. Are people afraid of dying? Do they continue to live while being frightened? It seems that I cannot discover such signs of tendencies.

What do ordinary adults think about the children like us who were born unexpectedly? How do they observe us? How can they incorporate the very notions into their lives the fact that children like us die in wars, even though it is our duty? What are they accepting?

Dying while remaining to be children.

Dying after becoming adults and aging.

What are the differences between them, and how can they be different?

We cannot compare them with each other in any way. That is the answer. No one can compare them with each other. It is impossible for a single person to experience both.

I think that either way would be fine. As I contemplate such issues, time flies rapidly. However, I might have to brood on it at times. The situation in which time is passing continuously is a proof of my being alive.

I look at my wristwatch. I should go back now.

“Hey, do you like flying in the sky?” Fuko asks.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Good for you.” She smiles happily. It is a smile like that of a squirrel. I think that she is trying to flatter me.

So, I am smiling for her.

Like a child.

In a way such as this one, I sometimes want to give them back to someone.
They are the things that people were given when they were in their childhood.
Everybody, without exception ...

-8-

That whale-like sedan is driving us back to the drive-in diner. This time around, Tokino and I sit in the back seats, Kusumi in the driver's seat, and Fuko in the passenger's seat. The wind blowing in from a half-opened window is chilly. My heart is feeling heavy just from thinking that I will have to get on Tokino's motorbike after this ride. Kusumi says she wants to take a ride on Tokino's motorcycle. She is coming forward to replace me as the one to be exposed to the cold air. She is strange.

When we arrive at the drive-in diner, the old man is not at the entrance anymore. As Sasakura probably has just seen us arriving at the place, he is walking out of the diner from the entrance door alone at the very timing.

"Oh well ..., you two." He is calling out cheerfully while seeing Tokino and me. His mood shift has gone through a lot of extreme phases in the last few hours. He looks quite drunk. "Where to from now on?"

"We are leaving now." Tokino replies. He starts the engine of the motorbike. "Hey, Kannami."

"What?" I am walking toward him.

"Can you lend your flight suit to her?" Tokino asks. "She can't stand getting blown by the chilly wind until she reaches the base."

Has he actually been thinking about making her stand the chill? That is quite a shocker to me. I take off my flight suit and toss it to Kusumi.

"Thank you." She smiles. She is holding with her lips a cigarette oriented diagonally.

I get back to the car and ask Sasakura, who is standing.

"How did you get here?"

"By bus." Sasakura answers while looking at his wristwatch. "How about you?"

“Do you drive?” I reply, while seeing Fuko.

“I am not good at it.” Fuko sticks out her tongue.

The engine of the motorcycle roars. Once Kusumi sits astride the motorbike, and clings to Tokino’s back, they rush into the road. It is like a scrambling acceleration of a fighter plane taking off from an aircraft carrier.

“Now, I think I am the one who has to drive.” I sigh. “Mr. Sasakura, you can go ahead and come with me.”

“You’re sober, aren’t you?” Fuko speaks.

I sit in the driver’s seat of the whale-like sedan, and hold a large, thin steering wheel. It is looking so unreliable. I do not want to drive such a boxy vehicle. Fuko takes the passenger’s seat and Sasakura sits in the back seat. I start the engine.

“Hey, one of the engines is dead, isn’t it?” Sasakura murmurs. “Of course, it is reliable enough, for it still works even if one of them is dead.”

“Isn’t there only one engine in this car?” Fuko looks back, and asks him.

“I mean cylinders.” Sasakura is looking annoyed. “You should have the spark plugs checked.”

“What are spark plugs?”

The car slowly gets on the road, and the headlights are directed toward the far end of the straight, dark road.

“Was a person named Jinroh assigned to the base before I am?” I look back halfway and ask Sasakura.

“Yeah ...” With his legs crossed, Sasakura is shutting his eyes. He loosely exhales the breath. “The aircraft you hopped onto today used to belong to your predecessor.”

“What did he refer to that as?”

“What do you mean by ‘that’?”

“I mean that aircraft.”

“Well. No, he did not give any name to it in particular.” Sasakura answers. “No one names aircrafts here. After all, there are only four aircrafts.”

“When did he die?” Fuko in the passenger’s seat puts her elbows on the back of the seat and turns around backward. “Hey, can you tell me where Jinroh’s grave is?”

“I appreciate that you are allowing me to take a ride on this car. Thanks for that.” Sasakura says. “However, I cannot tell you anything about that.”

“But, he died, didn’t he?”

“He is no longer with us here. That’s all.”

“He died.”

As Tokino’s motorcycle is way ahead of us already, we cannot see the light or anything. No other car runs on the road here. The fog has set in, which is giving me the impression as if we were flying in the sky. That is how much the suspension is so wobbly.

We cross an iron bridge, get off a bank, and run along a forest. As we get only about 100 meters from the base, I locate Tokino’s motorbike and step on the brake to park it at the location.

“Um, where are they?” Fuko looks around restlessly.

There is no trace of human figure nearby.

We get out of the car. After a while, Tokino and Kusumi appear from the dark forest. I first think that their voices sound as if they are quarrelling with each other. But, as we approach them, Kusumi becomes quiet.

I hand the car key to Kusumi. She crosses the road to reach the sedan. She looks to be in a bad mood, as if she were carrying a frying pan on her back.

“Good night, Kannami.” Fuko waves her hand. “Oh, I almost forgot. Tell me your first name.”

“Mine?”

“This kid is funny, ain’t he?” Fuko laughs.

“Bye-bye.” I open my hand.

“Hey, what’s your first name?”

“Yuichi.”

“Sorry about laughing.” Fuko smiles. “See you again, Yuichi.”

“Yeah, see you then ...”

“Promise me.”

I wave my hand just once for her.

“Later.” Tokino sits astride the motorbike. He then throws goggles and a hat to me. He is leaving by running away with his arm through his helmet.

The car which Kusumi and Fuko got in makes a U-turn, and goes back the same road that it has just used. After the tail lamps disappear, Sasakura and I start walking toward the base.

“I found two holes punched on the cowling.” Sasakura tells me.

“During today’s mission?”

“Yeah ...”

“Which side?”

“Upper right side. Not a scratch on the engine.”

It means that I was attacked at that particular time, which I happen to remember. Yeah, that more skilled pilot of the two. Probably, he was observing the trajectory in too much detail.

“How was the propeller?” I ask.

“Fortunately, no problem.”

We enter the premises through the gate, stray into the side, and walk on a lane leading to the courtyard. We make gritty sound with our shoes on the pebbled surface. It is very dark around the warehouse and the incinerator. The second floor of the office building is lit. I wonder if Suito Kusanagi is still there.

“When did Jinroh die?” I suddenly come up with the question.

“About a week ago.” Sasakura answers.

I was assigned to work in this base about three days ago.

My hand is searching inside my pocket for a cigarette. I am having a strangely uneasy feeling.

“Why did he die?” I ask.

The footsteps of the two of us.

We reach the courtyard, where it is brighter.

Sasakura does not answer.

I look up at the starlit sky just once.

“Then, good night.” Sasakura says.

“Good night.” I reply as well.

It is too dim for me to see his facial expression. Sasakura is walking toward the hangar. I wonder if he has a place to sleep there. He was also there last night.

When I get back to my room, the light is turned off. I turn on a small lamp on the desk. At the time, I am just reminded of the fact that I have forgotten to take back my flight suit from Kusumi. I make a slight sigh.

Tokino is already in the bed. He twitches just once. I take off the shirt and get into the bottom of the bunk bed. I have yet to get accustomed to the smell of the bed.

Then, I think about the two holes on the cowling.

The one who punched the holes would have been dead by now. He plunged into the water, while spitting fire. The other pilot who went down with a splash like a waterwheel of an excursion ship might have survived the crash. It seems that I, who shot down both of them, have just achieved the feat on the first day of the new assignment in this airbase, was bought a drink by the senior pilot, and was introduced to a new woman.

Dying and continuing to survive.

Which makes me happier? I wonder.

Hey, which one ...

The owl on Fuko’s chest comes up in my mind.

Why did Jinroh die?

Thinking about it creates nothing.

Probably ...

However.

Yes, the aircraft has been kept intact, without a scratch.

At least, it has been under the condition, even under which it has managed to be repaired within a week. It means that the aircraft did not crash. He was not shot down.

Then, for what reason did he die ...?

I wonder if he gave Fuko his flight suit.

He should have left such a thing for her.

A bed is boxy as well as a car is.

A coffin is boxy, too.

I do not like a boxy vehicle.

Episode 2: Canopy

What little blood he had left trickled thinly down his wrist. He ordered Omba to look away, and, sobbing, Omba obeyed him. The Laughing Man's last act, before turning his face to the bloodstained ground, was to pull off his mask.

This excerpt is from *The Laughing Man*, a short story included in *Nine Stories* (written by J. D. Salinger)

-1-

We have made the sortie five times over the span of two weeks. It probably is more frequent than average. Still, we have not encountered an enemy aircraft. This probability is very typical.

I have once chased away an enemy's spy plane flying far higher than I was. I could not think that the fuel was plenty enough to get me within the shooting range. As soon as the spy plane noticed me, it rapidly turned around and got away. I still do not understand why it did so. Maybe, it might have misunderstood my aircraft as the latest model with innovative weapons of some sort.

Yesterday, I had to turn back in the middle because of the oil leakage. Additionally, I let the wheel of the landing gear drop into a ditch beside the runway. I was close to snapping the landing gear. I did not see the ditch at all because the weeds were overgrowing there and no one had told me about it. Of course, I did not really make any excuse. Besides, no one even made any sarcastic remark about it to me.

According to the original plan, I was going to make a sortie with two other aircrafts today. However, since the repair work for the oil leakage is not finished, I have a senior pilot named Shinoda take my place as the substitute. In other words, only I alone have to wait on the ground, without flying in the sky.

Just waiting on the ground. Just looking up into the sky at the others flying. I suppose I cannot easily explain how it feels. Loneliness, vexation, or emptiness? Is it resentment, disconsolation, or anxiety. None of them feels right, probably. Drowsiness might barely be close to the feeling. My thoughts become vague and the feeling of my being alive is getting farther away from me. It is difficult for me to

believe that I am a human. For example, the weed whose head has been cut by a stick swung by a kid might have a similar feeling to mine. In short, I can surely say that it is the worst-case scenario of the condition. That is what I think.

I walk on the edge of the runway, and then I sit down in the shade of a tree near a runway lighting system. I stretch my legs forward on the ground and am leaning against a tree trunk. If the place were under the sunny sky, I might have looked like a mudguard for an entrance threshold that was being dried after being washed. I mean, I am dangling and being stretched moderately to a certain extent.

A bee is flying near me, and I am observing it. At first, I start doing so because I have come to think that it may be a good way of training. Recently, I occasionally find myself following small, moving objects. As long as it does not go too far away, I never lose them. After it gets out of sight, I gaze for a while into the air in which nothing is flying. Even though my mind is murky, both of my eyes want to focus on something. My eyes seem to know the role, and what to do.

There is almost no wind. Even small weeds do not move.

Many unusual things can be seen at the ground level.

Although there is nothing in the sky, why do so many things gather here? Have they fallen off from the sky?

Short grass is sensitive to the transition of seasons. The color has already become light brown. I do not know how the winter goes here. I wonder if it will snow. I want to see the moment when the snowflakes fall from the sky and collide with the ground. I wonder if they bounce off the ground.

I hear the rapping sound. It comes from the direction of the hangar. The motor sound of a compressor can also be heard intermittently. It is as if musicians are forming a rock band.

When I went to the hangar to check out what was going on a moment ago, the engine was still on the fuselage of the aircraft. Sasakura shook his head, saying, he was not sure of the reason why the oil was leaking. It was not that he was in a bad mood or getting into a trouble. He was looking rather joyful like a tagger of a hide-and-seek game, so I felt he would soon find and seek the hidden problem. After that, I walked out of the hangar and to this place directly.

I am smoking a cigarette.

Only by observing the flow of the smoke, I can understand the direction of the wind. That is how nearly windless and how fine the weather is. Bombers can drop bombs even from the outer space.

The figure of a person moves inside the shutter of the hangar. The one wearing a green uniform, who is talking with Sasakura in his white jumpsuit, is Suito Kusanagi. I can tell that she is looking at me. I do not have any confidence in my arm strength, but I have never met anyone who has better eyesight than I do. I am almost lying on the ground. In addition, I am in the shade of a tree. Probably, she cannot see my figure.

Kusanagi starts walking from the hangar toward me. Since the distance between us is still several hundreds meters, she would need three or four minutes to get here at the normal pace. I tend to do such a quick calculation in my head, and I can say that it is one of my occupational disorders. I take a glance at my wristwatch. I am on lunch break.

I am thinking about what to do. Shall I secretly hide myself in a forest behind me before it is too late? Or, shall I get up and go to the hangar to welcome her?

Whichever action I take might be okay. While I am thinking so, Kusanagi is getting close enough to me to find me. I am still not sure what to do about it. I lower the peak of my cap to wear it deeper to hide my face. I have decided to pretend that I am sleeping. I myself am admitting that it is a good idea because of its being potentially harmless to anyone. Now is the lunch break. I may be able to get away with this situation by letting her pass by me.

I am lying still, while seeing from below the peak of my cap. I see Kusanagi approaching. I do not see her entire body. What I can only see are her legs. She is wearing smaller shoes than expected.

“Kannami.” She calls my name, while standing in front of me.

I raise the peak of my cap with one hand, and squint to make a face as if I am being blinded by the light. The distance between my toes and her is about one meter. She is looking down at me from the position.

I get my upper body up and shift my lower back to the rear to sit straight.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Stand up, if you have a will to talk with me.”

I am on lunch break. I come close to saying so. I actually used to do so without any hesitation, when I belonged to the previous airbase. However, I stand up without words, dust my pants several times, and salute to her. I think it is a masterpiece of salute that incorporates the sluggishness that can barely get away from receiving the negative remarks.

“It appears that the oil leakage is caused by doing too much on the first day ...” With her fingers on the frame of her glasses, Kusanagi approaches me. She gets inside the shade of a tree as well.

“Is that what Mr. Sasakura told you?” I ask.

“I heard your aircraft was modified to breathe automatically.” She occupies the spot I have been at, and leans against the tree trunk.

“Yes ...” I nod. “Can it be that only mine is modified?”

“I suppose so. Sasakura said he wants to have all other aircrafts modified as well. However, until the reason for the oil leakage is found, I cannot grant a permission to do so.”

“I am being used as a guinea pig, I suppose.” I snigger.

“Do you think you need the modification?”

“Someone needs that.”

“Do you think it is worth applying the modification?”

“What do you mean by ‘worth’?”

“I will give judgment on that. What is your personal opinion?”

“Honestly, it was the first time for me to experience such a direct control response.”

“Even so, it will not be good if there are problems with its durability.” Kusanagi does not change her facial expression. “Or, did you overdo something in a particular way?”

“No, nothing in particular.”

“Did a bullet hit any part of the aircraft?”

“Never.”

“But I heard that two bullets hit the cowling, though.”

“Considering their angles of incident, neither of them could reach the interior of the engine, I think.” I reply. I am almost certain about that.

“Okay ...” Kusanagi looks downward. Then, she notices the cigarette butt I have dumped. She points the toe of her shoe toward the litter. “Pick it up before you leave here. Smoking is not allowed on and near runways, as you probably know.”

“I apologize.”

Kusanagi has her back off the tree trunk and is about to go back to the hangar.

“Ma’am ...” I find myself stopping her.

“Yes?” She stops and slowly looks back.

“About a person who had piloted my current aircraft before I am assigned to the current post ...”

“Is there any problem?”

“May I ask?”

“About what?”

“Well.” I shrug. “About his name, or his character.”

“Jinro Kurita.” Kusanagi answers immediately. “He came here seven months ago. He made sorties 63 times in total. I admit that he had the skill.”

“Where did he go?” I ask.

“It’s a privacy matter.” Kusanagi raises her chin slightly.

“Why did he leave here?”

“Like I just said, it is the matter of privacy.”

“My transfer from the previous post to the current base was really urgent. I guess it was probably because this base needed a personnel. Did he quit suddenly?”

“That’s right.” Kusanagi nods.

“What was the reason?”

“What reason? The reason of what?”

“Well, I mean, the reason why he quit so suddenly.”

“Why are you interested in it?” Kusanagi counters by asking me back.

“Did he die?” I ask.

“If you think that way, then it makes no difference in the situation.” She answers without changing her expression. “To be, or not to be. They are the only two conditions which any humans can be in.”

“Actually ... When a pilot succeeds the role from the predecessor, and continues to use the same aircraft, he usually communicates with the predecessor. The successor has to listen to the predecessor. Of course, it is only when the predecessor is still alive, that is.”

“That aircraft is still new. I have decided that there is no need for talking to him. Do you have any problem with that?”

“No, not at all.” I shake my head. “Fortunately.”

“There is no luck or fortune involved. It is the result of careful considerations.”

“That aircraft is one of the best models I have ever piloted to this day.”

“Anything else?” Kusanagi squints.

“Ma’am, are you a Kildren?” I ask.

Kusanagi’s eyes are widened.

Silence continues for a few seconds.

She opens her mouth a little and slowly exhales. I wait to hear what words are given off from it. Unfortunately, the atmosphere is not viscous enough to form words. I notice that she is trying to control her mental state. I can tell so, because she is smiling to hide the change of her mien. She is attempting to squint, to recover her original expression.

“Anything else?” It is the same vocal tone as the earlier one. I am impressed with the strength of her mind.

“No.” I salute quickly. This time, it really is to show my respect. Then, I look downward to see her feet. I wonder what the size of her shoes are.

I see.

She is also ...

At the moment, I see the back of a little girl.

Kusanagi is showing her back toward me, and is walking away. The back of her uniform has two creases and I am gazing into them for a while. It is a green uniform. On its shoulders, it has small metallic stars. They occasionally reflect light briefly.

On the runway and beyond, the dry air drifts with the gentleness of a dead person's face. Even a bird is not flying. The leaves of the trees are still barely clinging to the branches. The resistance is the proof of living, even if such acts end up going down the drain repeatedly for nothing.

The only way to believe you are living is to show the resistance to something.

I pick up the cigarette butt and hold it in my hand. Kusanagi is now far away. I did not smell any uncomfortable artificial odor. I start walking toward the direction opposite to the hangar.

At a glance, Suito Kusanagi looks like a woman in her late 20s. She does not seem to be wearing makeup. Her hair is short. Moreover, her glasses are old-fashioned. Obviously, she is making efforts to make herself look older. She is pushing herself hard to be something else. For whom does she make such efforts? In this airbase, there are only around a dozen personnel, including us (the pilots), mechanic crews, other staffs, and office workers.

We, pilots, are even younger than other types of personnel. Compared to us, Kusanagi might be more composed and settled down to a certain extent. But, once we get out of the base, we can see so few young people. Very rare. Only by being young, they are standing out. That is the case for Kusanagi as well. She is special enough.

If we go to a downtown, we might be able to hide ourselves in the cloak of anonymity. But it would be impossible for us to hide ourselves, at least in such a rural area. We can do nothing if we are regarded as Kildren only by the fact that we

are young. Then, people would easily be able to imagine what jobs we are engaged in. A military corporation, or an almost illegal religious corporation. The place where Tokino took me to last night was a religious corporation. I am sure of that. That is the way of this definite world.

I wonder since when things have been going on like this.

Probably, after the second great war ... Since that experiment was initiated ... Since then ...

I guess, at first, no one could expect that.

However ...

I am not sure whether it was really the case.

Correct information probably does not remain anymore.

The more the information is valid, the sooner it vanishes.

As my shoelace is loosened, I throw away the cigarette butt, crouches down, and tie the lace. A long time ago, when I was really young, I tied my shoelace by myself for the first time. Before that, I always had it tied by my mother, or by my elder sister. I thought it was naturally the way it was. However, after I entered the school, I had to live my life alone. It is difficult for me to tie my shoelace because my very feet are inserted into the shoes. The same is true for the buttons of my shirts. If the person wearing the shirt were not me, then it would have been very easy. But, if I myself am wearing it, then it becomes difficult all of a sudden.

We can easily punch somebody else's faces, but each person cannot do so to his own face.

Once anything become our properties, we cannot interfere with them.

We cannot destroy anything of our own.

I cannot destroy myself.

Even though I can destroy others.

I cannot destroy myself.

Therefore, each time I tie my shoelace, I am reminded of that.

My mother and my elder sister are already gone. They had passed away.

I do not have a family member anymore.

So.

I have to tie my shoelace by myself.

The size of my shoes will not change forever.

-2-

After walking for about one hour, I have gotten back to my room and am taking a shower. The hot water does not flow too well. Then, when I go to the hangar to check the status, I find Sasakura sleeping on his back on a cart. I am tempted to pull the cart all over the place to give him a ride, but we are not that closely acquainted to each other enough to do such a thing. Even though the cowling of my aircraft has been taken off, other parts are where they should be. I feel relieved a little.

“Is it fixed?” I get closer to the cart, and ask.

Sasakura opens one of his eyes, looks at me, and nods without words.

“What’s the cause?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

“Thank you.”

I lower my head to walk under the shutter, and get outside.

Because, I hear engine sound. I look up and find three aircrafts coming back. They are flying to the leeward to prepare for the landing.

I notice that all of them are safe. So, I have decided to go to the downtown. It is still within our duty hours, but it is obvious that we do not have the work for the rest of the day. Even though I think there is no problem with my leaving earlier, But just in case, I go back to the inside of the hangar to call Kusanagi’s office with the intercom on the wall near the shutter.

“This is Kannami. I will go out to eat. May I?”

“You should be back early, because you are flying in the morning tomorrow.”

“Roger.”

Only such a short exchange of information is enough. I look back again and find

Sasakura still sleeping on the cart.

“I will borrow your scooter.” I say to him loudly.

Even though there is no reply, he should have heard it. This is the third time I borrow his scooter. He hardly rides on it, so he wants to sell it to me at a reasonable price. I have heard that he restored what was given up by someone and dumped as a scrap. I guess it no longer fascinates him because it already works properly.

With the small scooter, I’m heading for the meat pie and coffee at the drive-in diner.

The weather is fine. I climb to a bank and cross an iron bridge. After that, the road stretches straight. I feel bad about the engine of the scooter not being able to get revved up any farther. This makes me feel as if I am flying more than an airplane does.

Even though I’m wearing goggles, my face feels the wind and my body is getting cooled down. I slow down a little in the middle. Anyway, I do appreciate the time in which I do not have to think about anything like now. It is worth riding the scooter just for the reason.

Probably because it is still in the early hours, only two vehicles are parked in the parking lot of the drive-in diner. A small sedan and a truck. Both of them might belong to the employees. I park the scooter near the entrance, climb up the brick steps, and enter the diner. The elder master glances at me. He should remember me by now. When I sit at the counter, he asks me, “Coffee, and?” I reply, “Meat pie.” At the table on the road side of the diner, an elderly couple is sitting across the table, facing each other. There is no trace of a waitress. No other customers. No music. I guess they are trying to save the electricity bill.

I light my cigarette and look at the road through the window.

“A bit early, eh?” The master says behind me.

I look back halfway. There is a coffee cup and a meat pie on a saucer. For a moment, I feel the aroma of the coffee.

“Shall I call?” The master opens his mouth again.

“What? Who?” I twist my head to see him. I get what he is trying to say

immediately. “Ah, no ... After I eat it, I will come back soon.”

“How’s your buddy?” The master makes wrinkles on his face and smiles. He seems to be asking about Tokino.

“He might come a little later.” I reply. “I’m not sure. I mean, we haven’t flied together today.”

Tokino’s motorbike should be faster than the scooter by at least threefold.

“You guys are coming here ... after you give the targets good shots, right?” The master asks. He probably means “after we shoot down enemy aircrafts”.

“I don’t know ...” I lean my head sideways. I do not believe we have such a rule.

I wonder if it is the case for Tokino. Perhaps, he has decided to make it the rule. I can understand if he goes to the mansion where Kusumi and other girls are waiting, rather than he comes here.

One vehicle has just entered the parking lot and stopped. After a short while, a woman is entering the diner. I think I might know her. She is the waitress working here. I do not know her name. She looks about 35 years old, according to my personal estimation, though.

“Hello, Mr. Kannami.” She greets me. I wonder when she learned my name.

She goes into the back of the diner. I think it is a good time for me to know her name, and ask the master about it.

“That girl’s Yuri.” The master tells me the name. “She was close to Mr. Kurita, by the way.”

“Oh ...” I am a little surprised. She might be too mature to be called a ‘girl’. Her age can be around that of my mother.

“So was Fuko, right?” I ask. I remember Fuko was worried about Jinro Kurita.

“But, you know, that’s a completely different story.”

I do not understand how different they are, but I nod diplomatically. Maybe, professional and amateur. Or, business and volunteer. If not, one is physical and the other is mental? I come up with various ideas, but say nothing.

I have eaten a half of the pie. It is delicious as usual.

However, without barely drinking even a few sips of coffee, I have to get out of the diner in haste.

-3-

I hear engine sound. It is at an unfamiliar wavelength.

I go outside the diner, and look up at the sky.

It is from the direction of the mountains.

Clouds are proudly hovering at the high altitude of the clear sky.

I see them.

But, they are flying very high.

I rush into the diner and put a coin into the slot of a pay phone. I push the number of Kusanagi's office.

One call.

"This is Kusanagi."

"Greetings. This is Kannami."

"Where are you now?"

"Drive-in diner."

"Oh ..." She clucks her tongue. "Sorry, I'm busy ... I'm hanging up."

"Several enemy aircrafts are heading toward the airbase. Probably, three Fortunes."

"Two." Kusanagi corrects.

"No, three."

"Can you see them? Then, how long will it take?"

"No more than five minutes."

"So, we have enough breathing room. But you cannot come back, right?"

"How do you deal with my aircraft?"

"There is no spare pilot but me."

“Please.”

The phone is hung up.

“What are they doing?!” I shout in a low voice and put the receiver back on the phone.

Of course, the blame is against the ones in charge, who have allowed enemy planes to infiltrate this deep into the territory. But, whoever is responsible might already be dead. In our field, the person whom we want to get angry at have often been dead already. It is meaningless for them to regret in heaven.

I get out of the diner again.

The master and Yuri are looking up at the sky as well. They are now almost exactly above us. When you see bombers exactly straight up right above you, then you can assume that you are safe. The distance between this place and the airbase is about 20 kilometers. They need no more than three minutes. Maybe, it would take approximately one minute until they start dropping bombs. They should already be getting prepared for the bombing, while opening the bomb bay doors. I guess many holes would be punched on the runway. I just hope the bomb will not hit the buildings, especially the hangar ...

“They fly so high.” The master utters, while putting his hand above his forehead.

“Didn’t they once fly over at lower altitude before?” Yuri says. “You know, I thought they were planning to land on this road. I was so scared.”

“If they flew low, we would have been able to intercept them.” I say. “It is not easy for them to get this far.”

“They sometimes come here desperately, right?” The master speaks. “It often happened in the past.”

“Not anymore.” I smile.

Such aircrafts are rare nowadays. Desperate acts end up becoming wastes. Pilots are cooler than that, I think. To prove it, I get back inside the diner, eat up the rest of the meat pie, and drink up the coffee. The master is viewing the sky outside. I pay the money to Yuri, who has come back inside.

“Are you going back?” Yuri asks.

“Yeah, it might be the time.”

“Be careful.”

“About what?” I look at Yuri’s face.

Pursing her lips, she looks a bit angry. She might be really angry, because she says nothing.

I go outside.

“I haven’t heard the sound yet.” The master, sitting on the brick step, says. The images of the enemies cannot be seen because they have already fled past the forest.

“Another 15 seconds.” Saying so, I walk to the scooter.

When I start the engine and get onto the road, I hear a low explosion sound echoing around the area. It is not that loud. As loud as the cracks at a fireworks festival. If the time now were at night, I would have been able to see the light much sooner.

I start riding the scooter to the airbase.

I need at least 30 minutes with the scooter. Everything would be gotten over with by the time I get there. The timing will not be too bad, I think.

After I have ridden the scooter for about 10 minutes, a big sedan approaches from behind at a very high speed. It passes by my scooter and it slams on the brakes. Its tires screech. It skids diagonally, and stops. A white arm is stretched from the window of the passenger seat, and pink hair appears. Then, a girl’s face looks at me.

“Yuichi Kannami!” With the husky voice, Fuko shouts my full name. How has she managed to remember my name? I am impressed.

I approach the passenger seat of the sedan, while riding the scooter. Kusumi on the driver’s seat is looking at me behind Fuko.

“What are you doing here?” Fuko asks. “Are they okay? We see a few huge aircrafts flying over.”

“The base has already been bombed.” I tell her. “Something might burn or

explode. The place near the base is dangerous. You shouldn't go there in a hurry."

"How's Tokino?" Kusumi on the driver's seat asks.

"I'm not sure ..."

"Hey, why don't you get in this car?" Fuko suggests.

"No, I cannot leave this vehicle. I am borrowing this from someone."

The sedan sinks the rear end once, starts running, and leaves the location. I resume riding the scooter slowly.

"Oh, yes." I am recalling something.

I have to get my flight suit back from Kusumi ...

I'm worried that the iron bridge might be destroyed, but it is still there and we can cross it safely. Bombs do not seem to have been dropped near the bridge. If the bridge were shattered, I would not be able to locate where a backup bridge might be in the upper reaches of the river. I might not be able to come back to the base without swimming or finding a ship or something. Almost all the supplies to the base are brought with ships. So, the port must be the prime target of the bombing. But no matter how old and miserable-looking the bridge is, it is the lifeline for humans. It seems that the enemy side has not gathered enough information, for they have not targeted this bridge. But, I admit that I feel relieved, because I do not want to swim.

While getting down from the upper part of the bank, I see the smoke from the airbase rising.

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There is almost no wind. But judging from the figures of the clouds I am looking up at, gales are blowing in the sky. In short, the calculation of the trajectory for dropping bombs had to be difficult. Unless it had the opportunity to calibrate the bombsight, errors by several hundred meters should occur. At a glance, I am relieved that buildings are not burning down. But, streaks of smoke are rising here and there. The black smoke rising from the forest over the runway seems to be the most furious. It is close to the area where I took a walk during the day. Although I threw a cigarette away without permission, it is now hardly possible for anyone to

find that out.

I reach the front of the gate with the scooter. Kusumi and Fuko are standing there.

“You are late and late, Kannami?” Fuko says. She is wearing everyday clothes such as a sweater and jeans, which make her look several times more attractive than she was on the previous day.

“Hey, do you think we are allowed to enter the premises?” Kusumi is wearing a jacket and a denim skirt. Her hair is tied back.

No one else seems to be around here. Have they evacuated to some other places? I see what is beyond the road before us. At about 10 meters away from the gate, their sedan has run onto the pavement and is leaning painfully.

The three of us are entering the premises. I am walking while pushing the scooter. The office seems to be empty. We turn to the direction for the runway and see several people moving with fire extinguishers. In front of the hangar, Sasakura in a jumpsuit is standing.

An engine sound is approaching. Then, an aircraft is executing a low pass over the runway. Of course, it is Sanka Mark B. I cannot recognize whose aircraft it is, because it is quickly heading for the forest and I can only see the silhouette of the backlit figure.

“Naofumi. It’s Naofumi.” Kusumi raises her hands and is waving them.

“Hey, how can you tell that?” Fuko asks.

I too want to know that, so I wait for Kusumi’s response. But she does not answer.

Sasakura notices me and runs toward us.

“Are you all right?” I ask him. “Have they all managed to take off safely?”

“Yeah, we barely made it.” Sasakura answers.

“As for me, you know, I have ended up evacuating your scooter.”

“Kannami’s aircraft is the hardest one to handle. It is now flying without the cowling. We didn’t have time to fill up the tank. It may run out of gas by now.”

“I heard Ms. Kusanagi would be on the aircraft. Is that right?”

“Yes.” Sasakura nods, and sees the girls behind me. “I advise you have them get out of here soon. Ms. Kusanagi will be angry after coming back.”

“Whom will she be angry at?”

“The one who has them come in.”

I look back and see the two who are wearing the serious expressions.

“Certainly, me.” I say, while seeing Sasakura.

“He says, ‘Certainly, me.’” Fuko whispers behind me. “Hey, what kingdom have you been the prince of?”

“Stop talking to him like that.” It is Kusumi’s voice. “Now, we should go back. We already know they are safe. By the way, Kannami.”

I look back.

“Tell Tokino that we have come here.”

“Okay.”

“Bye-bye.” Fuko smiles.

“Oh, I am just reminded of something.” I remember something, and look at Kusumi.

“What?” She leans her head sideways.

“My flight suit.”

“Uh, oh, ah ..., yeah, right.” Kusumi smiles. “I will bring it next time. Maybe.”

“He says, ‘Certainly, mee.’ ...” Fuko says so again.

“Later.” Kusumi opens her palm.

Then, they are going back. Fuko looks back at me in the middle and waves her hand. Since it is a white and delicate arm, it might snap on a poor runway, I imagine such a strange thing. Sanka’s only shortcoming is its vulnerability of the landing gear. It is a type of aircraft that suits particular kinds of runways.

“Kannami, I have something to show you.” Sasakura says.

He is entering the hangar, followed by me without words. There is a stairway beside a giant toolbox by a wall. I wonder if it is a stairway that leads down to a pit. But it is deeper than expected. Probably the concrete of the hangar floor must be made thicker than usual in order to shelter the pit from bombardment. For that reason, the stairway going downward is longer than usual for the depth of one floor. There seem to be several storage rooms in the basement. Steel doors are lined up on both sides of the dark corridor. After passing them by, we reach a rather spacious area lit by florescent lights. A bed is placed at a corner surrounded by cold concrete walls. Three sturdy wooden desks are lined up in the form of the letter “L”. It is obvious that Sasakura lives here.

“Here.” Sasakura points at a thing on the desk.

I do not know what it is. Small parts are attached to a cylinder-shaped object that is as small as a pineapple can. Some pipes are protruding from it to different directions and are converging into the upper part. I also see electric cords. Sasakura is gingerly lifting the object with both of his hands to show its bottom side to me. It looks to be a structure to transfer the rotation to outside with its flexible joint. Or, conversely speaking, it might be a structure to receive the torque. I understand it is an engine-related or compressor-related something.

“What is this?” I utter the statement that comes out naturally.

“This part receives the torque of the camshaft, and this gives the pressure to the carburetor.” Sasakura explains.

“Air intake charger?”

“Doing it by a motor has the limitation. It works well at the starting time. But, at the end, the more and the faster the motor rotates, the weaker the motor gets.”

“If you were to make efforts like this, wouldn’t it be better for you to bore cylinders to increase the internal diameters? Even though the bores getting larger is not welcome, you can still resort to increasing the number of cylinders ...”

“I don’t want to make it more powerful.” Sasakura grins. “The whole point of this idea completely differs in that sense.”

“How does it differ?”

“It makes you fly higher than before.”

“It can’t be.” As I am saying so, I am rendered slightly shocked.

To gain the altitude, the system that allows to accept thin air is indispensable. Humans would not complain, as long as they are supported with oxygen masks. Pilots would be provided with heaters because it is a little cold up there. That is enough for luxury. As for the case of engines, the fuel mixture ratio needs to be changed. Or, the time of ignition needs to be changed. If I want to go to the extreme, I can make it apply more pressure on the intake air. It means, tricking the engine by telling it, “You are on the ground. Do not think you are flying.” Such a trick can work for a large aircraft like a bomber. The bomber crew would include a flight mechanic along with the pilot, and it has the luxury of slowly ascending to the higher altitude while taking time. But, fighter aircrafts do not get to fly in such a leisurely way. It has to rapidly gain the altitude by 1,000 meters within tens of seconds. And, just as fast going down. Overcoming the rapid change of atmospheric pressure in such situations is the most important theme regarding aircraft engines. In order for fighter aircrafts to reach the altitude of bombers in operation, it needs to take off after adjusting the engine to the atmospheric pressure of the high altitude in advance. In this case of the high-altitude adjustment, its engine power is drastically lessened. In the extreme case of things going bad, we can only expect 60 percent of its usual performance. Also, if the engine is not tuned for the higher altitude, and the enemy aircrafts appear suddenly, the fighter aircraft cannot just gain the altitude and approach the targets. The engine would stall easily. To put it another way, if the altitude of operation exceeds a certain level, propellers and wings have to be all replaced. That is the accepted convention. This is based on a logic that is similar to the reason why the general figures of submarines for the purpose of operation under the water and the typical shapes of airplanes that are designed for flying in the sky are different.

I cannot judge how realistic the mechanism Sasakura experimentally has made is. His method, in which the power of the structure to support the intake air compression is directly generated by the rotation torque of the engine, sounds smart to me. But, I guess the problem lies in the durability of the turbine. The materials have to be able to endure severe conditions, and they have to be processed precisely. For example, turbochargers, the turbines of which are driven by pressure of the exhaust gas, work well for large-sized engines. However, the reality is that, for small-sized engines of fighter aircrafts, turbochargers are useless because they

break down so frequently. The fuel consumption can be slightly less and the power can be increased by 30 percent. But, with the addition of the vulnerable mechanism, the overall weight of the aircraft will be increased and the maintainability will be decreased. There are just too many sacrifices this way. Machines such as airplanes cannot fly if it has just one defect. If it cannot fly, then all parts become equivalent to pieces of scrap iron. There would be no value to them. So, it is natural for us to aim for mechanical structures that are as simple as possible.

“What do you think?” Sasakura asks. His eyes look joyful.

“I have no idea.” I reply honestly.

“I think it is worth trying.”

“Umm ... Probably, you’re right. I gotta at least try.”

“May I put this into your aircraft?”

“What?” I look at his face. Then, I see his point. “But, the official permission is required, correct?”

“You must remember the variable valve limiter that I installed the other day. I secretly did that.” Sasakura grins.

“You did that without permission?”

“I still told you about that. I felt I had to at least do that to you.”

“Of course you have to do that.” I find myself burst into laughter. “If you do such a thing as you like, a pilot cannot stand that. That’s like conducting experiments on human subjects.”

“But as for this, we cannot even do an easy experiment on the ground.”

“I will fly the aircraft with the modification, if you get permission from Ms. Kusanagi and if you let me carry a parachute on my back. Still, I’m not quite crazy about willing to do so. It won’t explode, will it?”

“Probably.” Sasakura nods. “But it is impossible for me to get a permission from Ms. Kusanagi. If I can, I don’t hide it in such a place.”

“I think she will understand it if you explain it to her properly. Now might be the chance, considering the fact that we were bombed today.”

“I don’t think so.” Sasakura shakes his head, and sits down on the bed with authority. The bed springs make creaky noise. “She will definitely say she needs a permission from the headquarters. She always does so.”

“If so, why don’t you wait for the permission from the headquarters?”

“It takes no less than two months.”

“Why?”

“My guess is that it has to do with matters pertaining to patents or something like that.”

“Oh ...” I nod.

“Moreover, there is almost no chance of getting the permission granted.”

“How pessimistic of you.”

“I need to prepare many and many pages of bothersome documents. Before that, I have to make a drawing for the design.”

“What? Haven’t you made a drawing yet?”

“I have to make an analysis report, and attach graphs of experimental data. In addition, I need to ask a big-shot professor of a certain university to check the contents and to grant me a seal of approval. With only one element lacking in the process, no permission will be granted. I cannot help but regard the system as a bureaucratic nuisance. I am convinced that everyone is trying to annoy me on purpose.”

“Why does the system as the company adopt such a bothersome system?”

“I think they do so in order to avoid consuming budget, labor, and facilities on wasteful researches and development.”

“Yours isn’t a waste, you think?” I dare to ask. I look at Sasakura while smirking. “I guess, in fact, you have either the analysis report or the experimental data, don’t you?”

“Nothing at all.”

“Then, what makes yours any different? Where is the element of conviction?”

“I made it.” Sasakura states, while glaring at me. “It’s the most distinguished point

of my craft.”

“Compared to what?”

“Compared to the case in which another person makes it.”

“In short, you are saying that you are a special person.”

“Of course, I am special.”

“Is it from the objective viewpoint?”

“If I tell you that I am saying this from the subjective viewpoint, then that makes me a fool. Do you think that I can say so?”

“Are you a genius?” I ask.

“Yes.”

For a few seconds, Sasakura keeps on glaring at me. After that, he looks down at the floor. Then he puts his both hands on the back of his head and lie down on the bed like the start of a backstroke swimmer. He is doing so in his dirty jumpsuit. I think I would not do it like that. But if he is a genius, then he can do that, I suppose.

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The three aircrafts have returned to the airbase soon. My dear precious aircraft, whose engine is exposed without the cowling, is taxiing in front of the hangar. I am meeting and welcoming it. I think I should thank her. Kusanagi, who is getting out from the canopy onto the wing, is not even wearing a helmet. She is just wearing a flight suit over the uniform, and sunglasses on her face.

“Good condition.” Kusanagi comments, after approaching me without smiling at all.

“About the engine?” I ask.

She nods.

“It means Mr. Sasakura is a good mechanic.”

“The automatic breathing is for beginners, though.”

“Right ...” I nod. “But I can focus on other issues, thanks to that.”

I look back and find Sasakura looking at us from the shade of the hangar shutter. He is too far away from us to hear our conversation.

“Tokino is late.” Kusanagi murmurs while walking.

“He has not come back yet.” I answer while looking up at the sky.

The other two have already landed on the runway. The hangar for the two is located opposite to the office building across the runway. Besides, there are several backup hangars for emergency situations. They are used for hiding malfunctioned aircrafts.

“He must have landed somewhere else.” She clucks her tongue, while looking at her wristwatch.

An aircraft as small as Sanka can easily land on a straight, smooth road. Tokino is probably loitering around somewhere.

“Mr. Sasakura seems to be developing a new device.” I have just decided to talk to her about it.

“What kind?”

“Umm ..., it’s a turbocharger of some sort.” The reason for my mentioning this has to do with my expecting that she might have just decided to respect Sasakura’s craftspersonship after she has experienced the effectiveness of the automatic breathing system. Sasakura talked about this with me a moment ago to get me to do this. I also feel like I want to help him at least in this way.

“Again ...” Kusanagi sighs slightly.

“I suppose it might be worth trying.”

“We have no time for that.” Kusanagi replies after glancing at me.

Our conversation is over. After that, we are walking without words. While walking, Kusanagi takes off her gloves. I am walking behind her diagonally while maintaining a certain distance like a wingmate. Her legs protruding from her skirt are straight and look smooth. I am realizing that she is not an adult, after all. Strictly speaking, getting on an airplane in a skirt like she has just done violates the regulation. I wonder if such a strange regulation was formulated by males or females. Anyway, I know for sure that it was introduced by adults. Adhering to such

trivial things is the characteristic, privilege, and responsibility of adults.

“Is there anything that you want to talk to me about?” After reaching the hangar, Kusanagi stops in front of Sasakura, and asks him.

“Huh?” Sasakura widens his eyes. He glances at me only for a moment. “No, nothing in particular ... I don’t have a special topic of discussion ... Umm, was the oil pressure okay?”

“Yeah.” Kusanagi nods. “As of now, the pressure has not been lowered. However, I am not sure yet because I did not shake it so much. If it is deemed okay after two more flights, I want you to do the same thing to the other three aircrafts as well.”

“What?” Sasakura asks. “Err, ma’am, about what?”

“Modifying the breathing mechanism.”

“Oh ..., yes ma’am.” Sasakura smiles, and then he brings a blush to his face.

How pure-minded this genius is. I am observing the two, while lighting a cigarette a little far away from them.

Kusanagi walks by Sasakura, and grabs the receiver of the intercom hanging on a wall. She faces the inner part of the hangar and stands with her shoulder leaning on the wall. She is standing tilted.

“This is Kusanagi ... Yes, connect to the manager.” While saying so, she looks back at us once. She seems to be smiling, although it might be my imagination. Sasakura is walking toward me, as if he wants to stay away from Kusanagi. “Yes ..., anyway, get the manager on the line and tell him that I am safe after the flight. What? I do not care about the meeting. Just do that ... Yes, tell him ...” She shuts her mouth again. She looks downward as if she is staring at her feet. Then, she looks back at us again. “Hey, don’t you have a cigarette?”

I take out a box of cigarette from my chest pocket, and walk toward Kusanagi.

“No smoking allowed in hangar.” While I say so, I shake the box. She takes one of the cigarettes sticking out of the box, and holds it in her mouth. I light it for her.

“Thanks.” She casts an upward glance at me only for a moment.

I get back to the place where Sasakura is standing. For some reason, I feel it is a

place like a spectator's seat.

“It's me. That's right. Yes ..., correct ...” Kusanagi starts speaking over the phone. I and Sasakura take a few steps away from her. Still, her voice is clearly audible. “Right, that's what I'm saying ... Miraculously, though ... Well, the damage is not serious. Yes ..., however, that's just because the enemies made the mistake this time. Why was the warning late? What? That cannot be the reason. No, I cannot be satisfied with the explanation. What are you talking about? Oh ... I see. I will be there to storm in and then yell at them. So, who is in charge of that? Okay ...”

While sensing the wind blowing through the runway, I light my cigarette. I look back toward the hangar and see Kusanagi is standing while facing us. She is looking as if she is putting her hand on her face to bite her finger. No, in fact, she is just holding her cigarette. Sasakura and I walk toward the office building at a quick pace as if we want to get away from the location full of Kusanagi's loud voice as soon as possible. Maybe, that is in fact what we are actually trying to do.

The deep exhaust sound of a bulldozer is resonating. It seems to be starting the process of filling the holes on the runway.

In front of the office building, we see Yudagawa and Shinoda. At the time, they are coming back from the opposite hangar.

“Kannami, where did you go?” Yudagawa with gray hair asks.

“Umm, I was just going out ...”

“Ms. Kusanagi got mad at you, right?”

“Not really.” I answer, smiling.

The other one named Shinoda has just disappeared into the building first. He is so taciturn that I have never seen him talking.

We look around at the runway again, and then push the glass door to enter the lobby.

-6-

It seems that the blackout has been continuing for a while. The contents of the refrigerator are not cold enough, but we are drinking beer in the lounge. There are three of us; I, Sasakura, and Yudagawa. Shinoda drank the first glass of beer in one

gulp and quickly got out of here. Tokino has not come back yet.

Kusanagi is entering the lobby. I expect her to go upstairs, but she enters the lounge unexpectedly.

“Mr. Yudagawa, can you stand by at my desk upstairs?” She asks. “Perhaps, we might be getting an emergency call.”

“Okay, ma’am.” Yudagawa replies. “Only if I can eat and drink there, though.”

“Sure, of course.” Kusanagi nods. “I will go out for a little bit. Probably, I will come back in four to five hours.” She looks at her wristwatch. “Around 21:00, I suppose.”

“Go ahead, of course.” Yudagawa smiles. “You should take a rest and relax sometimes.”

“A task.” Kusanagi slowly pronounces the word. She looks at me. “Kannami, come with me.”

“What?” I rise to my feet. “Oh, you mean upstairs?”

“No, we are going out together, I mean ...” She slightly leans her head and starts walking. “In three minutes, at the front gate.”

“Oh, yes ...” I nod.

She might want me to become a chauffeur to drive her because she wants to go somewhere ... But, Kusanagi can drive by herself. Anyway, I rush back to my room and change into my uniform. I get out of the billet, and pass through the courtyard to go around to the gate, where a black sports car is waiting for me. Kusanagi is in the driver’s seat. I see the particular car for the first time. Apparently, she owns the car personally. I wonder where she usually parks it. I have never been to the vicinity around the opposite side of the office building since I was assigned here.

Once I get in the passenger’s seat, the car starts moving. It gets on the road through the gate and accelerates toward the bank. The engine sound is rather light and lyrical. A high-pitched tone of the cam sounds like the echo of a tuning fork. I wonder if it is a six-cylinder engine. Kusanagi is wearing the same clothes as earlier, with the sunglasses on.

“What task?” I ask.

“Well ..., you’re my bodyguard.”

“To where?”

“About 150 kilometers north from here.”

“The observatory? Or, the base next to it?” I inquire.

But, she does not answer, while seeing forward. The car gets on the bank and is gearing up. It is still increasing the speed. The iron bridge is approaching at an unbelievably high speed.

“I might not be a suitable person for your bodyguard.” I try to say so as if in murmuring.

Among the four pilots, I am the smallest of the frame. Probably, I am the lightest one. Maybe, I am as light as Kusanagi. Being a lightweight is an advantage as a pilot, but I think such a person is not so reliable on the ground. Honestly, I am not good at brawling. If I have what I can be at least a bit proud of, it is my escape velocity. In any situation, nothing can be more reliable than this factor. As for a fighter aircraft, I can engage in a dogfight while feeling safe, if its escape maneuver is sure-fire and secured.

We pass through the iron bridge in an instant. Entering the broader road, we are increasing the speed even more. We are going so fast that we might just be able to take off from the ground if we pull the stick to control the elevators.

Something is approaching us in the sky ahead of us. It is an airplane.

“Oh, that’s Tokino.” I first recognize it. Thanks to my good eyesight, I am quicker at identifying it.

“I knew he has loitered on his way.” Kusanagi also looks at it as she is positioning her head lower to get the better view angle. “You know the diner down the road, don’t you?”

“Yes. The drive-in, right?”

“Right ... The area has a straight road and little traffic.”

Is she saying that he landed on that area?

Tokino’s aircraft is passing by above us, while shaking its wings. He seems to be

recognizing that this car is Kusanagi's.

“But it is dangerous if a car rushes out of nowhere.”

“Of course, it is prohibited by the regulations.”

“He might be in an emergency situation.”

“Yes ... In order to drink coffee.”

Okay, I will try if I have a chance. I secretly think. But it would be miserable if I break the landing gear. Typical roads have quite a lot of uneven surfaces, more than I would expect. Also, there are jamming elements like manholes. The landing gears for Sanka are fragile, and the stroke of the suspension mechanism is shallow. Its small tires are not suitable for off-road taxiing.

I study the profile of Kusanagi, who is holding the steering wheel. She keeps looking straight ahead with a straight facial expression. If anything, she seems to be smiling. Anyway, I am relieved to know that Tokino is back safely. It is still before 16:00. It would take about two hours of one-way driving to the destination. I sit back in the seat and stretch my legs. The low engine sound is roaring behind us.

I am wondering if I should talk to her about something. Still, I cannot come up with proper words to start the conversation with. Asking her about her past is against the manners. On the other hand, asking her about her present might be considered the invasion of her privacy. For our conversation, is there any suitable topic having to do with our work? I come up with this and that, but any of them has already been talked about.

What kind of person was Jinro Kurita, my predecessor? How is he now? Is he alive or dead? If he is already dead, what was the cause of his death? And then, does it not have anything to do with me? Such questions have popped up one after another in my mind. But, none of them is realized into a verbally presented question.

Besides ...

Why do I want to know such things?

Is it just because I want to kill time ...?

Probably, that is what it is. That is what I think.

Jobs and women. Friends and life. Aircrafts and engines. Everything I do in my

life is to kill time.

Until I die, I have to somehow cope with it.

Those who cannot do that are going to give up and die.

Whether you are an adult or a child, that is probably the same.

That has got to be the same, I think.

Of course, it is my imagination, though ...

I was once asked why I get on a fighter aircraft.

At the time, I replied that I did so to kill time.

That is a long time ago.

The one who asked me the question was my boss.

He disliked me.

He was an adult, and belonged to the generation that did not experience a war.

The way that we, children, feel can never be understood by adults.

We cannot be understood.

The more they try to understand us, the farther away we get from them.

Because we dislike to be understood.

So, trying to understand us itself is the proof that they do not understand us.

To be sure, we fight to kill time.

Still ...

I feel that it might be the essence of our ways of living.

Yes, I only feel so.

Is it wrong?

The manual from ancient times says that we should find a purpose of life.

That is because we get bored if we cannot find it.

In short, to kill time, we find a purpose of life.

In the end, nothing has changed since ancient times.

For leisure, for work, and for studying, they are all the same, I think.

We know that well because we live at our own paces matter-of-factly.

I am still a child.

At times, my right hand kills humans.

Instead of that.

I would probably let someone's right hand kill me.

Until then.

In order to kill time.

I manage to continue to live.

As a child.

"Ms. Kusanagi, since when have you been assigned to the base?" I ask.

"Can you imagine how rude your question is?" She asks, as she keeps looking forward.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure what I mean ..." She smiles.

There is a joke: Do not ask a woman about her age. I have heard that before. I do not understand what is so funny about the joke, though.

We get on a highway on the way, which makes the engine sound slightly higher. Kusanagi says nothing. She seems to be enjoying driving. I do not dislike silence, either. I look sideways and enjoy viewing the scenery that is flowing from the front side to the back. The view instantly vanishes into the space behind, and that is different from what I experience in an aircraft. When cars ahead of us are approaching, my right hand instinctively moves. I am bewildered by that, and I myself feel it is funny. Kusanagi changes traffic lanes frequently and passes other cars one after another. Probably, her life to date must have been this way, I imagine.

We change the road from the highway to a toll road leading to a seashore resort. On our way, I see the sea to our left. Ahead of us, a peninsula is protruding into the sea. Blackish rocks are far below us. The side of the road opposite of the sea is a concrete-covered slope. The road is sloping upward leisurely.

We veer off to a path along the mountainside, and then turn to the left to a road that has a sign OFF LIMITS TO UNAUTHORIZED PERSONS. After driving another hundreds of meters into the deeper part, we have reached a gate. Two uniformed guards are standing there. It is the observatory of an affiliated company. Kusanagi shows the ID card, and drives the car into the gate.

The narrow road between cliffs on both sides continues for a while, and then we reach the higher ground. Two anti-aircraft cannons, camouflaged with green nets, are mounted in the holes bored in the ground. A long-wave antenna is connected to simple steel towers. Below the antenna, a wooden building like a cabin is standing solely. It is thickly painted white and looks like a toy.

Kusanagi parks the vehicle right in front of the cabin. About ten automobiles are lined up, a bit far away from the cabin. I guess those are the official parking lots. Half of them are trucks. There is no building except for the hut within the vicinity. If all the owners of the vehicles are in the cabin, it has got to be extremely crowded inside. Probably, most sections of the facility is buried underground.

A man appears at the entrance of the cabin. He is a sturdy gentleman in his 40s. He has not come out by chance, because he is looking at us without appearing to be surprised. The gate guards must have contacted him and he is getting outside to welcome us. There might be stairs leading to the underground in that cabin.

“Long time no see.” He greets us, while approaching us. We have just gotten out of the vehicle.

“Thank you for your welcoming us.” Kusanagi shakes hands with him. “You mean, you won’t have us inside, right?”

“I apologize. But, you know, recently, the authority has been getting stricter.”

“What do you mean?”

“The rule has gotten high and mighty. Too rigid.” The man smiles. Then, he gets back to his original facial expression, and looks at me. “By the way, I am Honda. You?”

“He is my subordinate.” Kusanagi first replies, while I do not say a word. “I bring him here because I want him to drive me on the way back.”

“How come?” Honda shows a suspicious look, and sees Kusanagi’s vehicle. “You

have just come here by driving on your way, right?”

“I think I might exhaust my physical strength.” Kusanagi says. She looks up at the antenna. “Strange. At a glance, it doesn’t seem that it was damaged by a typhoon ... Anyway, I want you to have us get inside. Let me talk to the manager.”

“The manager is out now.” Honda says.

“I think I can make sure whether he is out or not if I enter his room.” Kusanagi speaks fast.

“Please, Ms. Kusanagi.” Honda sighs. “I will surely tell him. So, I mean, we well understand how important this matter is, for you are coming here. In short, I think we understand how you feel.”

“I have not come here to tell you how I feel. Make no mistake about that.” Kusanagi raises her chin. “I just want to see the face of the one who is trying to kill me. I want to ask if this is prohibited by the regulation.”

“You are going too far.” Honda smirks.

“You say that it was not done on purpose?”

“Definitely. What are you talking about?”

“I doubt it.” This time Kusanagi smiles. “All right. Anyway, I just enter the cabin.” She starts walking toward the cabin.

“Hey, wait.” Honda follows.

I do not know what to do. But, as a subordinate who is being appointed as her bodyguard, I cannot just walk out of this. That is what I think, at least. At the entrance of the cabin, Honda is grabbing Kusanagi’s arm. I get closer to them.

“Let go of me!” Kusanagi shakes off his hand by swinging her arm.

“I’m telling you this for your own sake.” Honda says in a low voice.

“Thank you, but I don’t need that.” She glances at me. “Kannami, wait here for me. I will be back in five minutes.”

“What if you don’t come back?”

“Go ahead and return to the base alone.”

Kusanagi disappears into the cabin. The door is shut, with a sound. Honda is left at the door, clucks his tongue, looks at me, and then shrugs.

“How childish.” He murmurs.

I think he is right.

“She has not grown up.” Honda looks away from me.

“Yeah ...” I glare at him and nod. *Should I punch him?* I think so for a moment. Honda looks at me. He finds something in my expression.

“Oh, sorry.” Honda nods a little and smiles artificially. It is a servile smile as if he wants to say, “Do not get so angry.”

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I am waiting alone for Kusanagi while sitting on the step before the cabin. Honda has already gone back inside the cabin.

Kusanagi has not come back after five minutes have passed. When 10 minutes have passed, I stand up and walk around the cabin and complete a lap. The ground is graveled, and a human-sized concrete chimney that appears to be an exhaust vent is standing on the north side.

I wonder if Kusanagi is okay. Something bad might be happening. I think I am in the position to have to save her ... However, I am not commanded to do so. At least, I have not received any order since we arrived at this place. Still, when we left the base, she appointed me to be her bodyguard. What she meant to imply worries me. Was she joking, or was she being serious?

As I think about forcing my way into the cabin, I stand in front of the entrance door of the cabin. At the moment, Kusanagi comes out of the door. It takes me by surprise, and I jump back.

“Thank you for waiting.” Kusanagi is expressionless.

“Umm ...” It is so sudden for me that I cannot come up with what to say.

“Drive me on our way back.”

No one else comes outside. We tread the graveled ground, and walk to the vehicle. It is getting dark. Almost the entire ground is already covered with shadow.

I get into the driver's seat and start the engine.

"Shall we leave?" I ask my boss on the passenger seat.

"Yeah." Kusanagi nods slightly. I cannot read her face because she is looking toward the opposite direction.

I turn the vehicle around, and drive toward the gate.

As we get out of the premises, the road in the dark forest is stretching forward. When we get back to the seashore, it is not so bright anymore. I see the silhouettes of the gliding birds riding on the ascending air currents around the precipice. I wonder if they are drying their wings like that before flying home to the nests. Even though the sky is still slightly bright, the road is very dark. I turn the headlights on. Airplanes do not have these. Shall I feel fortunate, or unlucky, about being in the situation in which we have something to shed lights on?

I occasionally pretend to use the rearview mirror to see what is behind the car, so that I can check out Kusanagi. She has her elbow stick out from the window and put her hand on her mouth. It looks as if she is biting her fingers. She is looking forward with no motion. Only her hair is slightly waving like smoke.

She looks neither angry nor happy. There is no emotion. She is turning off the switch of her emotion circuitry. That is just what it seems like. I have known that we belong to the same species. We are such kind of humans, and such type of children. However, we do not feel any glad about getting to meet our own kind. In short, it is meaningless.

The logic comes first, and then we utilize the logic to pretend to have emotions.

I have been doing so since I was younger.

If I do not do so, everyone becomes afraid of me. Both of my parents were afraid of me. So, I made efforts to pretend to look like a normal kid. I carefully observed the children around me. I learned that children laugh in particular situations, cry in another cases, get moody in that timing, and get coddled while occasionally observing others. I think that is a complete waste of time, but it seems that it is just such a big deal for adults.

If I can make everyone happy by doing so, I myself would have something to gain as well. Even so, such procedure of communication is unbelievably boring to me.

That is complete uniformity. Repetition and repetition. The acme of boredom. Despite that, such a simple repetition satisfies my parents, my friends, and any other people. They are relieved. They repeat that I am a good boy. They pat me on my head, saying "How cute." I simply protect my safety. I just construct my comfort zone. It is just convenient for me to lessen the friction with others.

I was special.

I came to know that.

When I learned of that, my parents left me. Everyone was afraid of me. Even though they insisted that I was the same, they were afraid of me. But, in the end, that was the case for me as well.

I thought I was afraid of myself.

I was afraid of my living.

However ...

By making a sigh once, I can overcome it.

Things have been made that way since the beginning.

Indeed ...

I have been chosen from the very start.

Then ... I have met a lot of the same kind of fellows. As I have spent time with them, I have reverted to a normal kid again.

My very being is normal in this place.

I can think that this is normal.

This is strange. I am impressed by how much other people in the same environment can affect me.

I have learned something here for the first time.

How much I am different from others.

How much many people are the same.

Anyway, I have regained the fixation to this society, and drastically attained the energy, (At least, on the surface from others' points of view.) to the extent that I

have continued to live like this.

As long as I keep on breathing, I will not die. Eat, sleep, wash the face, and brush the teeth. Just by repeating them, only by doing that, we can manage to live.

We can live without being able to tie shoelaces.

The only problem is for what purposes we live.

We have to choose whether to pray to God or to kill each other. It was the rule. I chose to fight and to fly. Why? Because I think that praying to God will eventually lead to the crisis of my mind, and praying will not get me closer to unlocking the secrets of life and death. In order to make sure that I am alive, I have to compare life with death. That is the way I think. Is it a luxury to suffer from such worries?

“For how long have you been a pilot?” Kusanagi asks me suddenly.

It is already getting dark, covered with navy blue.

Orange lights on the highway are lined up ahead of us. The color is beautiful enough to make me shudder.

“Five years.” I reply.

Kusanagi has to have already known that. She has my personal data.

But, people sometimes want to have conversation without a particular reason.

Now is probably the time for her, I suppose.

I gently hold the steering wheel again and check the speedometer. Although it is reading a little faster than the legal speed limit, it is still relatively slow, compared to those of other cars around us.

“Five years ...” Kusanagi utters.

“As my military personnel record indicates.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Haven’t you looked at it yet?”

“No.”

“It might be rare that a boss is not interested in the past history of a newly assigned subordinate.”

“Maybe. Do you see the reason for that?” She looks at me. I can feel it, even though I keep looking forward.

“It has to do with being a child.” I say.

“That’s right. Because of being a Kildren.” She nods.

“Since when?”

“14 years ago.”

I look sideways at her. Kusanagi does not look at me.

I imagine my thought is slipping out of my brain and is floating nearby like a flying moth. I shake off the imagination as if I swat the moth.

The glittering scales are scattered from the moth’s wings.

“Can I drive faster?” I ask.

“Yeah.” Kusanagi replies. “I won’t complain if I die.”

I step on the accelerator. The car accelerates, and slides onto the fast lane. I rapidly approach the car in front of us, and flash the headlights to command it to step aside. The engine pickup response is springy. It makes me feel comfortable. The brake might be relatively weak. The suspension is properly firm. The degree of the rolling movement is within my tolerance level. The pitching motion gets a passing grade.

I do not have to look back anymore. No one can catch up on us.

The high-pitched engine sound vanishes suddenly. I am beginning to wonder if I should die now. I am having an illusion that I am in a cockpit. The illusion that I am flying. I am holding a control stick now.

My right arm moves, and commands me to shoot.

The moth is on my right hand.

Whom do I shoot?

I bank to the left and drive through the curve.

The orange light bows like a dinosaur’s tail.

Someone is shooting at me.

Someone will shoot at me for me.

Only I am in the cockpit.

I am the only one.

The moth's powdery scales are glittering.

"Kannami." I hear Kusanagi's voice.

Not through the radio.

I am not the only one.

There are two of us. There are two in the cockpit.

There is no coffin more special than this.

"Yes?" I reply.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Is it a question, or a warning?"

"A pure question."

"I am in an aircraft. I won't be able to go back to the base, for I have little fuel left in the tank. I'm falling into the sea."

"Have you ever had such an experience?"

"Even so, the sky is painted in prime purple, and the clouds are shining in the moonlight. The sea below me has got to be marvelous."

"What did you do at the time?"

"I made an emergency landing on the sea. As I expected, it was marvelous."

"And then?"

"I was floating."

"You were eventually rescued, correct?"

"I was floating until dawn."

"That could actually happen, eh? Was it a Sanka?"

I nod.

I relax my right foot that was stepping on the accelerator, to decelerate the car. No car is around us anymore. The engine sound becomes unbelievably quiet. It is as if I were diving into the sea after running out of the fuel.

“I did not open the cockpit.” I explain it to Kusanagi. “That is the reason why the aircraft did not sink.”

“Oh ...” Kusanagi nods affirmatively. “It cannot be found in the manual. Even the aircraft designer might have not even thought about it. Did you report it to the authority appropriately?”

I nod.

“Why did you not open the cockpit?”

I am recalling the moment.

The tightly sealed clear acrylic canopy.

Around my feet was the sea water.

Waves of long periods.

I was viewing the panoramic night sky all night long.

The aircraft was rocking on the waves like a cradle.

Yes, I am a child.

Then, this is a coffin.

I am reminded of the sad feelings for the first time since a long time ago, and water is running down from my eyes. It is so unusual that I find myself laughing.

Why did I not open the cockpit?

Probably, I want to be encased in something, even when I am dying.

The same way as when I was born.

Such style of dying is what I admire.

Episode 3: Fillet

“Well,” he said, “you know how those things happen, Sybil. I was sitting there, playing. And you were nowhere in sight. And Sharon Lipschutz came over and sat down next to me. I couldn’t push her off, could I?”

This excerpt is from *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*, a short story included in *Nine Stories* (written by J. D. Salinger)

-1-

After taking a shower, I come back to my room with a towel on my head. I see a girl sitting on a chair there. She looks up at me, who is entering, and smiles. She looks to be about 10 years old. On her small white face, crescent-shaped eyes are lined up. One of her shoes with a ribbon appears from under her long skirt, which looks fluffy.

“Hello, may I ask your name?” The girl asks me.

I see Tokino, who is standing at an inclined angle with his back on a wall. He is intentionally looking upward.

“May I ask your name?”, that is.” Tokino says.

“Kannami.” I answer while facing the girl. I dry my hair with the towel. I am wearing a pair of trousers, luckily. But, my upper body is naked and I think I should put something on. I walk to the bed to look for clothes.

“Aren’t you asking anything about me?” She asks behind me.

“Who are you?” I ask it for her, as I thrust my head into the bunk bed.

I pull out a shirt and put my head through it. I should have done it after my hair dries up completely. Such a reluctant procedure irritates me a little.

After wearing the shirt, I dry my hair with the towel again. Finally, I can take a deep breath calmly. I take a box of cigarette from the desk, pick one up, and light it. Then, I sit on a chair nearby, and see the girl sitting at the center of the room.

She is glaring at me.

I see Tokino by the wall. Perhaps, I am showing him an awkward look in my face.

“May I ask your name?”, that is.” Tokino whispers, while sticking out his chin. He probably means I should ask her so properly.

“Umm, young girl, may I ask your name?” I ask her.

“You have to look straight into the eyes of the one you are talking to.”

“Sorry, I apologize.”

The girl smiles happily.

“It is Kannami, yes? What is your first name, Kannami?”

“Yuichi.”

“Yuichi.” She bites her lips, and fills her face with a smile. “I’m Mizuki Kusanagi.”

“Oh?” I am surprised, and quickly look at Tokino. He seems to be suppressing his laughter while putting his hand on his chin.

“Well, you mean, you’re that Kusanagi’s ...”

“Sister.” Mizuki Kusanagi answers.

“Oh ..., really.” I nod anyway.

“Nice to meet you, Yuichi.”

“Nice to meet you, too.”

“What is nice for you?”

“You just said so first.”

“In my case, being nice means becoming friends and talking with each other.”

“That is somewhat the case for me.”

While saying so, I observe her. Come to think of it, she is somewhat similar to Suito Kusanagi. The white hands at the end of her fragile thin arm are placed on her knees. Suddenly, she stops smiling and makes a facial expression as if she wants to tell others that she is a noble lady. It might be the face that she looks at into the mirror and practices how to generate.

She is keeping silent, because she is trying to test my ability to live up to the words I speak. I have to open the talk by bringing up a subject of conversation ...

“Why are you here?” I ask.

“Here?” Mizuki leans her head sideways.

“This room.”

“Oh ...” Mizuki opens her mouth a little, nods, and turns her eyes slightly diagonally. “Umm, the school is out. Then, I’m here to play with my elder sister ... But you know, I feel alone if I just wait for her by myself. I cried and begged my elder sister so that I can follow her, even though she tells me that I may not do so. I’m now exploring here, so that I do not have to end up disturbing my sister that way. By the way, I’m not afraid of men. In particular, of the men who aviate airplanes. That sort of feelings are, well ... umm ... how shall I put it ...”

“That sort of feelings do not spring up, you mean?” Tokino follows immediately.

“Yeah, that’s it.” She nods frankly.

While smoking the cigarette, I glance at Tokino. How can he expect her to say so in advance? I do not understand that at all. In the first place, I cannot comprehend the story behind her. At the same time, I feel that it is funny. But, if I laugh here, she will say that I am rude. I am focusing on keeping my face straight.

“Naofumi.” Mizuki looks sideways at Tokino. The profile is very similar to that of Suito Kusanagi. I can say that, especially the curves around the nose and chin are exactly alike. “Why don’t you have a seat?”

“What? Why?” Tokino gets his shoulder off the wall, and stands straight.

“I’m feeling awkward here. Hey, why don’t three of us try something joyful?”

I check my wristwatch. It is almost supper time.

“For example, what do you want?” Tokino walks to a sofa and sits down on it. As he approaches, the girl widens her eyes and swallows. Her eyes look as if she is looking at a lion in a circus.

“Well, yes ...” She blinks widely and bites her lips again. “Don’t you have a game or something like that?”

“Umm, no.” Tokino replies. “Kannami, what about you?”

“Me neither.” I shake my head sideways. Even a pack of playing cards is not in

this room. “Shall we play marbles by flicking coins?”

“That is silly.” The girl frowns and looks at me.

“But ... Once we start that, I think it can be pretty entertaining.”

“What do you two usually do in this room? Don’t you play games together?” She looks at Tokino and me alternately, with a puzzled look.

Neither Tokino nor I answer the question. Speaking of which, I have not played games recently. At least as of late, I have not played catch, played a game of chess, betted on trivial things, or done anything like that. We have just been living here. When we have alcohol, no one gets drunk. Here, it is rare that someone laughs out loud.

“Even though you are a child?” The girl murmurs while pursing her lips.

-2-

Tokino hastily gets out of the room, while saying he is reminded of a work of having to call someone. I doubt what he has just said. Mizuki Kusanagi and I are left in this room alone. The atmosphere around us is gloomy enough to render me spellbound. In such a situation, I feel that the air would make creaking sounds as if it were transformed into many balloons.

“What shall we do?” She asks.

“Nothing in particular.” I reply.

“If I were not here, what would you do?”

“I would lie down on the bed and read a book, or do something like that.”

“In a situation like that, what would Naofumi be doing?”

“I’m not sure ...” I try to recall situations in our daily lives. “He is, you know, rarely in this room. My speculation is that he would drink beer in the lounge or he goes out to somewhere.”

“Hmm ...” Mizuki shows a slightly perplexed face, but nods. “Alright. Do that.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Why don’t you lie down on the bed and read a book?”

“What do you want to do?” I ask.

“I wanna talk to you, Yuichi.”

“You are talking to me.”

“Right ...” She makes a fabricated smile in a moment, and shrugs.

I cross my legs again. The girl straightens her back.

Silence prevails again.

Even if the entire room were treated quite roughly in this particular timing, it would have been carried to other places as is, without the interior being jammed and roughed up, or, in other words, without being damaged. I am imagining that is how securely packed with silence this room is.

It is getting a little hot. Probably because I have just taken a shower.

“Why don’t we walk outside together?” I propose.

“Sounds good.” The girl nods positively.

“Have someone given you a tour here in the facility?”

“No.”

“Have you seen aircrafts?”

“I would like to.” The girl stands up. “Oh. I have completely forgotten to ask for it, for some reason. What is the matter with me? That’s right. One of my friends told me she could not speak as smoothly as usual when talking to a gentleman. I told her back then that it could not possibly be the case. But, perhaps, it is now happening to me now ...”

“I think it is similar to the case in which a drawer gets stuck in the middle.”

“Drawer?”

“Yeah. In many of such cases, an object is jamming the interior of the drawer by getting itself aligned diagonally.”

“Ah, I see what you mean ... That annoys me.”

Mizuki and I get out of the room, and are walking through the corridor. We climb down the stairs, and get out into the courtyard. I see the office building, but the

lights of the lounge are not turned on. Tokino might be elsewhere. When we reach a spot at which we can see the runway, the girl stops walking.

“We can fly a kite here.” She turns around and looks up at me.

“Maybe ... But no one here has a kite.”

“Why don’t you make it? I know it’s very easy.”

“Probably, you’re right.”

This time, I am walking ahead of her while heading toward the hangar. The light is leaking out from the half-opened shutter. Sasakura must be inside. I think he would show an annoyed look. I can imagine the scene so easily that I find that to be funny.

When I duck under the shutter, the bright light flashes in the backside of the inner part of the hangar.

“Fireworks?”

“No, it’s welding.” I stand in front of her, so that she does not see the light. “I would not see that if I were you.”

“What? Why?”

“The light is too intense. It would get burned into your eyes. After that, you would see a vague white thing in the sight, no matter what you try to see.”

“That sounds interesting.” The girl steps aside to see the spark.

The interior of the hangar gets brighter once again. I move my body to shift into the position right before her eyes.

“You’re so mean.”

“Not really.” I smile. “If you want to look at it, you should use eyewear.”

“I have good eyesight.”

“The strong light will damage your eyesight.”

As we walk toward the inner part, Sasakura notices us and is moving somewhere to turn off the welder. He shifts the round black glasses upward on his head.

“Hey.” I greet him.

“Where is she from?” Sasakura says, while looking at Mizuki.

“I’m Mizuki Kusanagi.” She introduces herself. “Can you lend me your glasses? Oh, sorry. May I ask your name?”

“Sasakura.” He is taking a pack of cigarette from a pocket of his jumpsuit. He holds a cigarette in his mouth, and looks at me. “She’s Ms. Kusanagi’s?”

“Right.” I nod. “Do you have another eyewear for welding? I want you to show its light to her.”

“Why?” Sasakura exhales the smoke and asks.

“Because I want to.” The girl answers.

Sasakura glares at the girl for a few seconds. When her smile starts to change, he takes the protective goggles off his head and hands it to her.

“Thank you.” Mizuki receives the goggles and puts them on while feeling the joy. “Oh, I can see nothing through this.”

“You can see the florescent light on the ceiling.” Sasakura says. He is walking toward the welding power supply. “Please do not come over here. It is dangerous.”

He takes a welding helmet from a tool shelf, turns on a switch of the welding power supply, and comes back to the place where he has originally been standing. Then, he puts a thick glove on his right hand and holds a grip from which a welding rod is sticking out. A thick cord is connected between the welding rod and the welding power supply. Sasakura finally puts out the cigarette by stepping on it with his foot. He has the welding rod close to a part (that appears to be a frame) on a cart and, at the same time, covers his face with the welding helmet.

I look sideways.

A flash.

A sound of something sizzling.

A smell of molten iron.

The girl is watching it through the filter glass of the welding goggles.

Her shadow projected on the wall behind her is huge and clear.

Fire sparks fly all over the place, and the flash is blinking.

The metal is melting and is formed into the shape of a ball. It turns red and loses its light. She must be watching it. I am gazing at the white profile of the girl. Her smooth cheeks look even whiter, by reflecting the light. Her tiny lips are slightly slack, and she puts her half-opened hand on the lips.

“Marvelous!” Mizuki shouts in a high-pitched voice.

I light my cigarette and exhale the smoke with authority. I feel comfortable to a certain extent. Because the emotion that she is expressing is the one I have forgotten since a long time ago. It is vaguely glowing in the distance. *Nostalgic*, I think.

“Why does it emit the flame?” The girl asks.

“It is not because he wants to.” I answer on behalf of Sasakura. “In short, he needs enough heat to melt it. It ends up looking unexpectedly flashy.”

“Can it make a hole on anything?”

“He is not welding for making a hole, but for joining materials.”

I am reluctant to explain it more. While holding the cigarette in my mouth, I walk to the shutter and duck under it to get outside. Mizuki is still asking Sasakura about something. Her loud, high-pitched voice carries well. I wonder how long Sasakura can keep himself silent.

I see Suito Kusanagi walking from the direction of the office building.

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“Sorry.” Kusanagi says with no expression.

“About what?” I ask.

She bends her knees and looks inside the hangar from under the shutter. The flash of welding is not lighting any more. Instead, I hear the girl’s voice. It sounds as if Sasakura is serving as a counselor, but I do not hear his voice. Kusanagi comes back.

“When I see that girl, I sometimes hate myself.” Unusually, it sounds like a joke. More unusually, Kusanagi smiles a bit. Come to think about it carefully, what she has just said is unbelievably rare. If there were Kusanagi Museum somewhere, it

would have been exhibited as the most important item without any doubt.

“What do you mean?” I am so startled that I only ask her a boring question that might as well be a back-channel feedback.

“I’m not sure ...” She is suddenly getting back to wearing a familiar face. “It’s time for me to pick her up and send her home.”

“I heard she is your younger sister ...” Sooner than I speak to Kusanagi, she has already disappeared into the hangar through the shutter.

About the half of the cigarette is still not finished. Like my life, I should not mash it and smash it in the middle.

After two or three minutes have passed, Kusanagi is getting out while pulling Mizuki’s hand. Then, they are walking toward the office building. The girl looks back at me in the middle and smiles. She is no longer wearing the welding goggles. I think she is not wearing them again for the rest of her life.

While he is smoking, Sasakura is getting outside the hangar.

“Thank you for your time.” I offer him words of appreciation. I am feeling exactly the same way as what I have just said.

He responds only by curving the edge of his lips. He seems to be in a better mood than I have expected.

Someone is walking toward us on a dark path leading to the runway. I recognize that he is Tokino, thanks to the light leaking from the window of the hangar. He is approaching us.

“Has she already left?” He whispers.

“A little while ago.” I reply. I throw the stub into an ashtray. My hair has completely been dried with the night wind. It is rather a bit cold.

“Did you command her to go home?”

“Ms. Kusanagi came here to pick her up.”

“She is not her sister.” Tokino says. He puts both of his hands in the pockets and gazes into his feet. His gesture is as if he is about to engrave secret letters with his foot.

“What do you mean?” I ask because he has stopped saying anything.

“She’s her daughter.” Tokino says.

Oh, I see, I think. Sasakura opens his mouth only a little and nods. It is more easily understandable. Right. As I think more, I realize that the mother-daughter relationship seems more likely to be the case.

When I see that girl, I sometimes hate myself. The statement from Suito Kusanagi Museum remains in my ears. I slam on the brake of myself, who is being inclined to think too much about this and that, and then have decided to go back to my room. Tokino seems to have gone to the cafeteria to drink beer. Sasakura is probably resuming the rest of the welding.

Just like this way, we get back to the usual night.

While reading a book, I fall asleep and dream for the first time since a long time ago. When I realize that and wake up, it is late at night.

It is completely dark in my room. I put my feet down on the floor, and sit on the bed for a while. On the upper part of our bunk bed, Tokino is sleeping. I can barely hear his breathing.

The one who has just appeared in my dream was that girl. Yes, she is Mizuki Kusanagi.

I was fishing in a river. I was knee-deep in the water, and was holding a long pole. It was as if I had been doing so for hours without moving.

I looked back and found her standing. She was dipping her feet in the water at a much shallower part of the river than I was in. In order not to get her skirt wet, she was lifting it with her both hands.

“Aren’t you afraid of fish?” The girl asked me.

“Why?”

“Aren’t you afraid of that face? It opens its mouth and shows its teeth ...”

“Really?”

“Its eyes are also scary.”

“Well, you may be right.” I answered casually.

“You are gonna be terrified if you see a person with a fish face is walking, right?”

“Umm, but ... After the evolution, fish became amphibians and reptiles. They then became birds and mammals.”

“Fish will be fish forever.”

“Humans will remain humans, too.”

I looked at what was around the girl's feet. Transparent water was flowing there. A black fish was swimming in the water around her feet. She seemed not to be able to notice it, for the view was blocked by her skirt. I realized that I had better not tell her about it. As soon as she noticed it, she would scream. I raised my head to look at the girl.

The person who was standing there was not Mizuki.

Suito. Yes, She was Suito Kusanagi.

The clothes were still the same. But, she had just gotten taller, and was the same as the current version of Suito Kusanagi, without doubt. She was slightly raising one of her straight eyebrows, squinting, and staring at me. I was so shocked that I dropped the fishing pole I was holding.

The fishing pole was floating, and drifting away from me. I tried to chase the pole, but the water that was twining around my legs was preventing me from walking in the river smoothly. I leaned forward, and thrust my both hands into the water.

The black fish was passing by in front of my face. Surely, it was a scary face.

I managed to reach the shore, and sat down. Suito Kusanagi also sat down beside me.

“What's wrong?” She asked. She was looking into my profile with interest. “Did you try to evolve?”

“What?” I asked back.

“Let two of us evolve, together.”

“What?”

Evolve?

Two of us, together?

I was thinking about what that meant.

Kusanagi stood up, and was walking away. At the upper part of the bank, a yellow tent had been pitched. She disappeared into it.

I followed her.

I desperately wanted to see what was inside the tent.

Then ...

After I peeled up the tent flap.

In the dark tent.

I saw it.

That is when I have just woken up. My heartbeat is at least three times faster than usual. It is like an engine of an aircraft ascending rapidly. I feel the tension and ache in my shoulders, the muscle of which is getting stiff. The both fists are clenched, and are sweaty.

While sitting on the edge of the bed, I repeatedly and calmly take a deep breath, that is so humanlike. It is not the first time for me to experience such a situation. I have learned the lesson that I can get back to the normal condition by doing so.

I loosen up, and relax.

The memory of the dream is gradually fading.

It is transformed into a strangely funny thing.

And then to a mysterious thing.

A fairy tale that I want to laugh at.

It is a fantasy.

It is a child's dream.

The stiffness still remains in my upper back, but I am successfully back to the normal condition.

I am relieved ...

The sweat on my forehead is cold.

As I am being careful not to make a sound, I get out of the room. I bring a cigarette from the desk. When I get to the courtyard, I light the cigarette. After the light goes out, the courtyard is as dark as a swamp. I cannot even see the exhaled smoke. Near the tip of my finger, the red light of the cigarette is moving in the air.

What I saw in the tent.

Although it was what I had seen many times.

I cannot recall that anymore.

-4-

At one time, I flew with Uroyuki Shinoda just once. It was because Yudagawa injured his eye in the previous sortie. It was not inflicted by our enemies, but it was because of his complete carelessness. He was wearing both an eyepatch and glasses for about a week. In this case, it was usually Tokino's turn to make a sortie as a substitute instead of Yudagawa. But, he caught a cold and the fever made him groan in misery. To prevent myself from catching the cold from him, I went so far as to spend a night in the lounge.

Then, I ended up flying with the guy named Shinoda. Although more than two months have already passed since I was assigned to this airbase, I have hardly talked with Shinoda. I was not even sure how his voice sounded.

Shinoda seems to be the oldest pilot among the four of us. If I remember correctly, Yudagawa said such a thing. Shinoda had a gloomy appearance like a conjurer, and both his chin and nose were pointy. He was always wearing a blackish garment with long sleeves. He always had a gold pen in the chest pocket. He does not smoke. He is the only non-smoker here.

At the time, we were flying toward the south along the coastline. Then, we went over the sea for about an hour. We soon found a target and approached it. It was obviously a private fishing boat, so we did not attack it. The most suspicious possibility was that it was a ship to send supplies to submarines. However, the ship was too small for the purpose and the crews did not look dubious.

“Still, there is a case in which we can reveal the target's identity only by shooting

it.” I said through the radio.

“Why don’t you try that?” Shinoda suggested.

“No, I won’t.” I was already turning around.

“Do you want me to try it?”

“No. Let’s go back.”

This is the longest conversation that I have ever had with him. We returned to the base with quite a lot of fuel left in the tank. The hangars are far away from each other, so I run to where Shinoda is, after getting off the aircraft. I am thinking of having a conversation with him before going to the office for the reporting. In the hangar, he is getting on a wing to polish the canopy with a rag.

“Thank you for waiting.” I say.

Shinoda glances at me, but does not get off the wing quickly. I am waiting for a while at the gate of the hangar while smoking. After he finally comes out of the hangar, we walk side by side. We remain silent until we reach the Kusanagi’s office ... In short, I have failed to talk to him.

I only need just one minute to report to Kusanagi. I am the one who has just done all the explaining.

“Anything else?” Kusanagi asks, while sitting back in the seat.

“That’s all.”

“Okay, thank you.”

The two of us get out into the corridor.

When we are climbing down the stairs, the door is opened behind us and Kusanagi shows her face.

“Hey, I am just being reminded of something a bit irksome.” She looks at me. “I had an unexpected call a little earlier. Several visitors are coming here to participate in an observation tour in two hours. Kannami, please attend them and conduct the study tour.”

“Certainly.” I nod at the stairway landing.

“A group of five or six. I think they will return probably in 30 minutes or so.”

“Affirmative.”

Shinoda has already walked away ahead of me, and is spreading a magazine to read it in the lounge. However, it is rare for him to be in this place. Perhaps, he is waiting for me.

“They have visited here once before.” Suddenly, Shinoda speaks.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” I ask, while taking a seat. I am holding a pack of cigarette in my pocket.

“Visitors.”

“Oh ...” I nod. “What were they like?”

“I have an urge to kill them.” Saying so, Shinoda smirks. I am seeing his smirk for the first time.

“Did you actually kill them?” I smile and ask.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t have a gun.”

“Ah, I see.” I nod. “Then, I should follow suit.”

“If I were that woman, I would have pulled the trigger a long time ago.”

“What?” I frown. “What woman?”

“On the second floor.” Shinoda jerks his chin. Probably, he is indicating Suito Kusanagi.

“If you were Ms. Kusanagi, you would have shot ... whom?”

“Anyone.”

“Why?”

“She always carries a gun.”

I laugh because I am regarding his comment as a joke. However, Shinoda is not laughing. He is casting an upward glance at me. His eyes look as if he were targeting a game. His front hair partially covers his eyes. Through the slits between the strands of hair, the whites of his eyes are clearly visible.

“Have you heard about Kurita?” Shinoda smirks again. His white anterior teeth are visible.

“I haven’t.” I reply instantly.

Jinro Kurita is the predecessor pilot of my current aircraft. Before I came here, he had vanished. No one is yet to tell me anything. Not even about whether he died or he was transferred to other assignments.

“What’s the story here?” I ask.

“That woman shot him.” Shinoda says.

“Ms. Kusanagi did?” I lean forward. “You mean she shot Mr. Kurita?”

Shinoda nods. Standing up, he roughly gets the magazine back to the rack.

“Really?” I ask.

Shinoda glances sideways at me just once, and then he goes out of the lounge without words.

I take a seat again, and close my eyes.

That might be the case, I think.

-5-

The visitors are a group of six and they are all females. Probably, in their 40s or 50s. The group name is written on the plate attached to the front glass of a minibus, but I just do not remember that. For some reason, all of them look twice as heavy as I am. However, the group has not been assembled for that common characteristic. I am not sure of how they are related to our company. Are they supporters? Or, members of an opposition group? I only know so little about them. Of course, if they were especially dangerous, they would not have been allowed to enter the facility and they should have gotten themselves accompanied by a proper business-related attendant from the headquarters. If it were such serious deals to that level, Kusanagi herself would have greeted, entertained, and guided them. If they can leave this to me alone, then it has got to mean that these visitors are not all so important.

We walk near the edge of the runway, and then I take them to a hangar for a tour.

Luckily, Sasakura is not there. I briefly explain an aircraft to them. *This is an engine. That is a propeller. Those are machine guns.* Something like that. It is as if I am teaching new words to kindergartners.

“Is this your airplane?” A woman in a brown business suit asks. It is obvious that she is the leader of the group because she is always leading them by walking in front.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“For how long have you been making sorties?” A woman in a green one-piece dress next to the leader in a brown business suit asks. Her parasol is also green. She has been opening it earlier near the runway. She is now holding it with her thick arm.

“I am still a newcomer here ... But, I have been a pilot for about five years.”

“How do you feel?” The woman in green asks.

“Um? What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, when you are flying in the sky.” She squints, and makes a mysterious expression.

“Umm, how do I feel? Err ...” I smile wryly. “As if I myself am flying ... I should say ...”

The women chuckle. Maybe, they feel that it is funny. I do not feel too bad because they seem to like what ends up being my joke.

“So, how do you feel when you shoot down the enemy?” This time, another woman in the rear asks. It is a hoarse voice. I look at her carefully, and can tell that she is quite old. She might over 60. “You have shot down many, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I nod slightly.

“Don’t you paint kill marks on your aircraft?” The leader in brown interrupts.

“I used to do so until the previous aircraft.” I answer. “But, I was transferred to this base suddenly.”

“You can draw the kill marks on this one, can’t you?”

“If I just paint kill marks, no one will believe that.”

“But, the data of your previous kill record have been sent here, right?”

“Yeah, you may be right, ma’am.” I nod. I have not expected and thought about such bothersome things.

“Hey, how do you feel?” I hear the hoarse voice in the rear again. The old woman makes the wrinkles around the edges of her eyes. “How do you feel when you shoot down enemies?”

“Now, thanks to this, I can go back.” That is how I feel.” I answer.

One woman is clapping her hands. She is a small woman like a vinyl doll. I wonder what is going on. Probably, she is applauding. All other women look at her with glaring eyes. The vinyl doll stops clapping, and looks toward the shutter as if she does not care about anything.

“It’s like a game.” Someone whispers.

That’s right, I think. I pretend not to have just heard that.

“But thanks to your fighting the battles, we can lead such, oh yes, happy lives like this. I really appreciate it. It’s true.” The leader woman says.

“Oh, please do not mention it. It is my duty.” I smile. It is so-called businesslike smile for the sake of professional courtesy.

I do not fight for anyone in particular. Not for the nation. Let alone for any people in particular. I earn wages. Moreover, we are ideally suited to this job. I myself understand that well. Conversely speaking, I really do not understand how ordinary people think of us. I definitely would like to listen to them about what they really think of us.

Even so, I am not quite willing to ask these women here now. The wrinkled face of the elderly woman standing in the rear. The white face and the red lips. These wicked makeups are glaring at me. I cannot possibly believe that those are the gazes that are intended to be directed toward the same species.

At a moment, I become conscious of my right hand.

Then, I’m reminded of what Shinoda was speaking.

I might shoot them, if I encounter these women in the sky.

As soon as I think so, I feel funny and find myself smiling.

“By the way, how is that girl?” The leader in brown asks. “A girl was working here, right? She gave me a tour when I visited here on the previous occasion.”

“Is it Ms. Kusanagi?”

“Umm, yes. I think I remember her having such a name.”

I do not quite like the use of the word “girl” to describe Kusanagi. However, from the point of view of these women, Suito Kusanagi is definitely a girl.

“She is now working in the office.” I answer. “It seems that she cannot leave her office because she has to attend an important matter.” I am impressed by the fact that I can tell a lie quite smoothly.

“Can you hand this to her?” The leader extends a paper shopping bag toward me. “I have brought a gift for her. It’s a little something.”

“Certainly, ma’am.” I receive it. A gift-wrapped box is in it. Not heavy. Probably, it is confectionery, or something like that.

After that, I guide them to the cafeteria of the billet and we go to the courtyard at the end of the tour. The women show the appreciation to me politely. What they are just telling me are so cheesy that they make me feel the uneasy chill of embarrassment going up my spine just by hearing them.

After the microbus goes out of the base through the gate, I light the cigarette and take a deep breath. I recognize that I am feeling a bit exhausted.

“Good work.” I hear the voice from above me. I look up, and see Suito Kusanagi sticking her face out of the window on the second floor of the office building.

“They handed me a souvenir.” I lift up the paper bag a little.

“What?”

“I think it’s confectionery. They said it’s for Ms. Kusanagi.”

“I don’t want it.” Without showing any expression on her face, she shakes her head just once. “You and others can go ahead and share it.”

The window is closed.

With a cigarette in my mouth, I head for the lounge. No one is there, of course.

Tokino is sleeping in our room. Because I do not want to catch a cold from him, the lounge is my temporary roost now. Yudagawa and Shinoda are probably in their rooms.

I unseal the package and look inside the box. If it is confectionery, I will leisurely enjoy it with coffee for the first time in a while. But, the content of the gift is a toy. It is a fashion doll.

Kusanagi is getting down to the lobby. She notices my presence and approaches me.

“If you want coffee, go upstairs.” Kusanagi says.

She looks inside the box on the table.

“You should give it to Mizuki.” I speak of my proposal.

“For goodness sake ...” She clicks her tongue. “They make such a sarcastic gesture.”

“Sarcastic?” I crack up.

If it is sarcasm, is it not of the best quality? It is my honest opinion. The fashion doll is wearing the uniform of a commercial airline company. It is a girl with long and straight blonde hair. It does not resemble Suito Kusanagi at all.

“Anyway, that was a big help that I got from you. Thank you.” She sits down on a sofa opposite me, and says.

“About what?”

“Being an attendant to entertain the guests.”

“Oh ...” I nod. “That was not such a big deal.”

“Really?” Kusanagi shows a look of being surprised on her face, and widens her eyes. “I don’t understand you well.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Anyway, I really hate dealing with them. So, you helped me a lot. I will buy you dinner.”

“Oh, really?” I feel so glad that I end up coughing.

“You are weird.” Kusanagi laughs.

-6-

Kusanagi lets Yudagawa stand by in the office to be on duty to take phone calls. It is a duty that anyone with just one eye can do. Tokino’s fever has already gone down, and he is looking fine. When I see him in our room, he is up and drinking beer.

“Don’t get too close to me.” He turns me away. “You will catch a cold from me.”

“I am going out for a while.”

“No reporting required.”

I take my jacket and get out of the room. Kusanagi’s car is waiting for me in front of the office building. I get into the passenger seat. She drives the vehicle out of the gate, and then turns to the right. I am a bit surprised, for I have no experience of heading for that direction. The base is located on an island sandwiched between two large rivers. A bridge is built across one of the rivers, but none on the other one. That is, if I head for the other bridgeless river, I will only hit the dead end. That is what I have heard, so I have not headed for that direction yet.

I see the runway to our right. However, the lower half of the view is silhouetted in darkness, and it looks like a residue layer that has settled down at the bottom of the sky that is slightly brighter. On the road ahead of us, I can barely see a vague space that is lit by the headlights.

We drive on the gravel road in the middle, climb a slope, and reach the meadow. It is located at the end of the runway. I have flown above this part several times, so I know our approximate current location. The river should be right beyond the vicinity.

Then, we drive down the slope. An area with densely populated low trees is approaching. I see a small log house in it. Kusanagi’s car stops at the open area before the cabin.

She gets out of the car without words. I get out, too.

It is very dark around the vicinity, except for the sky. There is no light nearby. A utility pole connects the log house with loose electric wires. It is surrounded by the

forest and meadow, and it is quiet. Although the river should be nearby, I cannot see or hear any sign of it. Of course, no other house or anything of the sort is nearby.

“What is this place?” I ask.

Kusanagi has already climbed up the steps in front of the cabin and is standing at the entrance. She seems to be unlocking the door.

The door opens. The light inside is turned on. It looks orangey.

I hear the birds singing. Stars are scattered in the sky. No moon. No wind. My footsteps make strange sound of rubber being contracted. I have not noticed that, even though they are the same shoes that I wear all the time as usual.

Suito Kusanagi pretty much lives her life in the airbase. She is not the only one who does that. All other workers do so as well. There is no town nearby. No reasonably priced residential complex. On top of that, inns that can welcome people engaged in this kind of jobs are limited. It is obvious that the cabin is not the house where Kusanagi lives.

What did she say before leaving the base ...? I try to recall it. If I remember correctly, she said she would buy me dinner. I remember so, but she might have just said she would just treat me to a meal. Within the close vicinity, there is no restaurant at which we can eat dinner, unless we drive all the way to the drive-in diner.

I climb up the wooden steps and get inside the log house.

The moist air has mysterious scent. It is like leather, like a tent, or like an old doll. Such complex scent makes me feel its history. I see a sofa, a table, a cabinet, a fireplace, a carpet, a rocking chair, windows, curtains, a bar counter, a refrigerator, a television set, another door on the back side of the house, a serial-patterned cloth hanging on a wall, a bird cage with no bird, a magazine rack, Kusanagi kneeling down over the counter, a thin shelf with glasses on them, a photograph in which many small faces are lined up, a picture frame, an incandescent lamp with a shade made of stained glass, a vase with no flower, white slippers, and a sordidly tinted stuffed bear on a round chair.

“What is this place?” I have yet to close the entrance door.

“What would you like to drink? Beer? Or, would you prefer wine?” Since Kusanagi is kneeling down, I cannot see her face.

“Do you have soft drinks?”

“Sorry.” Kusanagi shows her face and shakes her head.

“Then, beer, please.”

I close the door behind me. The inner space of the room is locking out the darkness, and it seems to be a little brighter.

“Have a seat.”

As I follow her direction, I sit down on a sofa. Because of the curtains covering the windows, I cannot see outside. Bare, thick beams run across each other along the high ceiling. The fireplace chimney, which is a cylinder made of black metal, stretches straight upward and then turns diagonally near the ceiling.

Kusanagi brings two glasses. She hands me one of them and puts the other on the table. Then, she takes a small round stool from the corner of the room, and brings it toward the table. She sits down on it. She is spreading her legs to two directions and puts her hands on the chair. It is like a pose that a gymnast shows on a balance beam.

“So, what is up?” She asks. Although her expression has not changed in particular, I might be able to tell that she is smiling. It is probably because of the orangey lighting, or because of my imagination.

“What is this place?” I ask her, while sipping beer. That is the third time for me to ask this question.

“An accommodation facility.” Kusanagi answers. “Like a guest room.”

“Really ...” I nod. “That’s awesome.”

“Sure.”

“Are we having a dinner here?” I ask.

“Don’t you like alcohol?”

“No. I’m not a heavy drinker.” I answer honestly. “But, yeah, I can drink this much. I like its taste, though.”

“What is the problem the alcohol causes on you?”

“It gives me a headache.”

“If you have a headache, what’s the problem?”

“When that happens, I hate to think about anything.” I sip beer again.

“Does it bother you?”

“No ...” I laugh. “It does not really bother me, I guess.”

Kusanagi stretches her arm, takes a glass of beer, and drinks half of it at one gulp. Then, she takes off her jacket and walks to the rocking chair to drape it over the backrest. She takes a pack of cigarette from its pocket and walks back while lighting it.

“Well.” She says, and exhales the smoke with a sigh. “Then, I will prepare something.”

“Meal?” I am standing up. “Need help?”

“Never mind. Anyhow, I don’t have decent ingredients.” She says, while waving her hand. “I have nothing but instant foods. Oh, hey, perhaps, are you good at cooking?”

“No, not at all.” I shake my head. “I’m not even good at eating.”

“I’m relieved.” Kusanagi nods with a serious expression on her face, drinks up the beer while holding the cigarette in the other hand. “Phew ... Oh yes, go ahead and watch TV to kill time.”

“No ...” I utter. “If possible, I like to chat.”

“Really?” She replies while walking to the kitchen. “You don’t seem to be a talkative type.”

“Why have you brought me here?” I ask honestly. The question is so heavy that I feel a painful burden on my shoulders.

“The fact is, employees have the right to use this facility. So, we have to come here occasionally.” Kusanagi explains. “You know, I am at the position, because of which I should tell everyone that. But, actually ... They come here just once. No one comes back again, ever.”

“So, are you saying that everyone comes here at least once? With Ms. Kusanagi?”

“I hardly come here alone with someone.”

“Why?”

“Well, I don’t know why.” Kusanagi is opening the refrigerator and is looking inside. “Is it because to prepare an extra meal is such a drag of chore?”

“Can I see the adjacent room?” I stand up with the glass in my hand. I want to know what is beyond the backdoor.

“Go ahead.”

I put the glass back on the table, and walk to the adjacent room to see what is inside it. I push the door open and find a switch on the wall right next to the door. I turn on the light. I see a space that is half the size of the living room that I have just been in. There are only two beds being placed in it. The windows are covered with curtains as expected. Two short rattan wardrobes are by the wall. There is a closet and a bathroom at the back of the room.

I approach the window and look outside through the slit between the curtains. Because of the darkness, I can see nothing. By shifting the focus of my eyes, I can see the dark reflection of a part of my face.

I understand it is a facility designed for two persons. If three persons come here, one of them has to sleep on a sofa.

I go back to the living room. It is when Kusanagi is putting a dish into a microwave oven and closing it.

“I think you might have wanted to bring your younger sister here.” I say to her over the bar counter.

“It’s mixing up official business with personal affairs.”

“Are you talking about bringing your sister here, or to the airbase?” I point out.

While snorting, Kusanagi nods. She is gazing at me with her lips curved.

Before the meal is placed on the table, I drink two glasses of beer. Kusanagi drinks twice as much. She switches to wine in the middle, and the bottles are placed on the counter.

A thick dish like lasagna. Twisted pasta in a soup. Then, seafood and corn released from cans. Forks and spoons are plastic.

“Are they not the types being used in passenger planes?” Kusanagi comments. “Eating with a plastic fork is the last thing that I want to do.”

Still, while saying so, she has already started eating the lasagna with it.

Each dish is vapid and the taste is dull, but I am not dissatisfied with it at all. The only dissatisfaction is the lack of coffee. I do not mention it, though. It is not that tonight is the last day of the Earth.

Kusanagi hardly eats the food, but guzzles down the wine. Compared to the usual Kusanagi, she is surely looking cheerful. Does the fact that the visitors of the airbase tour earlier on the day have gone back make her so happy? I do not know the reason. At least, she looks drunk. *I have to drive on our way back*, I am thinking.

-7-

We talk mainly about airplanes. Kusanagi was once a pilot. So, we did not have problem with finding topics. This is the first time for me to talk this much since I was assigned to the base. I have not talked this much, with Tokino and Sasakura combined. However, I was only listening to her story most of the time, and Kusanagi is talking almost entirely. I am observing her explaining the scenes of air combats with hand gestures enthusiastically. Although her facial expression has not changed by a lot, she is surely getting drunk. Two empty wine bottles are standing on the bar counter.

As for me, I drink beer little by little. I am feeling comfortable because I am getting a little absent-minded with alcohol. Each dish is more than half left and has already gotten cold.

“The most unforgettable experience was that I was shot by the enemy whom I thought I had completely shot down.” Kusanagi squints one of her eyes and shakes her head with a serious look in her face. “He was going down. Since I could see what was inside the cockpit, I was descending to watch him all the way to the end. His fuel tank was already covered with fire, and the propellers were about to stop spinning. If he descended skillfully, he would have been able to make an emergency ditching on the sea. However, after gaining enough speed by making a steep dive, it

suddenly steered the aircraft to deliberately decelerate to let it stall, and raised the nose upward. It's a suicidal act, isn't it? Then, what do you think happened next?"

"You mean, about the enemy? Or, about Ms. Kusanagi?" I ask.

It is still natural for a pilot to shoot the enemy, when he realizes that he is bound to go down. Kusanagi was probably expecting anything as simple as that. I do not think that she would bring her aircraft within the range, over which the opponent would have any control.

"When the aircraft was stalling, the pilot launched the air-to-surface rocket to use the reaction force to point the nose toward me. Can you believe that? That's how he shot me. For that moment, I had to pass by right in front of him."

"What was the damage you received?"

"A hole was punched right on the canopy, and my precious helmet was damaged. Then ..., although I had not noticed it until I returned to the base, an aluminum fragment was driven around here on the left side of my neck." She puts her hand on the back of her neck.

"I have once crash-landed." I speak, after sipping beer. "I broke my leg at the time."

"On the sea, right?"

"This is the different story from that."

"Huh? Where?"

"I'm not sure ..." I laugh. "I wonder where I crash-landed. I lost my consciousness before I understood where I was."

"Were you brought to the hospital?"

"Probably, yes."

"Who brought you there?"

"I do not know ..."

"What happened to your aircraft?"

"I do not know ..." I then smile. "I have not seen it since then."

“How did you crash-land?”

“One of the tail empennages was blown away. Umm, but, the rudder was still working, mysteriously. So, as a tentative measure, I searched for a flat land and thought that I managed to make an emergency landing. However, one of the landing gears failed to come out. The aircraft landed head-first in a headlong orientation as if it was doing a handstand in front of a stable containing horses or cows. One of the main wings was caught in what appeared to be a morass and started sinking. The aircraft got stuck there, and I jumped off the cockpit by myself. I hit my back and, err, was left there. I do not remember what happened too well.”

“You only broke a leg?”

“Yeah. But at the time, I felt I broke my backbone, not a leg.” I chuckle. It is like a reminiscent smile. “It was so painful that I could not say a word. Horses, cows, or whatever seemed to be nearby, looking at me. I think there was a bird that looked like a duck. I was glad that a cat wasn’t there.”

“Why?”

“Because I dislike cats.”

Kusanagi claps her hands and laughs. I have not intended to say a joke.

“I crawled my way up from the morass, and was lying there with mud for hours. I was hoping that the aircraft would not explode. It was exhaling the smoke and the fuel was leaking onto the surface of the morass. I wanted to smoke a cigarette, but endured the urge. If the fuel caught fire, it would be the end. However ..., I thought it would not be a bad idea to deliberately ignite the fuel and burn the plane to notify someone that I was there. You know, I could smoke a cigarette by doing so. But, I gradually became sleepy, and things remained that way after that.”

“Since there were livestock animals, there had to be local residents nearby, correct?”

“Probably.” I nod. “Then, when I regained consciousness, I was in a bed in a hospital. By that time, I was feeling much better. I was just hungry. But, severely wounded folks were in the beds around me, so I could not quite show off how good my condition was. A few of them were dying there, you know.”

“Didn’t you think you wanted to die?”

“What?” I am about to tap my cigarette on an ashtray.

I raise my head to look at Kusanagi.

She puts one of her hands on her cheek and is staring at me.

“When you were severely wounded like that, didn’t you think you wanted to die, for all the heck you cared?”

“I was not that seriously wounded.”

“Haven’t you ever thought you wanted to die?”

I exhale the smoke. Although my beer still remains in the glass, I do not want to drink it anymore. It is almost 21:00, maybe. Two hours of time has passed already, since our arrival here.

“Have you ever thought you hate to live your life?” Kusanagi asks.

She is showing almost no expression. As usual, she is giving me a calm impression. However, it is obvious that she is somewhat lacking her balance. Her tone and gesture differ from usual. Of course, they are being influenced by alcohol.

“I have.” I nod. “Everyone has, I think. It is natural to think so, isn’t it?”

“What I just said belongs to a completely different dimension from such matters.” Kusanagi’s tone is becoming even calmer. “That is not what I meant. I mean, something like ... let’s put an end to it, or I have had enough of it ... I don’t know how to put it. It is like wanting to give up on something ...”

“What’s the difference?” I ask, while exhaling the smoke. I am surprised by the fact that my tone sounds cold, even from my perspective. “Can it be the same as children committing suicides?”

“No, that’s not it.” Kusanagi smiles slightly. “At least, it’s not impulsive. So, I think it has to be based on another motive. For example, it is close to setting the life expectancy in advance and plan the timing of death.”

“But, isn’t that also impulsive?”

“It is only so matter-of-factly as to be reminded of occasionally, long after having forgotten about it.” Kusanagi looks up at the ceiling. “Imagine this. A long time ago, someone makes a lifetime schedule to plan on which date to die. However, she

has forgotten about it completely, and is reminded of it today. So, how shall I put it? She feels glad about recalling the schedule.”

“Hmm.” I nod. “I do not think I experience that sort of thing.”

“Really?” Kusanagi looks at me. “For example, do you have any plan for the future?”

“Plan?”

“Until when do you intend to live?”

“I have not thought of it.”

“Why don’t you think and make a plan?”

“Thinking to make a plan is not going to get me anywhere. I know I will be shot by someone and die eventually in the future. Besides, I cannot imagine that.”

“But, it is your life.”

“I doubt it ...” I shrug. “People often say that sort of thing that way, but is it really my life?”

“If it is not yours, whose life is it?”

“No one’s life, I suppose.”

“Umm, okay, there is a religion like that.” Kusanagi nods slightly several times.

“Not a religion.”

“Getting angry?”

“How about you, Ms. Kusanagi?” I ask, while putting out the cigarette on the ashtray.

“Umm?” She leans her head.

“Have you thought you wanted to die?”

“Of course, very often.” She smiles. She is looking somewhat happy. Her expression is similar to that of Mizuki, I am noticing.

“Why don’t you die whenever you think that way?”

“Well, I wonder why.” Kusanagi leans her head even more. “If I endure and stay

alive a bit longer, then that feeling will disappear completely. After that, I will definitely think, “Thank goodness that I have not died yet.” I do not die probably because I can expect that.”

“But after that, you want to die again, right? Don’t you think that you would not have to have suffered from the torment if you had died sooner in the previous opportunity?”

“I do not think it is tormenting for me.”

“Really ...” I chuckle.

“It is like a telephone ringing and being silent.” Kusanagi closes her eyes. “If it continues to ring, it’s noisy. If it doesn’t ring, everyone will forget where the telephone is.”

I am becoming a little sleepy. I take a look at the clock.

Kusanagi opens her eyes and stares at me.

“You want to return to the base?” She asks.

“Yes.” I stand up. “Let’s clean this up.”

“We can stay here, if you want to.”

“Stay here?”

I look at the door leading to the bedroom. Then, I look at Kusanagi’s face again. For some reason, I am reminded of Fuko. I have not seen her for a long time. Tokino is probably visiting Kusumi, but I was not invited by him to join in. I wonder if Fuko is still waiting for Jinro Kurita.

“Did Mr. Kurita use to come here, too?” I ask.

“Yeah.” Kusanagi replies. But, she, who is cleaning up the table, stops her hands for a moment. A little after that, she looks up at me. “Why?”

If we were engaging in an aerial combat, that much of the delay in timing would have been fatal.

“Mr. Shinoda said a weird thing.”

“What did he say?”

“He said that you killed Mr. Kurita.”

“Hmm ...” Kusanagi slowly stands up. “How?”

“Well ..., he said you shot him, I think.”

“Oh, really ...”

Kusanagi brings the glasses to the kitchen. I take the plates with leftover food on them to the bar counter. She starts washing the glasses. I am standing and watching her over the bar counter. The water is flowing from the tap and she is washing the glasses with her hands. The water is falling down onto the sink and is making noise.

“By any chance, do you want to be killed?” Kusanagi is glancing at me.

“I’m not sure ...” I laugh.

I laugh seriously, I think.

-8-

Two days after that, I am flying in the sky with Yudagawa. He is a substitute for Tokino. He took off the eye bandage yesterday, and is saying that he is ready to go. Tokino’s fever has gone down and he seems to be doing fine, too. Still, he is conceding the role in the mission to Yudagawa, for some reason.

Three enemy bombers are heading for the west. If there are escort fighters, we will hold them in check or drive them away if possible. It is our ambiguous mission. In short, even if we fail to accomplish the mission, our allies are still capable of intercepting the bombers by using more massive attacks in the next area. We only have to confirm whether the escort fighters are actually guarding the bombers.

They are above the sea.

I see the bombers at the much higher altitude than we are flying. It is not possible for us to ascend to the level. Once we try to go that high, we will not be able to catch up with them. The supercharger Sasakura developed has not been installed yet, of course. The test drive has not even been implemented yet. As for Sasakura, he seems to be developing a different mechanism recently, and he does not even tell me anything about it.

The number of enemy fighters is four. The two of them are far away. The other

two are below us. I am thinking about returning to the base. So, I tell that to Yudagawa through the radio.

“Let’s just do our job before returning, at least a bit.” As he says so, he lowers his left wing to start diving.

I hesitate to decide what to do. Should I follow and assist him? Or, should I keep in check the two aircrafts above us?

Anyway, I start turning around and survey the lower sky. The two enemies are ascending toward us. Yudagawa is already lunging straight at them.

The two above us are not making the move yet. I am misjudging them. They are not intending to leave their duty of escorting the bombers. As for me, I do not feel like going that high up to that altitude. I expect the bombers to pack considerable firepower and return fire to fight back. Unless they lower their altitude, it is dangerous for me to lunge at them alone. I have made the decision, have my aircraft roll sideways, and have its nose point downward.

However, after analyzing it later in retrospect, this hesitation of a few seconds is the cause of defeat. We learn of this sort of thing in hindsight, only after it has occurred. I figure out the cause of the defeat, and write it down on a report. The report form has such a blank space to be filled. That is the way it is.

Yudagawa’s first attack injects bullets into the fuel tank of one of the enemies. The aircraft explodes before falling into the sea. But, when Yudagawa pitches the nose of his aircraft upward near the surface of the water, the other enemy is getting behind him.

I am behind them.

When my right hand pulls the trigger to shoot the bullets, the enemy shoots at Yudagawa.

Yudagawa escapes to the left, and the enemy follows suit by banking to the left as well.

I shoot again.

I am close to the sea surface.

I turn to the right, and check the upper sky while revving up the engine.

No one is there.

The two enemies at the higher altitude have already gone to somewhere.

The bombers are nowhere to be found, hidden in the clouds.

I climb to the higher altitude, assume the inverted orientation, and then roll my aircraft 180 degrees to return to the horizontal flight.

I bank the wings right and left to check below.

At the time, I see Yudagawa's aircraft. It is right before diving into the sea.

One of the enemies has crashed into the sea.

This means that both the bullets the enemy has shot and the bullets that I shot hit the respective targets.

I confirm the location.

It is at least 50 kilometers off the coast.

I look up into the sky.

I recognize the other enemy fighters quite far away.

I report the counts of enemy bombers and fighters by transmitting the cipher that has been set in advance, via the long-wave radio.

I descend and search the sea surface again. But, I can see nothing. The wind is strong and the wave is high. Only the rough sea is there. I cannot even find the smoke anywhere.

I take a look at the fuel level indicator. I have enough fuel to stay there for a while. I turn around again. I fly to the higher altitude and look around, to check if there is a ship nearby.

After turning around four times, I give up and decide to return to the base.

-9-

In Kusanagi's office, I am reporting the situation, in which Yudagawa was shot down, for about an hour. The telephone sometimes rings and interrupts my explanation. Apparently, the call is about the updated information regarding the bombers after the encounter. I am not interested in it.

Kusanagi puts her hand on her forehead, and sighs several times. She is not saying a word to accuse me, but I cannot state that her eyes glaring at me are not showing any sign of the accusation. It is obvious. There is no one else who is responsible for it.

“Did you have to decide to retreat?” Kusanagi asks me.

“No.” I shake my head. “If I started descending two seconds earlier than that, I would have shot down the two enemies and gotten back here.”

“That is not the point of my question.”

“According to the flight training program, we have to fight back when we encounter two enemies. Therefore, he made no mistake in making the judgment.”

However, the difference in judgment lies in the fact that there were four of them instead of two.

“That’s enough.” She closes her eyes. “Take a rest. You are dismissed ...”

“Thank you, ma’am.” I stand up, and get out of the room after making a salute.

As I climb down the stairs, I see Tokino and Shinoda waiting in the lounge. Only one aircraft has returned. The last part of the story is obvious. They are looking at me. They want to know the first half of the story.

I am reminded of the day when I first visited a church.

Being led by my father’s hand, I entered the church. Many chairs were lined up and, at the innermost part, many people were singing in high voices. Those many voices were mixed, and echoed in the building. They then transformed into the indistinct bass of the mysterious sound, which was beyond description, and then enveloped me. A very high ceiling, and finely crafted primary-colored stained-glass windows. The domed ceiling was surrounded by mosaics, on which humanoids with wings were depicted.

I was standing in a narrow spacing between rows of chairs. I could only see the ceiling and the stained-glass windows. I wanted to see the cross, but I could not do so because the people standing in front of me were blocking my view. It was strange that many high-frequency sounds echoed and transformed into the bass sound. I thought only my ears were acting weird.

While I am walking toward the front of Tokino and Shinoda, I feel as if I am walking on an aisle in that cathedral. I finally light my cigarette after I sit down on a sofa.

“Don’t worry about that.” Tokino speaks first.

“Where was it at?” Shinoda squints, and asks.

“Above the sea.” I answer. Then, I shake my head. “He was not dead at that point. But ... there is no chance for him to survive.”

“The rescue is on the way, right?” Tokino asks.

“Probably.” I nod. Kusanagi was mentioning that.

I exhale the bitter smoke, and sigh. Sweats are running down my forehead. It is not hot. I do not understand why I am sweating.

“It was, well, the sixth.” I murmur.

This is the sixth case in which the aircraft flying with me is shot down. Among the cases, only one pilot has been rescued. He is still alive, but he is not likely to come back to the base for any assignment, because he has lost the eyesight.

Then, I explain the situation to them. I have already reported in Kusanagi’s office, so I think I am duplicating it quite smoothly.

What I saw when I last turned around was a rough, gray sea.

I have returned to the base alone.

The time span I had to endure when I was flying back to the base.

It was a really terrible time.

I cannot run away.

At the same time, I do not want to think about anything.

After I am done with talking, Tokino takes beer from the refrigerator and starts drinking. Shinoda stands up and gets out of the lounge without words. I am lighting a new cigarette.

I feel as if I were hearing the hymn in the cathedral.

“I should have been the one on the mission.” Tokino clucks his tongue.

Oh, I see, I think.

I have not even thought of that scenario, because I feel I am the only one who is responsible for that. However, so does Tokino, and probably Shinoda, too ... Even Kusanagi might be thinking that it is her own responsibility.

In any case.

It is the easiest way for us to think that it is our respective responsibility.

If everything is my own responsibility, then the only thing I have to do is to provide closure to issues. It can be concluded. Thinking that it is someone else's responsibility makes things more complicated and harder to process.

I take a shower, and then go back to my room. I have thought that I cannot sleep at all, but I give up and lie down on the bed. Tokino is not coming back to the room. I guess he is trying to leave me alone.

I hear a knock on the door, but I act as if I am sleeping and remain silent. The door is opened, and Sasakura looks into the room. Since the room is dark, he should not be able to see my face.

“Kannami?” Sasakura calls my name. “Are you sleeping?”

I remain silent.

The door is quietly closed.

Even when Tokino comes back to the room several hours later, I have not slept yet. He seems to fall asleep instantly on the top of our bunk bed.

I am shutting my eyes.

However, I am seeing the gray sea all the time.

“Shouldn't I have gotten accustomed to it by now?” I speak to myself.

Before I know it, my right hand is grasping my left wrist.

Is he still alive?

Does he want to die?

I am recalling what Kusanagi was talking about.

I am recalling various things.

Most of them are what I do not want to recall.

How can I ... shake off these memories?

Suito Kusanagi enters my room and whispers near my face.

“Do you want to be killed, too?”

It is a dream.

When I wake up, it is already bright outside the window.

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I put on a flight suit and get out of the room.

Due to a fog, not even half of the runway is visible. The hangar is shuttered. I open a side door to check the interior of the hangar, but no one is inside.

My aircraft is there.

I get closer to it and touch it.

Cold.

The joint between the main wing and the body is covered with aluminum wing root fairing. Narrowly spaced rivets. The smooth curvature of the surface reflects the world while warping the image.

The smoother the boundary is, the better it is.

Because it reduces friction.

Every part of aircrafts is designed to be smooth.

I could not sleep last night, probably because I am trying to connect yesterday and today smoothly.

In order not to forget.

Then, to forget.

I go outside the hangar to smoke. I light the cigarette, walk the runway diagonally to head for another hangar that is located across the office building. That is where Yudagawa's aircraft has been assigned for mooring.

The shutter is closed.

I shudder.

Suito Kusanagi is standing there, while letting her back lean on the shutter.

She is smoking, too.

“So early.” Kusanagi says.

“Yes, I went to bed early.” I am telling a lie. I look at the wristwatch. It is still 04:30. It is before dawn.

“We have not found him yet.” Kusanagi shakes her head slightly.

“Well, I am afraid that the successful rescue is unlikely.” I reply. “You have to hire a new pilot again ...”

“Probably, there is no more reinforcement.”

“What? Why?”

“We are moving out, I think.”

“Moving out? From this airbase? To where?”

“I don’t know ...” Kusanagi sighs.

“Are we all moving out together?”

“I’m not sure ...”

It is not unusual. Rather, this sort of thing is quite frequent. Our stage keeps moving. It is a part of our job. We, lower rank soldiers, cannot understand the whole picture of this war. Kusanagi might know more than I do. But, even so, her comprehension of this war spans a little wider range, and that is all. To begin with, I am not interested in it. As I am told to do so, I will fly to any place, any time.

“Then ..., I might take a short sleep at the office.” Kusanagi throws the stub into an ashtray. “Is there anything you want to say?”

“No, nothing.” I shake my head.

Kusanagi is walking toward the office. I take out one more cigarette, and decide to walk around a little more.

My head feels dizzy, and it is a good sign. It would be marvelous if my head continued to feel dizzy forever.

While walking, I am hearing the hymn in the cathedral again.

It was someone's funeral.

Yes, my little sister's funeral.

I am being reminded of it.

Being led by my father's hand, I was walking in the dark aisle.

Around the ceiling of the cathedral, parts between the dome and the beams are plastered, and the mosaics were placed there as well.

I was looking toward the ceiling above me most of the time. The humanoids with wings were looking mysterious, and they were pretty much the only things I was looking at.

I did not know where my sister had gone.

Because I did not even think that people would die.

At that time, my sister was being laid to rest in a small box.

Is she under the ground now?

Has she already been decomposed by now ...?

The dark, gray sea.

The hymn.

The glittering scales are falling down from the moth's wings.

Suddenly, I am recalling something. It is the white face of Mizuki Kusanagi.

I do not remember my little sister's face.

Episode 4: Spinner

Lionel was either unwilling or unable to speak up at once. At any rate, he waited till the hiccupping aftermath of his tears had subsided a little. Then his answer was delivered, muffled but intelligible, into the warmth of Boo Boo's neck. "It's one of those things that go up in the air," he said. "With string you hold."

This excerpt is from *Down at the Dinghy*, a short story included in *Nine Stories* (written by J. D. Salinger)

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It was raining on the moving day. For pilots, rainy days are the birthdays of demons. I am afraid of the one which does not usually make merry deciding to make merry. It makes me hope that this gloomy day is over as soon as possible. It looks as if each raindrop clung to the canopy is being controlled from hell. I am urged to expect them to suddenly form an evil grin on the cowl, as the runway gets closer. Once I reach the sky above the cloud, I will have nothing to do with the climate. Therefore, only by ascending with sheer determination against the instinct of the Earth, I can escape from the gloom. However, since we have failed to become the angels, we have to go back to the Earth in the end. As the altitude decreases, the gloom of the ground recurs. Human beings are such existences that cling to the humid ground and live miserably.

If the rain were a little harder, our flight would have been postponed. When we were taking off from the ground, the rain was still gentle. About 15:00, Senryu, an old type of aircraft, arrived at the base. It was the first time for me to see a two-seat Mark E. Its pilot was a good-natured middle-aged man named Mugiro Yamagiwa. Suito Kusanagi got into the aircraft. Three Sankas, piloted by Tokino, I, and Shinoda, in this order, took off and followed this Senryu. Even though we were feeling the peace of mind thanks to the fact that we had a guiding aircraft, by the time that we were lowering the altitude to land, the sun was setting, the sky was becoming completely dark, and the rain was getting more torrential. The condition would not allow the pilots to check other aircrafts other than lights with naked eye.

I could say it was a miracle that all of the four aircrafts successfully landed on the runway just with a single attempt. I am sure that Kusanagi was proud of the feat.

Occasionally, there are times during which pilots feel the urge to return to the ground even if a landing gear happens to be broken. That is more or so the case, when the pilot is close to an unknown airbase at which the pilot cannot easily recognize the aerodynamics involving the winds to aviate the plane.

We were not sure at the night how large the new airbase was. A simple and frugal party was held in the cafeteria, in which the four of us were welcomed. It seemed that Mugiro Yamagiwa was the leader of the squadron stationed in the base, and he seemed to have five subordinate pilots. But, those who attended the welcome party were four. They were all males who had similar impressions. We joked, "If one of them is traded to our team, then the number of pilots for the two teams would become the same." Although two weeks had already passed since Yudagawa went missing in action, our team had yet to recruit the new member. I heard that the previous base was not going to be used for a while. I am getting worried about Sasakura, and have decided to ask Kusanagi about him in the middle of the party.

"Why do you ask?" She glares at me with a sideways glance. "As of now, I have heard nothing of him."

In short, does it mean that the mechanics are still staying at the previous base? It is not that such a massive amount of facilities can easily be transferred from one base to another. Besides, this airbase should have its own facilities and engineering personnel.

"I mean, he has helped me with this and that ..." The choice of my expression is as casual as possible. "Also, I'm interested in what he was developing."

"If it is that much useful, then it would become widespread, sooner or later." Kusanagi's tone is even more casual.

"By the way, why have we moved into this airbase?" I place the glass in my hand onto the table and take out a cigarette. Occasionally, someone might have looked at Kusanagi and me, but none of them should be overhearing our conversation. It is because Tokino is speaking loudly to a group of people, gathering at a part of the cafeteria that is slightly far away from us.

"If you are asking me about it, you have got to be insane, you know?" Kusanagi whispers, sniffs, and smiles.

"I am doing so, probably because I'm drunk." I exhale the cigarette smoke and

sigh simultaneously. “For example, is it normal for me to assume on a constant basis that a large-scale combat is about to occur in the near future at any moment?”

“There is always the possibility that it would result in ending up being in a large scale.” She says so, while taking her eyes away from me and observing other people. “At times, many people may be forced to move from place to place, no thanks to the plans and motives that we cannot understand at all. I mean, it might be a short period or a long term. Could it be based on a political reason related to the election, or the managerial strategy of the military company? In short, it is like plants that are shaken when a strong gust of wind blows. Everyone intuitively knows that being shaken along with the wind is the way of the preventive measure not to be snapped.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier just to be snapped and fall off in the early phase?”

“Well, nothing has to be easier than dying.”

Although I do not know who brought a guitar to the cafeteria, someone is playing guitar, and many start singing along in chorus. I am not a big fan of such a noisy environment, so I am stepping outside.

It has already stopped raining. The light from the office is reflected here and there on the asphalt in front of the building. The humidity is high, and the air is stuffy. But, it is not cold. The sticky fog is twining around night-lights like cotton candies, and is muffling the buzzy noises from the light bulbs.

There is a small piloti-based building beside a passage corridor connecting the billet and the office. Two vehicle-shaped stationary rides, which are often seen in amusement parks and shopping malls, are installed. One is in the shape of a fire engine and the other is a helicopter. The boxes to insert coins are standing beside the respective rides. I guess, they are designed to shake back and forth or right and left while making loud noises. Their round and smooth designs like those of eggs are lovely. Still, they are so weathered and dirty. They are probably disposed articles brought in from somewhere. At least, they are not dumped here. This may mean that children come to this airbase occasionally. They do not look broken, and seem to be still functional. However, the reason why they are placed here still remains a mystery.

I get in the fire engine, and take a seat. The surface is slippery and cold. Then, the

spacing of the seat is cramped. It is too small for my body size, to say the least. I'm not willing to insert a coin. Instead, I light a cigarette again. I am still drunk a bit.

As I am looking at the huge cotton candies being developed in front of the building, Tokino appears.

"Oh, Kannami. It's you." With a cigarette oriented at an angle in his mouth, he is approaching me. "Have you ever dreamed of becoming a firefighter?"

"Is the party over?"

"No, it seems to be on pace to go on forever." While blasting the smoke from his mouth, Tokino sighs. "We meet similar kind of people wherever we go, in reality. I mean, as of late, I have rarely met guys that are strange enough to shock me to the level that I am forced to say 'I have never seen anyone like this'."

"Have there been such shock providers back in the days?"

"I have met them." Tokino nods. "You know, it may be attributed to the fact that I was young back then. It may just be relative, perhaps."

"Ah, I see."

Tokino gets in the helicopter-shaped stationary ride next to the ride that is designed after a fire engine. He is bigger than I am. Moreover, although the fire engine is a roofless convertible, the helicopter has the roof, which makes him look more cramped in the limited space. I could have asked if I should take his place. But, I keep myself silent because I cannot come up with the reason why I have to get into the helicopter.

"How claustrophobic this gets." Tokino comments merrily. "This is the first time for me to get on a helicopter. I just cannot believe why this baby can fly, despite its having no wings ..."

He tries to shake it by moving his body. It makes the creaking sound.

"You will be reprimanded if you break it." I advise.

Then, another one appears.

The figure is approaching us straight from the office, which is located beyond the piloti-based building. A thin, short one. Judging from the appearance, I first have thought that the one is a male. But, as I hear the voice, I am finally convinced that

the one is a female.

“What are you doing there?” She asks.

“No, nothing in particular.” I reply. “Is there any age limit here?”

“You over there.” The woman is glaring at Tokino. “You were shaking it, weren’t you?”

“No, how can I do such a thing?” Tokino laughs. “I was trying to get off, and I might have been struggling to do so.”

“You are those who have come to this base today, right?”

“Yes.” I nod.

“The one named Kannami ... Is he still in the cafeteria?”

“Oh, no, he isn’t there anymore ...” I reply. “I think so, you know.”

“Then, did he go back to his room?”

“No, not yet ... I guess.”

“Is he going out somewhere?”

“Well, I don’t think so.”

“No, do not tell me. Are you the one?” The woman asks. She seems to be finally noticing that I am the one she is looking for, because I have been giggling while making replies. “You’re drunk, aren’t you?”

“Even though I’m drunk, I’m Kannami.”

“Why haven’t you told me so from the beginning?”

“Because I wasn’t asked to do so.” I shrug deliberately. “Then, what do you want?”

“Oh, well ...” She opens her eyes and examines me. “So, you are the one ... Hmm, this is somewhat of a surprise. You are completely different from what I have expected.”

“Hey, I’m Tokino, by the way. Am I different from what you have expected?” The pilot who was cramped in the helicopter asks.

“I’m Mitsuya. Nice to meet you.” She ignores Tokino, and extends her hand

toward me.

“I am yet to wash my hands.” Instead of shaking hands with her, I open both arms and smile back at her.

“Nice to meet you.”

Tokino greets her, but Mitsuya does not turn to him. She is glaring at me, with a face that is about to burst into laughter. “I look forward to tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? Are you going to a circus, or something?” I ask.

“Do you like a circus?” She asks back.

“That depends on what kind of circus it is.” I answer.

Mitsuya turns around swiftly, and goes back the way she came. She has her back straight, and each of her steps is showing the confidence within her. It reminds me of a pair of compasses that a navigator uses on a chart, and then, of Kusanagi. Even when she disappears into the door of the office, she does not look back. While seeing her back, I and Tokino show each other’s bitter smirks, and make sure that we share the same sense of defeat as if we have drawn blanks on a lottery. Does she have her room in the office, or does she still have work to do?

“What’s that?” Tokino asks, while curling his back in the helicopter. “Is she your fan?”

“I prefer a propeller to a fan.”

“Right. We prefer a propeller to a rotor.” Tokino smiles. “Anyway, she is not an amiable woman, is she? When I meet such type of woman, I’m urged to insert coins into her mouth. Talk about being very arrogant. I guess she is broken, don’t you think?”

“She might actually have a high position, the right to be arrogant.”

“If that is the case, then she wouldn’t bother shaking hands.”

That’s right, I thought so at the time. In short, it was the first night when I met Midori Mitsuya, and the first place where I met Midori Mitsuya. Such a night and such a place are both valuable because each of them is once in a lifetime, the only ones in the world. So, I can say that I must not throw it into a garbage can immediately. It would be safer for me to pin it onto a part of a partition or a cork

board. When someone encounters another one for the first time, no one can predict how important the one will be in the future. We can pin down only the hunch. Only by pinning it, we can feel relieved. By the next morning, I have completely forgotten about her.

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In the next morning, the weather is fine. Now I know that a small hill is standing very close to the airbase. We actually entered the region of the dangerous terrain around the base last night, and the very thought makes me shudder with fear.

I am brushing my teeth while viewing the runway, and Tokino gets up. He is wrapping a towel around his head. I do not understand why he is doing so. Perhaps, he wants me to ask him the reason. His face is indicating so, and I have just decided not to ask him on purpose.

“That was the top class.” He utters, while feeling the glare from outside and sees the view from the window.

“You mean, the runway?”

“You know, that woman ... last night.” While turning on the faucet to let the water pour, Tokino says.

“Who?”

“Well, the woman named Mitsuya.”

“Oh ...” I am recalling her for the first time. “Umm, I am wondering if she has such a name. I don’t remember well ...”

“It seems that she is the ace. I heard it from everyone after that.”

I slept early last night, but Tokino seemed to have gone back to the place where everyone was after that.

“You mean the ace in baseball?”

“Come on.”

I smile. Of course, I know what he means from the beginning. There is nothing surprising about it in particular. Female aces are not unusual. About 20 percent of the pilots in our company are females. In my personal opinion, there are more

capable female pilots than male counterparts on average. In short, the chance for females becoming the ace pilots is higher than that for males by that much. I'm not sure at all what vector is working on the trend. Or, I wonder if the females are hired based on the higher standards of recruiting selection processes. Or, (in my personal opinion though) does it have to do with the possibility that females tend to be less daunted than males? That is, according to this analysis, females are more likely to make a step deeper into the final phase of matters. Obviously, this obsession can increase the accuracy of bullets hitting the targets. On the other hand, the chance for the female pilots to lose their lives should go up higher accordingly. But, such data probably do not exist. After thinking about the issue to that extent, I am beginning to think that only my right hand is that of a female.

"There was one before." Tokino says after washing his face. "Anyway, female aces tend to be beyond our controls."

"So do male aces, I think."

"I don't care about males. You are our ace, actually. Do as you like."

"I heard that Ms. Kusanagi was terrific." I say.

"Who said that?"

"Mr. Sasakura." I cannot pronounce the name accurately because I'm brushing my teeth.

"Oh ..." Tokino nods. "Aren't you missing him after being allocated in different places?"

"Why?"

"The skillful mechanics like him are very rare these days. I miss him so much, too." Tokino curves his lips. "Speaking of which, Ms. Kusanagi is beyond our controls as well. Someone has got to do something about that. Anyway, you are free, so I would like you to do anything as you like."

"What are you talking about?" I break out into laughter.

"Yawn ..." Tokino gapes. "It pains me to recognize again that a morning without a hangover is so realistic like this. Who will help a young man shivering with worries? Ah, I mean, there is a clear reason. There was not enough alcohol last

night. Everything just comes down to that. I couldn't sleep at all. It sucks."

"I heard your snoring, though."

"I was pretending to be sleeping. You know, I wanted you not to worry about me. I am gentle, aren't I? After all, you are our ace pilot. I hope you maintain yourself in the best possible condition. That is the result of my mentality as your friend. Same is true for Ms. Kusanagi. We have to save face, supposedly. We are counting on you, Kannami."

"So, what is that for?"

Tapping my back, Tokino is walking back toward our room. As for me, I'm still having the toothbrush in my mouth.

The word 'ace' probably has been obsolete for a long time. When I belonged to the previous team, I was standing out even more than I do now. I once did twice as much work as the other six pilots could do combined. For that reason, I was treated special, and no one talked to me. My coward boss at the time was too timid to look straight into my eyes. I think that everyone wanted me to die as soon as possible. In short, that is what the ace is about.

Sigh.

Toothpaste foam is overflowing from my mouth.

I can see a flag over the roof of the office building. From the way it is fluttering, I can tell the direction and the strength of the wind. It is now blowing opposite to the direction of that last night.

I think I will return to our room and organize my belongings. I share the room with Tokino in this airbase, too. But, as expected, I am being summoned to the conference.

I and Tokino have yet to take the belongings out of the cardboard boxes. So, I start searching for clothes to wear for going to the conference room.

"Since it is urgent, I think we can wear anything." Although I am saying so, Tokino shakes his head sideways.

"They say the first time is important, right?"

He possesses a relatively scrupulous aspect like this. I end up putting on a

wrinkled jacket (I do not have time to iron it.), and rush to the conference room. We enter the dimly lit room, and take the seats at the edge of a table. It seems that we are the last ones, and the others are already in the room.

“Then, let’s start, shall we?” Mugiro Yamagiwa announces with a smile. As Kusanagi darkens the room light even more, the center of the screen, that is hung with an inclination from the ceiling, is lit in a shape that is rectangular with respect to the orientation of the surface. “In this afternoon, you are going to participate in the largest project we have ever run.”

For an hour after that, we gaze into the screen without words, and develop in our brains what Yamagiwa is speaking of. The large project seems to only mean that we will head for one place in great numbers. As a result, the firepower will be consequently concentrated into one location. *What purpose is it for? What meaning will it have? What results will the operation deliver?* Such explanations have all been omitted. That is nothing new. We do not want to listen to such talks anyway.

From this base, eight fighter aircrafts are taking off. According to the plan, the number will go up to 20 aircrafts in the middle of the mission, and it will reach approximately 80 at the last point. In addition to that, about 30 medium bombers, and 20 heavy bombers in the higher altitude. Moreover, one step ahead of us, about 40 other fighters and about 50 ground-attack aircrafts are scheduled to assault two bases in the front line that are positioned closer to our side. The combative capabilities of the enemy bases are expected to be decreased by 40 percent, by the time we arrive at the location.

“To begin with, they are no big deals. That is not even an issue.” Yamagiwa comments. It sounds like a joke to make us laugh and relax. At least, I should not believe what he says as it is. Against the enemy capabilities that are not supposed to be worthy of becoming an issue, we would not even bother mobilizing as many as 50 ground-attack aircrafts in the first place.

If possible, we want to intercept the main forces of the enemies as deep into the front line as possible. But we do not know what we can do until we get there. We may assume that we would encounter them above the ocean before we reach the projected point of operation. Our estimate of enemy fighters that may appear within the time of operation is about 100 to 150. Whatever possible reason such data might be based on, it cannot be pessimistic in any case. It is always based on

optimistic measures. Actually, at least, what I mean is that the data and the statistical numbers that are told to us are underestimated.

The groups that are scheduled to join the operation afterward are not mentioned. My guess is that they are more likely to constitute the main forces. There is a rule, according to which those who arrive at the war zone later are ranked higher.

About some expected troubles, measures to deal with them are explained. Everyone would think to prefer a quick death in an instantaneous explosion to getting tangled up with messy situations. There is a “questions and answers” session after the briefing, but no one speaks up.

After the moments of silence, Midori Mitsuya, sitting the closest to the screen, raises her hand subtly.

“What is it?” Yamagiwa raises his chin a little.

“I would like to ask a question that is not related to combat. Would it not be a problem?” Mitsuya asks in brisk pronunciation.

“Permission granted.”

“Will the party for tonight be canceled?” She asks.

“A party will be held again?” Tokino, sitting next to me, utters.

“The children in the neighborhood come to play here once in two months.” Mitsuya looks at us and explains with no expression. “Tonight is the night.”

“Pardon me.” Tokino lowers his head. “I didn’t know that.”

“We are not canceling it.” Yamagiwa answers. “The operation is top secret. We don’t have to inform them of the cancellation.”

“Understood.” Mitsuya nods. “We might end up being behind the schedule by the time it starts.”

She is sounding like she is worrying more about making it to the party to be held in the evening. It might be a funny joke. Or, it can be interpreted as heartwarmingly businesslike.

Silence prevails once again.

“Anything else?” For some reason, Yamagiwa is looking straight at me.

I shake my head a little without words.

“Ms. Kusanagi, do you have anything else to add?” Yamagiwa looks back at the vicinity by the wall.

“Probably, it will be above the ocean.” Kusanagi says plainly. “Once the front bases are attacked in the initial phase, the enemy will try to do something about it. If their fighters fly above them all over the place, then they won’t be able to aim at targets that are flying above them. They will try to push forward, even if it is difficult. That is definitely going to be the case.”

“That will help us as well.” Tokino comments in a low voice.

However, our operation is to prevent them from aiming higher above us.

“That is quite a distance.” Kusanagi looks at me. “The Sanka team should hold onto the drop tanks until the last seconds.”

“If possible, we want to drop them onto the enemy fields.” Tokino whispers again.

Kusanagi sees us sideways. It is a gentle face, and she looks as if she is even smiling a little. She has been looking gloomy in the last few days. Compared to that, her current impression is looking much healthier. It is probably because of the luminous contrast that was generated from the vivid light of the projector.

“Then, see you in 20 minutes at the runway.” Yamagiwa says. He makes a big sigh. “More power to all of you ...”

Everyone stands up.

We get out of the room through the door, one by one.

At the corner of the room, Suito Kusanagi is standing with her arms crossed. My gaze meets hers again.

While walking, I consciously clench my right fist. Then, a chill suddenly runs down my spine. It is as usual. Nothing new. I can say that I try this to make sure and enjoy the reaction. Is this chilling feeling the tremor of excitement? Is this intensity giving me the chills? It is always repeated accurately. Even though it seems to be complicated, we only possess very simple circuitries in the end. Sometimes, I feel as if I were a machine.

When getting out to the piloti-based building, I take a look at my right hand. It is as if I am looking at the face of my wristwatch, while I am going out with a girl, without letting her notice it.

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There are two runways, and eight of our aircrafts take off in no time.

The wind is good. The visibility is fine, too. I see the scenery around the airbase for the first time. The sea is closer than expected. The surrounding vicinity is almost entirely covered with wetlands. The images of the blue sky are reflected here and there on the surface. A slightly elevated mountain is standing alone, on top of which an antenna tower is erected. A city is located beyond the mountain. Roads that appear to have been built recently stretch straight toward the downtown area.

We are flying toward the east along the shore for a while.

Our three aircrafts are Sankas, whereas the other five are twin-engined Someakas. Our Sankas are flying below and behind their Someakas.

The harmony of the multiple buzzing is comfortable to me. Additionally, the sound is intermittently heard after being stirred with the wind noise. Although the sky is clear, the one ruling the space around us is a mischievous devil with no shadow. This imp is making the sound discontinuous.

In about 30 minutes, about 10 aircrafts are ascending from below us. We slow down a bit to wait for them. They look like a new type of Sankas. I have never seen such a paint application. The upper side is painted in camouflage of ultramarine blue and light blue. The figure of their cowlings is obviously different from ours. Which means that they carry a new type of engines. Even though I want to observe them carefully, I have decided to do it later.

By the time the bombers appear above the clouds in front of us, the space around us is filled with many aircrafts. It is looking like a multi-level parking lot.

I am shaking my body rapidly, and have been humming a certain musical tune. It has been my favorite rock 'n' roll song since my childhood days, but I do not know the title. I do not know the lyric, except for the final phrase.

I am letting only my eyes do the work, and observe the dazzling sky. Not being

able to look at many places at the same time is the weakest point of human eyes.

My right hand is on the control stick. My left hand is on the throttle lever. My both feet are on the rudder pedals.

My right hand seems to be waiting for the preys.

Relax. Loosen the strength.

Yet.

It is like a fierce beast hiding while steadying the breathing.

In order to kill.

Holding the breath for now.

Staying still quietly.

No sound. No hope. No light. No purpose.

Just waiting.

My back feels another version of me existing outside me.

I am stealing out of myself.

I am stealing out of this aircraft.

I am stealing out of the society, and the Earth.

I am floating, far and far away.

Such an illusion.

It chills my spine.

Someone's hand touches my shoulder gently.

The one whispers softly.

“Hey, why don't you run wild all over the place?”

It is when I feel the breathing right by my ear.

They're coming.

The upper sky to my right.

Countless dots.

Immediately, I receive the radio contact.

My body is getting colder and colder.

I am ready to shiver.

I release my right hand from the control stick once, and shake it slightly.

And then, I grab the control stick firmly again.

“You will take care of three enemies.” I hear Tokino’s voice with some noise.

I see the belly of Tokino’s aircraft ascending to my right.

Right after that, the battle order is issued.

“You’ve jumped the gun to take a flier.” I say to Tokino.

But, what else can be out there in the sky?

I push up the throttle lever slowly, and check the meters. Nothing wrong with the oil pressure. Check the fuel. I then roughly calculate the remaining amount of fuel in the drop tank. While recalling Kusanagi’s advice, I have decided to wait a little longer until I drop it.

There is no cloud.

This kind of field is rare.

The location of the sun is almost exactly straight behind me.

As the first positioning, this may give me a slight advantage.

Anti-aircraft guns are starting to roar far below me. Are they trying to read the wind, or are they just bluffing? Since their aircrafts have already come too close to them, they cannot continue shooting shells.

The coastline is close. It is the expected position. They will probably try to lure us to the zone above the ocean.

The twin-engined Someakas fly around from above. The nimbler Sankas climb up from the lower altitude. At least these basic operational maneuvers have already been planned from the start.

But before that, I need to gain the altitude.

I just keep on ascending.

The enemies are gaining on me, and getting closer and closer.

How many are there? Like the leaves drifting on the surface of a river, the formation is beautiful. As we split into two groups, the enemies start spreading to both sides.

I hear the command to make a lunge for the right side.

We can execute such a team play only during the first phase.

The battle will soon turn into a melee and we will dance with each other.

At least, I want to survive until the dance time comes.

I fasten my belt again.

I straighten up in the seat.

I close my eyes for about two seconds. *One, two.*

Take a deep breath.

The first group of our aircrafts is descending obliquely. They are describing a large arc to go around to the opposite side.

Then, the next group is making a lunge to the right front side.

I and Tokino belong to the next team.

“Don’t worry about me.” Tokino says. A funny joke.

“I’m released from something.” I say so, and then control the ailerons.

The wings are leaning to one direction. While slipping diagonally, my aircraft starts descending rapidly.

An easy half-rolling.

I descend, while keeping my aircraft upside-down.

Over my head, the sea and the white waves.

The blood does not rush to my head, when I am upside-down.

I check the instrument panel.

After checking the right and left sides, I half-roll the aircraft once.

I look around.

Three enemies ahead of me.

I target the slowest one, and adjust the angle of diving.

I look back to make sure of the safety.

I roll to the opposite direction, and carefully survey the space around me.

My right hand gently unlocks the safety lock.

I close the throttle to control the speed.

Swing the rudder left and right to apply the air brake.

Apparently, the enemies are shooting.

How hasty ... Too soon.

He cannot even direct his nose toward me.

The first one will enter my shooting range in three seconds.

In the meantime, I look around to choose the second target.

Shall I use the flaps to slow down even more? I think about it for a moment, and then I roll over and pull the control stick.

While making a turn right before stalling, I race the engine and let the propeller torque swing the nose sideways.

Good timing.

My right hand pulls the trigger for about two seconds.

In the middle of the process, my left hand is closing the throttle.

I check behind me, look to the right and then the left, and then check the view ahead of me.

The enemy is already spitting fire. *First, one down.*

I make a turn.

I am slowly rolling and ascending.

The second enemy is turning around far below me.

Another one is trying to lunge at me from behind, deviated at a certain degree from the longitudinal axis. *It cannot catch up on me*, I figure.

While maintaining the middle throttle, I let it dive.

I roll once again just in case, survey the surroundings, and then pull the elevator input.

I see the ocean to my side.

A bit far away from me, the coastline is white. What appears to be a blackish sandbreak forest stretches long and far.

Anti-air shells explode close to me. I am afraid that it is closer to their allies than me. They are getting reckless.

I hold my breath.

My body is being pressed against the seat.

As expected, the enemy is right in front of me.

My right hand shoots the machine gun.

That one is not good.

After going too far, I turn to the left immediately.

I might have lowered the altitude a little too much.

Both above and below me, there are numerous dots.

But what I can hear is only my engine sound.

Occasionally, I can see tiny flames.

Besides, streaks of black smokes are wriggling like snakes and are causing obstructions.

I want to move smoothly. That is all that I think.

One enemy is coming from the higher altitude to the left.

I turn to the opposite side ahead of time.

I gradually ascend.

“Are you still alive?” Tokino’s voice.

“I might be dead.” I reply.

Once again, bullets are shot from a distance. I ignore the attack.

While gaining the altitude even more, I observe the maneuvers of the enemy that I missed earlier.

I guess that it will soon execute the turning maneuver. I have decided to test it again after reading its course. After pretending to advance toward a different direction for a short while, I cut my way straight toward the target with my aircraft inverted upside-down.

The aircraft has just started to think about chasing another target.

I push up the throttle lever.

The engine starts racing with the splendid breathing.

I am reminded of Sasakura for a moment.

I am rolling over by 180 degrees.

With a slight angle of diving, I make a lunge.

I instantly reach the maximum speed, and the warning sound is issued.

There is no one else around me anymore.

I see three aircrafts in the higher altitude behind me, but they are distant.

I see what is ahead of me again, and adjust the direction with the rudders.

I half-roll to let the wings stay erect, and then I start turning sharply.

Since the enemy notices it and turns to the left, I make the nose of my aircraft turn smoothly to the same direction. This is mine. I never miss from this distance.

After counting three, I shoot the gun only for a second.

I break away immediately.

I check the instrument panel.

I find no abnormality.

I shake my aircraft to right and left with the ailerons to check the situation around me.

I ascend.

I see the enemy aircraft that I have just shot emitting black smoke and going

down. Two down.

Around the upper-front direction diagonally to the right, approximately a few hundred meters away, an anti-air shell has exploded. With a delay, I hear something hitting the canopy. It might be getting scratches.

There seems to be no one close to me. That is the reason why I am being targeted from below.

Everyone else is flying closer to the sea.

Have our bombers already passed the danger zone?

I look at the direction, but I cannot discern the situation because smokes are floating here and there.

I read the watch.

While ascending, I release the drop tank.

My aircraft is now even lighter. Now, it is time to show my real stuff.

I ascend, while looking for the preys.

Finally, I see the bombers and medium-sized aircrafts. They seem to have already penetrated deep into the enemy territory. They are probably ready to start bombing at any moment.

Do not head for the land. That is the command being issued.

It seems likely that another group of ally aircrafts are planning to attack from a different angle. Of course, the enemies are getting prepared and waiting for the maneuver.

I am sweating. It is a proof that my body is getting warm.

The main event starts now. I have just been getting warmed up.

I am breathing slowly.

I am calming myself down.

I am holding back my nerve that is getting racked like a clock with a broken pendulum.

Do not make haste.

Slowly.

Yes. Calm down. Steady yourself ...

I find an area in which about 20 aircraft are jumbled up and flying all over the place. The air is getting murky with smokes around the area. Two aircraft are now obliquely descending while emitting black smokes. I look around, and then let the nose of the aircraft point to the direction.

Those which are flying while remaining intact are down to nearly half of the original number when the battle was initiated. They have either been shot down or have retreated due to having run out of ammunition. Incapable of waiting for one extra second. Shooting bullets for one second too much. Shooting wastefully. They can become fatal.

“Are you the one coming over here?” That is Tokino’s voice.

“Here? Where?”

Before confirming the location of Tokino’s aircraft, I am transversally descending while slipping.

Luckily, the enemy enters the attack range in front of me. It looks as if it were motionless like a balloon. I shoot the machine gun for two seconds.

Before colliding with it, I break away upward.

An ally plane lunges and shoots at the same target. The tail unit is torn apart, blown away, and it starts spinning around.

“Hey, it’s you!” Tokino’s excited voice.

“Oh, it’s me. Me.” I laugh.

But, I notice another one coming from the upper sky behind me at an oblique angle, and I am trying to decide which direction to take to break away.

“Hey, it’s coming.” Tokino gives me the information. Although he is flying far below me, he is watching what others are doing very well.

I turn to the right, and the enemy turns to the right as well.

I daringly turn to the left, and push down the control stick all the way to control the elevators for the descent. I feel my head being pulled upward, so I hold the

helmet with my left hand. At the moment right before I experience the redout, I roll over, and then this time I immediately pull the control stick toward me fully to align the elevators for the ascent. If I repeat such maneuvers, I get high faster than taking drugs.

I look for the enemy, but I cannot find it.

Then, it is regaining its balance behind me to the left.

It is quite agile.

I strengthen the grip of my right hand.

This pilot has got a serious stuff.

I start turning around and describe a big arc around it.

In this case, a direct, fair-and-square attack method is the best.

As the enemy is thinking the same, it starts circling with almost the same radius.

I see its canopy.

The enemy pilot appears to be seeing me, too.

A black logo is on the cowling. *A cat's face?* Its ears are pointy. That is the shape it is resembling.

It turns sharply, and has its nose point straight toward me.

I also direct the nose of my aircraft toward it.

Closing in.

I shoot for one second.

Rolling over, and breaking away.

The enemy shoots as well.

We pass each other, separated by only a few meters.

Make a sharp turning, with flaps fully deployed.

The enemy is turning already.

That's fast.

Tokino's aircraft speeds across from the side. I cannot tell if he has shot.

When I redirect the nose of the aircraft toward it again, it nimbly reverses to the opposite direction.

At the time, a Someaka on my side is lunging and shooting.

“Hey, hey, do not meddle with this.” Tokino complains.

“Can’t you fly silently?” A woman’s voice. It must be Mitsuya.

The aircraft with a black cat logo is rolling and descending like a leaf. Outstanding control. In order to dodge Mitsuya’s attack, it lowers the altitude by quite a bit, and escapes to the land. *A decision that is based on a cool, calm, and collected judgment*, I think. Mitsuya’s Someaka is on pursuit for a while, but cannot catch up on it. We cannot just chase it too deep toward the direction.

Other enemies are beginning to retreat.

In the end, our dance party has not lasted even for 20 minutes. Too many participants can spoil a party and cause a confusion. It is like the party is over in the middle. I am not sure at all, about which side has been depleted by how much. But, it just happens exactly in an instant. Time always flies before we know it. I can even say that the fuel level indicators are far more trustworthy than clocks.

Soon after that, we hear the radio command to gather at the higher altitude.

-4-

On our way back to the airbase, we are flying toward the setting sun. The sky is dyed pink, then purple, deep blue, and finally gray.

We have already entered the area where we cannot use the radio. So, when we approach the base, I take the position between Tokino’s aircraft and Shinoda’s so that our Sankas are descending in a longitudinal single-file formation. Landing in the same order as that for taking off the ground is the unwritten rule. It is probably because we want to savor the miracle of being able to form the line in the same order again.

At the time, I notice for the first time the fact that only three Someakas have been flying along with us. I wonder why I have not been able to realize that. Probably I have gotten so high that my nerves have been paralyzed.

After the landing, we taxi to the front of the hangar. When I got out of the

cockpit and put my feet on the steps, Tokino, who has already gotten out, is walking toward me.

“The numbers are equalized.” He tuts with a scowling face. He means that two of Yamagiwa’s team have gone down.

I jump off from the steps. As I put my hand into a pocket to try to take a cigarette, Tokino holds out a box in front of my nose.

“Thank you.” I take one of his cigarettes. “Did you see them going down?”

“No.” He lights a cigarette, too. While exhaling the smoke, Tokino is viewing the opposite side of the runway. “But I saw several of Someakas being encased in flames. Twin-engined aircrafts look miserable, just by losing only one of the engines.”

Uroyuki Shinoda also gets off his aircraft and is moving toward us. He too is paying attention to the hangar on the opposite side, and looks back at them several times. Three twin-engined Someakas are now reaching the front of the hangar.

“Mr. Shinoda, did you witness what transpired?” I ask.

“That one, who ran away at the end of the fight.” Shinoda answers in a low voice.

“Oh, you mean the one with the black cat?” I am reminded of the logo on the cowling.

“Black cat?” Tokino asks.

“I saw the logo.”

“Oh, really?”

Two mechanics on the maintenance support vehicles are approaching, and ask if there is anything to check on our aircrafts. The three of us make orders of which parts to check, and have decided to leave the location.

We are walking to the piloti-based building by the office, where Suito Kusanagi is waiting for us while smoking.

“Two of theirs were shot down.” Tokino looks at her face, and speaks.

“It seems that way.” Kusanagi nods, while looking at the runway. “If the loss is one-fourth, that is just too bad.” She sighs. “For my team, it has been one-fourth

from the start.”

We hear high-pitched voices from somewhere. Children’s voices.

I look at the direction of the billet, and notice them.

“Oh, the party is being held ...” I utter. Mitsuya was talking about it this morning.
“So, children are here.”

“Yeah, I was struggling with them a little until now.” Kusanagi widens her eyes, and shows an unusual expression.

“What? Of all people, Ms. Kusanagi?”

“You know, due to the labor shortage. But I don’t have problems with kids, but with parents. I have finally managed to escape from the mess, and am now smoking here.”

I check the stationary rides that are designed after a fire engine and a helicopter at the piloti-based building. Of course, no one is riding on them.

Mugiro Yamagiwa seems to be visiting the hangar to pick up the pilots. While we are waiting at the lobby of the office, Yamagiwa comes back with three pilots. Then, I learn of who the three survivors are. One of them is Midori Mitsuya. The other two are the brothers named Koime.

I cannot instantly recall the faces of the two who did not come back. One is the man who was playing the guitar at last night’s party, and the other is ... Although I am trying to recall the memory of him by browsing the film footage in my brain, I give up before long. It is a waste of time and none of my business. I am not willing to ask their names. Clearly, I have got too much to lose by trying to remember them. I do not care if I am considered heartless. I just do not want to corner myself into such a sentimental state.

So, during the reporting session following that, I try thinking about other things as much as possible. I hear the names of the two pilots who might be dead several times, but I ignore them on purpose.

I repeatedly recall today’s dance steps over and over again. The black cat, whom I encountered last, was especially fast. It is not that it possessed the exceptional speed. Its control responses were 0.5 seconds faster than normal. In other words,

the judgment speed was fast. Its movement was free of waste, graceful, and smooth. I cannot ask for a worthier dance partner.

“The black panther, Skyly J2, was ascending from below Kishinuma’s aircraft.” Mitsuya is explaining while showing the aircrafts’ positions with her both hands. “When it almost reached the tail of Kishinuma’s, it suddenly rolled 180 degrees. Just like this, it was pointing upward, so I thought it was suffering from an unintended trouble. But, it made a stall turn and let Kumatake’s aircraft, which was trying to provide the support, pass it by. It made a snap roll-like downward pitch maneuver, and it shot at close range as if it was trying to cover the targets with bullets from above transversally.

The black panther, I thought.

To be sure, it sounds better as a lucky charm than a cat, and appears to be appropriate.

Mitsuya looks at me. I notice that I have been looking at her, and take my eyes off her. My right hand seems to be looking for the control stick under the table.

Both of the two aircrafts seemed to be shot down by the black panther. Mitsuya is in a very calm tone. But it is obvious that she is burning with rage. At the time, she was trying to chase the black panther. It was a wise decision not to do so.

Next, Kusanagi speaks. Although I hardly hear it, she seems to know the black panther. She says the pilot used to aviate another aircraft before, and the cowl of the aircraft also had a logo of the black panther drawn on it. The purpose of painting the cowl in black has the effect of preventing the glare caused by the reflection of the sunlight. Any aircrafts do that. But, to let it assume a shape of a black panther’s face is a rarely seen trend. *Even though I cannot be completely certain about it, it probably was the same pilot*, Kusanagi says.

I am not sure if such data have any value. If we know in advance the opponents that we go against, like the way it is in sports, then that is a different story. However, we are dealing with a game, in which the experiences of losses cannot be fully used for learning, because the losers are bound to become too silent to tell the tales.

I shot down two enemies. Tokino got one. (I was the first one to shoot at it, though.) Then, Mitsuya brought down one. In other words, we attained a lopsided victory by the score of 4-2. However, no one can even say a joke related to it.

The only benefit in a case like this is that the meeting is over soon.

The silence continues. Yamagiwa announces, “If I get something else, I will let you know soon.” Everyone stands up silently.

Mitsuya passes by me at the door and is climbing down the stairs. She is wearing the cap even in the meeting. I look at her back for a while.

“I think she should say at least a word or two.” Tokino, who has been behind me without making me notice, whispers.

“What? Who?”

“Ms. Mitsuya. Umm, I do not understand how she can be so impudent.”

I did not feel that she was being impudent. *Two of her colleagues have failed to come back. It is natural for her to act like that,* I think.

“That cannot be helped.” I utter.

When climbing down the stairs, I see Mitsuya running through the piloti structure. She is running into the cafeteria.

“The party is being held.” I say. “Shall we go there?”

“A party without alcohol is like a birthday party for zombies.” Tokino snorts. “Do you know this? What I dislike most are human children.”

“Do you dislike them more than zombies?”

“More than zombies’ children.”

I might be similar to him, I think.

I am reminded of Mizuki Kusanagi. Even though someone might still be a child, there should not be a problem as long as the one is big enough as she is and has as much discretion as she does. I wonder about how old the children gathering around in the party are. My mind is split between the curiosity of wanting to take a peek at the party and the will to avoid getting involved with it.

“Why don’t we go out?” Tokino suggests at the piloti. “Let’s go to the city that we do not know yet.”

After confirming that the fire engine and the helicopter are not being used, I nod to Tokino.

It seems that Tokino has invited Shinoda, too. But he is not coming with us.

Since we do not have any means of transportation, I and Tokino have waited at the bus stop in front of the base for about 20 minutes, and get on a small bus. The children's party seems to have already been over, and several pairs of mothers and children are getting on the bus. Almost all others must have come to the base by their own private vehicles. I saw the cars like those in the parking lot. The children who are led by their mothers are curiously looking at us, who are sitting on the backmost seats. It probably has a lot to do with our wearing flight jackets.

The engine of the bus does not seem to be working well. It is slowly and painfully climbing up the slope while shaking and rocking rapidly, and stops after going down the slope a little. Most of the children are getting off at the location. I guess there are many residences in the vicinity. It is at the middle of the mountain, and it is on the opposite side from the viewpoint of the airbase. Still, it is close to the base. The distance is so short from the base that it is not deemed safe enough. To begin with, only the families related to our company might be living here. Probably, that is the case.

At the next bus stop, more people get off. At that point, there are only five passengers other than us. It is a little past 19:00. Is the bus getting empty because this bus heading for the city is going to the direction opposite of many commuters? However, even when we are getting closer to the city, we can find no bustling place. I just see the tracks for trolleys at the center of the main street. It is a slightly rare sight for me. After a while, we see a tram running with just one light on its nose.

Tokino stands up and walks to the driver. He is hearing something from him.

"He said we should get off at the next stop." He comes back and tells me the tip he got from the driver, while sitting down next to me.

The place we get off as advised to do so is in front of a bowling alley. Judging from the surroundings around it, we do not see a place to eat at. The stores alongside the street are already shuttered. We hardly see people walking.

"They close very early."

"Exemplary conduct."

“We should have brought someone who knows the vicinity.” Tokino whispers. The problem is that those who are in the base are not likely to be of any service tonight.

“I guess that whatever is in this building is most likely to be what we want.” I tell him so, because I am thinking that it may be fun to bowl for the first time in a long while.

Only the retro-styled marquee is lit up, and the spacious parking lot is as dark as those in gang movies. The building itself has few windows and its silhouette looks desolate like a factory. No matter how favorably we see it, the place does not show any sign of bustle or popularity. But, we do not have anywhere else to go. We can do nothing but move to the entrance. Then, we hear from the road the sound of a car slamming on the brake to halt suddenly. After going back, the car is moving onto the parking lot. It is a black sedan. It comes close to us and stops.

The one getting out of the driver’s seat is Suito Kusanagi. Even though she is wearing a jacket, she is still wearing a uniform underneath.

“Well, well. What a coincidence, ma’am.” Tokino says jokingly. He is also looking surprised.

“Are you bowling?” Kusanagi asks.

“I am thinking we might get a chance to drink beer, at least.” I reply, even though I myself am not interested in drinking beer all that much.

“But you can drink beer even without coming this far, right?” Walking toward the entrance, Kusanagi says. After I and Tokino look at each other, we decide to follow her.

There are about 30 lanes. At the closest corner, the red neon of a hamburger shop is glittering. Before that, six billiard tables are lined up, and no one is playing there. In the bowling lanes, about five groups are playing. In short, it is deserted.

“Poor turnout, isn’t it.” Tokino murmurs, while lighting a cigarette.

“Would you like to play billiard? Or, bowling?” Kusanagi asks.

“Bowling.”

“I prefer beer.”

Vending machines are lined up on the far end to the right. As he is holding a can of cold beer, Tokino smiles happily. In a situation like this, a vending machine is as appreciated as God. However, no one seems to care about how many beer cans are in the box. That remains a mysterious tendency. I mean, even the bullets of a machine gun run out very quickly.

In the end, we start playing bowling as I want to do so. Kusanagi gives us the commands, and we are collecting drinks and snacks as we are assigned to do so. After I pay the fee for a lane, I buy two colas with crushed ice. Kusanagi is coming back from the hamburger shop with a large paper bag in her arms. Tokino has placed six cans of beer on the table, has already finished his first throw, and is practicing his rolling motion with his head leaning sideways.

As I and Kusanagi sit on fiberglass seats, Tokino comes back after he has failed to knock down the pins in the split formation.

“It’s been a while.” Tokino says while sitting down.

“For me, this is the first time.” Kusanagi says, and is picking up the ball. “Like this?”

“Anything goes. Please do as you like, commander.” Tokino says, while opening the pull-top can of the beer.

With an awkward motion, Kusanagi rolls the ball. It manages to roll to the end without dropping into a gutter. While looking at it, I take a bite of the hamburger. A worn-out taste of mustard makes me feel the nostalgia. Cola becomes volatile in my throat, and it tastes good.

“Hey, what does she want to do?” Tokino gets his face close to me, and whispers. That is when Kusanagi steps forward to make the second roll.

“I think she is in a good mood.” I speak of my observation.

“Is she? Even with that?” Tokino frowns.

Kusanagi is coming back, clapping her hands. But her face is showing almost no smile. I stand up and move to pick up my ball. While taking a deep breath and gazing at the pins on the lane, I slowly step forward and deliver the ball. At the moment the ball is released from my hand, I find myself looking the other way. Another ball on another lane. I look back. Tokino and Kusanagi are looking at me.

Billiard tables in the distance. The red neon of the hamburger shop. While making sure of various things, I walk back to my seat. By the time the ball is expected to reach the pins, I look back. The ball is just scattering the pins. Three pins remain standing.

I take the cola from the table and drink it. I feel the tingly irritation on my tongue. Kusanagi is looking up at me, while sipping beer. Tokino is waving to a girl on the next lane. In the meantime, my ball is coming back without saying “I’m back.” I pick it up, take a deep breath again, recall the rolling form, and make my body trace it. The ball starts rolling. And then, in the same way, I find myself taking my eyes away from it. *Is it my habit?* I wonder.

My fingers that are pulled out of the finger holes on the ball.

In this afternoon.

The same fingers snuffed out lives of two human beings.

With these fingers.

I eat hamburgers.

Also, I hold a paper cup filled up with cola.

Probably, there are some of those who can never forgive this kind of coincidences.

However.

On the other hand, I do not understand why they come up with such logic.

Fiberglass, the same material as the one used for seats in the bowling alley, is used for the wings of rocket bombs. Firework displays and bombings are based on almost the same physical phenomena. Even if you do not handle money directly, it circulates in the society and will be used for weapon deals somewhere. Products or parts to kill people are not necessarily made by those who wish others’ deaths.

Even though there is no awareness.

Anyone, somewhere, kills others.

While playing push and shove, who will be squeezed out ...? Even if you aren’t making any contact with the victim directly, the fact that everyone is responsible for

squeezing out the one does not change.

I didn't see it. I didn't touch the one.

I just stood firm on my feet, so that I would not be pushed out.

Can it work as an excuse?

I think that is not the case.

That's all.

Anyway, that's nothing to worry about.

It is natural for anyone to try to stand firm.

I can't help it.

Tokino gets a strike with a dynamic fast ball. Kusanagi is clapping, which makes me notice what just transpired. Four girls are playing on the third lane from ours, and one of them is clapping while looking at Tokino. He shows his palm to the girl and moves his fingers.

“Bowling ain't too bad after all, is it?” He sits down and tilts the beer can.

Probably, nothing can be too bad.

Humans' lives.

Even the pins lined up in a formation to be scattered.

They cannot be underestimated.

“Kannami?”

“Huh?”

“Your turn.” Kusanagi's face is in front of me.

I stand up and walk, to take my ball. Tokino is nowhere close. As I look around, I find him sitting on a seat three lanes away from ours, while smoking there.

I lift the ball to the level of my chest, and observe the pins in the distance.

My right hand is now staying calm.

This might be gentle in reality.

I guess it prefers bowling to dogfights.

The three of us do not care about who wins or who loses. In short, no one keeps track of the score. The machine automatically prints out the results, though. By that time, six beer cans have already been emptied. Tokino tells us that he is going out for dinner with the girls, and salutes to Kusanagi.

“Will you grant me the permission, ma’am?” He asks.

“Permission granted. The condition is that you will be alive in your own bed tomorrow morning.”

“Roger.” Tokino brings his arms down swiftly, glances at me with a hint of meaning, turns around, and walks away. When he catches up with the girls at the billiard tables, he waves to me once again. The high-pitched laughter is fading away.

“One more game?” Kusanagi asks, while still sitting.

“Umm, let’s see.” I light a cigarette absent-mindedly.

In the paper bag of the hamburger shop, a lot of food is still left inside. French fries and fried fish. The paper cup for the cola looks shriveled as if it has lost its religious faith. The ice has dissolved into water, and the diluted liquid is just not drinkable anymore.

“How about eating out?” I ask.

“Are you hungry?”

“No.”

“I’m ..., err, I might want to drink more.”

“Then, I can come with you.”

“Okay, I’ll go and ask about a place to go out to.” Kusanagi stands up and walks to a counter, at which a clerk is working. I sit back in the seat and have decided to observe the surroundings. I stretch my arm and tap the cigarette on the ashtray. Although I have not been aware of it, the music with the low specific gravity is playing. It is 20:00.

In the first place, why has Kusanagi come here? I think. I do not have anything else to think about. Then, I am suddenly conscious that Kusanagi and I are now alone

because Tokino has left. I have not felt anything until now. Come to think of it, that face of Tokino was ... I recall his grin with his hand raised, and tut. I make a short sigh, cross my legs, and have my cheek rest on my hand.

I see ..., now I get it.

I was teased by Tokino. I did not notice it at all.

“Good luck.” He might have said.

Since there were three girls, I could have been invited to join them, generally speaking.

What is this ...?

“What a bummer.” I find myself exhaling the statement.

“What’s that?” Kusanagi is right next to me.

“Oh, err ...” As I am taken by surprise, I sit up straight in the seat.

“I got the information about a good restaurant.” Kusanagi says. “You are ready to eat, right?”

“That’s right.” I nod. “If it is more delicious than that hamburger.”

“Probably ...” She sees the paper bag, and leans her head sideways. “I think that would not be a problem.”

We step out of the bowling alley. We have decided to leave Kusanagi’s car parked in the parking lot, and take a walk. As we get into the alley, we see small shops with their signs, here and there. There are not too many pedestrians.

“What food can we eat there?”

“Well, I didn’t ask about it.” Kusanagi answers. “But, he said it is delicious.”

“Abstract, isn’t it?”

“Kannami, about the black panther whom I told you about a little while ago ...”

“It is not ‘a little while ago’. But a long time ago.”

“That pilot is, in fact, my acquaintance.”

“What type of acquaintance?” I look up at Kusanagi at the moment, although I am walking while looking downward.

“Umm, I mean, he used to be a person in our company.”

“Person?” I smile. “It sounds like a polite expression.”

“Because he was my boss.”

“Ah, I get it.”

“When our company had decided to cease manufacturing aircrafts with tractor configurations, he rebelled against the policy and quit the company.”

“What? Only for that reason?”

Tractor configuration describes one type of aircraft designs, which means that the engine and the propeller are mounted on the front side. Current Sankas and Someakas are both categorized as pushers, whose propellers are mounted on the rear part. In short, pusher engines are located behind the cockpits. It is said that the pusher configuration has the obvious advantages in maximizing the propulsion powers effectively.

“What is the reason for his sticking to tractors?” I ask.

“What do you think?”

“The pilot wouldn’t be shredded by the propeller blades when trying to eject.” I speak, while thinking about it. However, because the current egress systems are designed to propel out the pilots by gunpowder explosions, the risk of being ground by the propeller blades can be avoided even for pusher aircrafts.

As expected, Kusanagi shakes her head sideways.

I say, “Okay, then. The pilot can let the spiral slipstream of the propeller act on the wings when stalling.”

It is an extremely rare method of operation. Being able to forcefully change the direction when stalling is one of the few merits that the tractor aircrafts have.

“Correct.” Kusanagi nods while walking.

“Well ..., that might be a proper reason.” I nod, too. “That is what every pilot familiar with the tractors says. But, there are not so many opportunities to use the technique. Besides, the risk of stalling the aircraft during dogfights is ...”

Oh, but, Midori Mitsuya was speaking about it.

I remember that. The black panther did the stall turn. In short, it stalled, at the same time, rapidly turned around to let the chasing aircraft pass it by, and shot at it. I was half-listening to her report absent-mindedly during the meeting, but I can say that it is a feat that can be done only by tractor aircrafts.

It is natural that a pilot wants to get on an aircraft that is conveniently fit for his specialty. Still, I wonder if there is a pilot who switches over to the enemy side just for that reason. Even if that is what actually happened, I cannot just believe it easily.

“When I used to fly, I encountered him just once.”

“Did you encounter the black panther?”

“We called it Black Cat.” She says, sounding amused. “It seems to have grown up to be and promoted to a panther before I know it.”

“I thought it was a cat during the first encounter.”

“If it goes across your path in front of you, that signals a bad omen.”

“Such a thing that you say.”

“Although it’s a long time ago, I used to feed a black cat.” Kusanagi says. “It walked across the path in front of me every day.”

“Did something bad happen?”

“I failed to commit suicide over and over.” Kusanagi utters, and then chuckles. *Is she trying to say a joke?* “Really, to the level that I hate to live.”

She stops suddenly and looks up at the sign.

Is there a cat? I wonder. I feel the presence of two glittering eyes glaring at us from somewhere.

“Here.” She tilts her head.

“What?”

“Here is the restaurant I was told about.”

“Restaurant? Where?”

“Well ...” Kusanagi shrugs. “Isn’t there a stairway?”

“Yes, there is.”

“Go upstairs.”

“Me?”

“You wouldn’t like the notion of letting a lady go first, would you?”

“No ... I don’t care about that sort of thing in particular.” I laugh, and then climb up the stairs.

The paint on the wall has almost come off. The stairs are made of wood, and their corners are worn out and round. Although it is too dark to see it at first, I notice that there is a door on the right side on top of the stairway. Faint light penetrates through the frosted glass. The letters lined along the circular arc indicate the restaurant’s name.

I open the door without any hesitation, for I do not want to see Kusanagi’s cynical smile by looking back at her. I have that much of pride in myself. Even a fur seal can do this.

Unexpectedly, the place inside has a chic interior. In long and thin glass tubes, real flames are burning. A clerk with a bow tie welcomes us. We are shown to a table at a corner. For the first time in quite a while, I am getting to experience an ancient ritual, in which I take a seat after my chair is pulled out by somebody else.

When we are handed menus and left alone, I let my chest touch the edge of the table and have my face close to Kusanagi.

“Ms. Kusanagi, do you have money?”

“Yes.” She nods with a straight face. “What do you mean?”

“Two reasons.”

“Two?”

“One is that this place seems expensive. The other is that I don’t have money.”

“Oh?” Kusanagi is looking down at the menu. “Then, do you want to know my two opinions?”

“What are they?”

“I dislike a man who is worried about the price, and I find a man who is not worried about the price to be even more despicable.”

We order various dishes, and start with wine. When we tinkle the glasses, she says, “Congratulations.” I ask her what the congratulations are for. She answers, “For the fact that we are alive every day.” I do not think that it is necessarily a good thing. However, to show my appreciation for the wine she is treating me to, I nod silently and smile.

Hors d’oeuvres, soup, and then fish for the main dish. By that time, we are drinking the second bottle of wine. Although I have not drunk even half as much as Kusanagi, I am completely drunk. My thought is hazy, and I want to close my eyes. My eyelids are as heavy as sandbags, and it is beginning to develop into the battle against the gravity.

The next dish is chicken sauté. Terrifically wonderful. If possible, I wish I could eat it first.

“When do you think you will die?” Kusanagi asks suddenly.

I am too absent-minded to understand what she has just asked in an instant.

“Sorry. Am I being a little rude?” She smiles. “Well, but, it is quite a serious question. Unbelievably serious, and severe.”

I nod.

“I mean ... When are you scheduled to die?” Saying so, Kusanagi bites her lips and shakes her head a bit. “No, err ...” She turns her eyes upward and sighs. “Not that. What should I say? About when you will die, haven’t you tried to decide when to do that? I mean, without doing so, we will continue this way forever ...”

The waiter is walking toward us, and that part of our conversation stops. She orders the third bottle of wine.

“I can’t drink anymore.”

“I will drink.”

“I knew it.”

“Let us resume.” Kusanagi is resting her cheek on her hand, with the elbow planted on the table. She has eaten almost no food. She has been drinking too much, without any doubt. “Have you been listening?”

“I have, but I don’t understand what you mean.”

“I do not think you do not get it.” She puts the dishes and the glass aside, has her both elbows placed on the table, and leans her head toward me. She might be appealing the gesture to start a secret talk. Since I must not ignore it, I straighten up and have my face get a bit closer to her.

“Do you want to live forever?” She whispers. “Forevermore, and ever more ...”

“I’m not sure yet.” I shake my head. “I haven’t lived for so long yet.”

“Do you intend to continue killing your mates forever?”

“Mates?”

“Same humans as you are, right?”

“I don’t like that expression.” I object immediately. While closing my eyes, I sit back in the chair. The distance between us becomes a little greater.

“Getting angry?” She is smiling.

“Getting drunk?” I talk back, looking at Kusanagi.

Not good. I can’t think.

My brain is giving up on thinking anything.

I am the one who is getting drunk.

But ...

I do not think I said anything wrong.

“In my case.” Kusanagi shows a gentle expression. I have never seen such a mien on her face before. It might be a hallucination. “I have lived longer than you. So, I have come to know at least a little. I can simulate the distant future. I have brains for thinking about such things. For example, feeling lonely, sad, or empty ...” She shakes her head slowly. “I don’t have such feelings at all. Not even a fraction of it. Very cool and calm. It has gotten very cold.” She looks straight at me and smiles gently. “This feeling is neither impulsive, and umm, nor desperate. But still ...” She puts her hand on her cheek and has her chin on it. “I want to interfere at least a little with my life or my fate. This is typical, though. That is, being humanly ordinary. Get it? It’s about being humanly ordinary. What are we? Humans, aren’t we? Isn’t it right? Considering the way of my dying is humanly ordinary. Don’t you

think so?”

“I’m not sure.” I shake my head. “What is fate?”

“There is a natural flow, in which people age and die. It is the rule no one can change. That’s fate.” She squints.

“Is there such a thing?” I snort.

“We don’t have them, though.”

“We don’t?”

“No, we don’t have fates.”

“So?”

“At times, don’t you feel the urge to die?”

“Whether I want to die or not, I will die someday in the future anyway.”

“It is the reason why you pilot the aircrafts, correct?”

“Whether I get on the aircraft or not, I will die when I die.”

“You want to die, don’t you?”

“Um ...” I thrust my hand into a pocket. I am looking for a cigarette. My head becomes numb as if it were getting electrically charged. I want to lie down immediately. I have a little trouble in breathing and my entire body is getting hot. But, I am not sweating. Some parts in my body are losing the balance.

The waiter is coming. *Is everything to your liking, sir?* he asks.

“About what?” I find myself asking back. Naturally, he is asking about the dishes. Not about our lives or fates.

Everything tastes good, but we are full, Kusanagi makes an excuse. I ask him to clear my plates, too. We are asked about the dessert. Both of us order coffee only.

I am gazing at Kusanagi. She is holding the glass, in which the rest of the wine remains, and drinks it at one gulp. Then, she looks back at me and whispers.

“I want to die. Even tonight is okay for me. Hey, if I beg you, could you please kill me?”

In the end, we spent about one hour and a half at the restaurant. It was still a little before 22:00. But the city is as quiet as the dead of the night. I and Kusanagi are walking in a dark alley. At a place that was close to the bowling alley facing the main street, three men were crouching by the side of the street. I am sensing the tense air of danger. I think they are saying something to us.

Although I ignore it, Kusanagi starts laughing. She thrusts her hand into the interior of her jacket. I notice the move, hold her arm in haste, and pull it toward me.

It appears that stones are being thrown to us, for I hear something hitting the asphalt surface and the fence nearby. I drag Kusanagi by her hand, and run into the parking lot. As I turn around, I notice that the three men are standing up and looking at us. There is no sign of trying to follow us. *Thank goodness*, I think.

“What is up with that?” Kusanagi shakes off my hand and groans in a low voice.

“What do you have in your inside pocket?” I ask.

“Why don’t you check it out?” As she taunts, she starts chuckling again.

I do not check it. There is no need to do so. I see a gun holster in the pocket. However, I cannot tell if she has actually tried to pull out the gun. She might have just tried to smoke a cigarette. Even she herself might have not understood what she was trying to do.

And, then ...

Why do I have to save her?

That question makes me wonder even more.

As if a gigantic obstacle is suddenly appearing in front of us, I feel my sight is being blocked. I feel unbelievably sick. I am feeling the anxiety like I am flying into the clouds without seeing the scenery around me.

I am getting intoxicated.

After talking about which one of us is less drunk, I get into the driver’s seat. Kusanagi sits in the passenger seat a little after that. As she pulls the door, it does not shut smoothly.

“Shut the door.” I warn her, as I start the engine.

Kusanagi opens the door again and closes it, by exerting more force this time. Although she needs not to do so with that much strength, she seems to have done it with her full might. Of course, the door has to be shut tightly as it should. The momentum of the shutting door knocks her down into the driver’s seat, and her head collides with my shoulder. Her hand is at the back of my head, and the other arm of hers reaches for my shoulder, which she anchors herself on and pulls her own body toward, to get closer to me.

I keep myself silent.

She applies her lips on my mouth.

Two seconds.

I lose my strength a little, and retreat until I can see her entire face within my sight. She squints, pouts like a spinner, and laughs.

“What are you going to do? Could you please kill me?” That mouth speaks.

I put the car in gear without words.

“If you do not do anything, we will remain this way forever.”

That’s right, I think.

“This way forever.”

However ...

At least, yesterday and today are different.

Probably, today and tomorrow are different as well.

Even on the same path that we walk every day, we can step on different parts of it.

Just because it is the same path we walk every day, that does not mean that the scenery is the same.

Is that much not enough?

Not satisfied with that much?

Or.

Is there any problem with its being only that much?

Only that much.

It is only that much ...

Since I do not come up with proper words, I keep silent.

Kusanagi sits back in the seat and closes her eyes.

I hold the steering wheel and recall the hymn.

I turn on the headlight.

Moths are flying in front of the hood.

Two moths.

The car brings the two of us out of the parking lot.

From anywhere will do.

To anywhere will do.

Probably.

We are the two who want to be brought out.

Episode 5: Spoiler

This is the squalid, or moving, part of the story, and the scene changes. The people change, too. I'm still around, but from here on it, for reasons I'm not at liberty to disclose, I've disguised myself so cunningly that even the cleverest reader will fail to recognize me.

This excerpt is from *For Esmé—with Love and Squalor*, a short story included in *Nine Stories* (written by J. D. Salinger)

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After that, we, three Someakas and three Sankas, made sorties twice. They were both missions to escort our bombers. We have managed to return to the base alive without any trouble. During the time, we flew six times in total, including scouting missions. These things happened within two weeks, so I can say that we were being relatively busy.

Then, suddenly, we are commanded to return to the previous base. This directive is making both Tokino and Shinoda happy. I am feeling a little glad, too. Other than finding the place to bowl and the good restaurant nearby, we have not quite been able to become familiar with this city. I have not gotten on the tram, and I have given up on it. Suito Kusanagi is in a good mood, too. I guess that the children's party is scheduled to be held again in the near future.

However, although we have not been informed of it until right before moving out of the base, our team is not the only one leaving this base. The three subordinates of Yamagiwa are joining us. I mean, Midori Mitsuya, Aragi Koime, and Saiga Koime. It appears that Yamagiwa is returning to the headquarters. That is virtually equivalent to being promoted to the higher rank. It is a mysterious appointment, because he has lost two of his subordinates.

It is a fine day, when we are flying to the base, at which Sasakura is waiting.

Beside the six fighter aircrafts, like the way it was during the arrival to this base, Yamagiwa and Kusanagi are on board Senryu. According to what I have heard, Yamagiwa has insisted that seeing her off despite making a bit of detour is his duty even though Kusanagi was not too crazy about the idea. Since I heard it from Tokino, I am not too sure about the integrity of the information.

Although I have hardly been conscious of it, the base which we had been stationed to before we moved to the most recent base is known as Urisu. I usually do not remember proper nouns. I even forget people's names very easily. For example, I do not remember the name of that waitress in the drive-in diner anymore. Same is true for place names. When I live in one place, I start remembering the name after about half a year has passed. On the other hand, when I get used to the life in the new environment, I just forget the name. After leaving the place, I just cannot recall it at all. I do not feel the necessity of connecting people and lands to the characters that describe their names. If someone is in front of me, I do not need his or her name. If a person is not in front of me, I do not talk about the one. In short, in either case, I do not have the opportunity to use someone's names anyway.

But this time, I have left one place once, and am now returning to the place where I had not thought I would go back to. This is an unusual event in my life. I have never experienced anything like this. It is rare for any person to get reunited with someone who has once parted ways. Well, I can firmly state that such a reunion never occurs, not even once. I am actually coming back to this place that I had been to before, and, as a consequence, I am suddenly starting to care about the land and to pay attention to its name.

On the Urisu base, we land, taking turns. Huge holes beside the runway, which were punched by the bombing we experienced in the past, are already filled. The restoration processes seem to have been completed. To my surprise, the outer wall of the hangar has been painted in green and looks amazingly beautiful. During the period in which our aircrafts were absent, the crews must have needed to kill time. The busier, the messier. The more abundant the free time, the neater and cleaner it gets. I can say it is a universally applicable rule.

I and Tokino are back to the same room again. As I leave my belongings in the room and go to see Sasakura, he just raises his hand once with the welding goggles on. Nothing has changed. I hear something, look outside the shutter, and find Senryu taking off just at the moment. I see Yamagiwa is leaving and going back to the base alone.

Shinoda is moving into the billet we are in. The room which he and Yudagawa had been using seems to be moved into by the Koime brothers. Then, Midori

Mitsuya is assigned to the room adjacent to Kusanagi's office. It is a special treatment of privilege. I have only two requests for her. One is that I would like her not to gather children from the neighbors. The other is that I would like her to get stationary rides that can be operated by inserting coins. I do not care about what type of rides they are. Of course, these two requests are stored only in my mind.

Since then, we have not flown for about three days.

Sasakura is checking Someakas all the time and does not seem to sleep even at night. Their engines are still new, and according to him, "They haven't exerted their full powers." I guess that he finds such imperfections to be unbearable and attractive at the same time, like scattered pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

After one week has passed, the two aircrafts piloted by Midori Mitsuya and I went flying for scouting. Kusanagi decided to let us team up with each other, because pairing Someaka with Sanka can enlarge the range of combative versatility and adds the extra luxury on us. But, unfortunately, this time around, I did not get to experience the chance to observe Mitsuya's skills and Someaka's functionality in the close distance.

Come to think of it, on this day, I got to talk to her for the first time since we came back to Urisu. Still, we had only one verbal exchange through the radio, "Let's go back." and "Roger." I do not even remember which one of us started the exchange first and which one replied.

Mitsuya is docile and taciturn. Her issuing a warning-like statement to Tokino and me for getting on the stationary rides designed after a fire engine and a helicopter has left a strong impression on me. Looking back, it was probably a rare case. Maybe, she was getting drunk at the time.

When we get back to the base after two hours' flight, the two aircrafts of Tokino and Ayaga Koime have already left the base for making a sortie of another mission.

After Tokino comes back, he will invite me to go out tonight. That is definitely for sure. I recall the meat pie of the drive-in diner, Kusumi, and Fuko. I do not exactly want to meet any one of the three in particular. Even though, I have not visited the place since I came back to Urisu, I do not have any special feelings about that. But if they actually appear in front of me, both the meat pie and the girls would not give me any negative feelings. Like the moment at which I flip a playing

card, I might enjoy them during the short moment in which I recognize what they are.

I taxi the aircraft from the runway to the hangar, park it at the designated location, and turn off the ignition. However, Mitsuya's Someaka is following me along the same course. She parks her aircraft right next to mine.

From the hangar, Sasakura is stepping out with a grin.

"Why?" I ask Sasakura, while pointing at the Someaka behind me with my thumb.

"She made a deal to bring it here." Sasakura explains, while thrusting his both hands into the pockets of his jumpsuit. He is looking restless.

Mitsuya gets out of the aircraft, and walks toward us.

"Oh, hi ..." Sasakura bows his head slightly.

"I leave it to you." She says mechanically without changing her expression.

We leave Sasakura behind, and walk to the office abreast.

"Then, how do you like this place?" I ask, while lighting a cigarette.

"Umm, so-so." Mitsuya answers.

"Are you getting along with Ms. Kusanagi?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well ..." I raise the edge of my lips and shake my head. "Nothing in particular. It is like, 'How are you doing?'"

"Thank you." She shows a smile in an instant and wipes it off her face quickly. "I'm dissatisfied with nothing. If possible, I just want to produce results as soon as possible."

"You need not hurry."

"You are right. We have as much time as we like." She nods. "Is that what you believe?"

We have just reached the office, and I open the door.

"I will go upstairs after the cigarette gets shorter." I tell that to her, and head for the lounge.

Mitsuya is running upstairs alone. I am by the window in the lounge, enjoy the view of the runway, and smoke the rest of the cigarette. I see Sasakura and others towing aircrafts in front of the hangar. I put out the cigarette, sigh by exhaling the remaining smoke, and head for the stairway. I hear a door being closed and someone climbing down the stairs. Mitsuya is coming this way.

“Oh? Was Ms. Kusanagi not there?”

“Well, we are done with the reporting session.” Mitsuya flips her palms upward. “Besides, the telephone started ringing ...”

“Did she say that I do not have to go to the office to report the situation?”

“Yes.”

“That’s nice.” I show my smile. “But I am suffering from a loss because I put out the cigarette in haste.”

I walk to the fridge and open its door.

“Would you like to drink something?” I ask her.

“I don’t drink alcohol.”

“How about fizzy drink?”

“If there is soda.”

“There are.” I pick up two bottles of soda. “If you make requests for your favorite drinks, they will stock the drinks.”

“I know that, of course.”

“Yeah, I think you know that.” I hand a cold bottle to her.

“Thank you.” She nods with no expression, and sits on a vinyl seat. At a glance, her facial expression looks to be nervous, but it is usual for her. It is the default setting of her behavior. She crosses her legs and twists off the cap of the bottle.

“Ms. Kusanagi might be unordinary, don’t you think?” After the first sip, she asks.

“I’m not sure.” I snort. Although I have not thought she is eccentric, it might be just because I do not know people who are not eccentric too well. “Do you dislike her?”

“No.” Mitsuya smiles uncharacteristically. “Since you might be the most trustworthy person here, I am telling you this ...” She lowers her tone and makes her face look serious. “In fact, Ms. Kusanagi is the one who was scheduled to be transferred to the headquarters.”

“Who told you that?” I feel surprised in my mind.

“Of course, Mr. Yamagiwa did. Who else? He said Ms. Kusanagi declined the offer, and recommended him instead. She seems to have made clear that she does not want to leave the battlefield.”

“Really ...” I nod slightly.

“But ... The true reason is you, isn’t it?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Umm, but, I’m not interested in such topics.” Mitsuya sits back against the seat and crosses her arms. “It is just that, her ideology catches my attention.”

“Ideology? Ms. Kusanagi’s?”

“Kildren, who live forever.” Mitsuya says, while glaring at me sideways. “I was told about it at night before yesterday.”

I am staying silent.

I try to recall what I did at night before yesterday, without any success.

“I also heard about your predecessor.” Mitsuya sighs, and puts her head on the back of the seat. It is a posture like she is looking up at the ceiling. It also looks as if she were begging me, *Choke my neck*.

“Exactly, what was it about?” I ask, while keeping my voice calm.

“Ms. Kusanagi said she killed him.” Still looking upward, Mitsuya whispers. “Quite a delusion.”

“Delusion?”

“You know that, don’t you?” Mitsuya raises her head and turns her face toward me. She is now looking straight at me.

“If I am told so, I feel I might know that.”

“You are evading the question ...” She sniggers.

“Do you believe that?”

“Believe what?”

“I mean, about the information pertaining to Ms. Kusanagi killing Jinro Kurita.”

“Oh, that’s the guy’s name.” Mitsuya shows her teeth and smiles. “How absurd.”

“That is true.” I say.

She stops laughing and applies the bottle on her lips. Her eyes are still fixed on me. I look back at her, and sip the soda.

Delusion ...

I wonder if it makes a busy noise like carbonic bubbles.

I wonder if it brings to me the sweet fragrance of the childhood.

It resembles the sound of rain and that of waves.

It resembles the vibration of the wings turning around above a gray ocean.

I keep silent.

Mitsuya’s smile does not come back anymore. Only the pair of serious, cold eyes is riveted to me while moving subtly.

“Are you sane?” The words overflow from her mouth.

Sane ...

Is it about the grip of my right hand holding the control stick?

“You must be able to understand that, because you are a Kildren, too.”

“I’m not.”

“Really?”

“I’m ...”

“At times, there are those who try to think so and end up believing so. It is like an occupational disease, and nobody cares about it.”

“I’m ...”

“I’ll give you good information.” I approach her.

“No, please don’t ...” Mitsuya shakes her head, as if she is about to burst into tears. “Sorry. I was wrong. I admit I was wrong. So, do not say it, please.”

“Okay.” I assume a pose to hold my arms up, and back off from her. I take the bottle from the table and sip the soda. I pick up a cigarette from the pocket and hold it in my mouth. While looking for a lighter, I look at her. She is not shedding tears, and I feel relieved. “How do you feel? Can you not trust me anymore?”

“Yes, I trust you.” Mitsuya nods. She stands up. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Umm ...”

The soda on the table is still generating small bubbles. More than half of it is left.

I light the cigarette and inhale the smoke.

“If possible, tonight ... I wonder if we can talk a little more?”

“Is it a request?”

“Request.”

“Alright.” I exhale the smoke and nod. “Tokino would probably go out after coming back here. But I’ll stay.”

“Thank you.” Mitsuya nods.

“Why can we not talk now?”

“Sorry. No, I can’t, err ...” She closes her eyes and looks upward. “For some reason, I cannot talk now. I will be thinking and make it definitely clear.”

“Clear?”

“My mind. I mean, I will recover my composure.”

“Hum.” I nod. “If you can do that, I envy you.”

Mitsuya gets out of the lounge and climbs up the stairs. *Her room is on the second floor in this building*, I finally recall it. In other words, she has bothered to climb down to the lounge.

I inhale the smoke and exhale it.

The creaking sound of metal is echoing in my head.

Many wild dogs are barking loudly.

Can she block out such things?

Clear mind ...

What kind of power is it? I think so while looking at the ceiling.

-2-

Tokino has come back in the evening. When he is done with taking a shower, I am lying down on the bed and am reading a magazine.

“We are going out, Kannami.”

“Okay.” I reply. “Are you going to Kusumi’s place?”

“Yeah.”

“Say hello to her.”

“What?” Tokino looks back. “You are not coming?”

“No, I will refrain myself from going out tonight.”

“How come?”

“Umm ... No reason in particular.”

Tokino gets close to me, and looks into my face.

“It’s getting dark.” I say.

“It is dark from the start.” He sighs and retreats to the center of the room. “I can give you my space, if you want to read in bed. The top of the bunk bed is so bright that I have hard time trying to go to sleep.”

“I like it here.”

“Your eyesight will deteriorate.”

“It won’t.” I crack up. “I have gotten used to it.”

“I wonder who it is?” Tokino says, as he puts his head through a shirt.

“What?”

“The person who is scheduled to meet with Kannami tonight.”

“Probably ...” I reply, while reading the magazine. “Not an accountant. Not a first mate. Not a jazz singer, either.”

“It is Ms. Kusanagi, right?”

“Wrong ...”

Silence.

I look at Tokino. He is sitting at the desk and is about to light a cigarette. Usually, before he does that, he would have opened a can of beer. In short, he is subtly different from his usual self.

“You want to drink beer as soon as possible.” I say so, instead of him. “Isn’t it right?”

“I appreciate your pointing that out.” Tokino exhales the smoke and smiles. “Are you getting along with Ms. Kusanagi? I’m not positively impressed with your action.”

“You are not guessing right. But, why do you say that?”

“I advise you to reconsider what you are doing to the best of your ability, if it is still possible for you. I’m not willing to beg you. But, this is the best faith possible that I can show you as your friend.”

“You are misunderstanding this ...” I give up on reading the magazine. “Bye-bye. Say hello to Fuko, too.”

“Please do not say ...” Tokino exhales the smoke. “The person is not Ms. Mitsuya, is she?”

“Bye-bye.”

“Hey, hey.” Tokino laughs. “You may want to rethink and reconsider nothing but that. I’m not giving you bad advice.”

“Excuse me ...” I stand up. “I want you not to say anything within your scale of thoughts. From the beginning, you have been missing the point.”

“Umm, you think so?” Tokino warps his lips. “Well, alright. That would be okay if you hear it as a general opinion. Stay calm, please ...”

“Then, I will ask you this as a general opinion.” As I am fortifying myself with the calmness that is decorated with a sigh and a smile, I show a dumbfounded face that looks like papier-mâché. “Specifically, what points of Ms. Kusanagi and Ms. Mitsuya are dangerous? Is it an absolute evaluation?”

“There is no such thing as an absolute evaluation in this world.”

“Then, what is your opinion based on?”

“Well, the averaged out values of my life experience.”

“Do you compare them with the lives of Kusumi and Fuko?”

“That’s right.” Tokino nods. “You can think that way all you want. That’s what it is. It is obvious, isn’t it? What would happen if you sleep with Ms. Kusanagi?” As if he has just shot an invisible basketball, he snaps both of his wrists. “That is the thing ... You will be killed someday.”

“You mean it literally?” I ask, laughing.

“Literal meaning, of course. More specifically, you will be shot in your head. Then, goodbye.”

“Hmm ...” I lean my head. “Then, how about Ms. Mitsuya?”

“Probably, you cannot escape from it. Like a doodlebug.”

“You ... do not mean it literally, do you?”

“Nope.” Tokino laughs, too. “It would be amazing if it were meant literally. Not that. Umm, I don’t know how to put it. You might be cornered into an inconvenient situation ... Anyway, you wouldn’t be able to make your move freely. It is what I mean to say.”

“Inconvenient, eh?” I nod.

I can immediately understand what Tokino is imagining. Even though it is too straightforward, I feel it is a keen insight that is so characteristic of him.

Tokino becomes silent.

“Anything else?” I ask.

“I have already said it.”

“I understand.” I nod and sigh softly.

“What do you understand?”

“The thoughts and the policy of Tokino.”

“I didn’t speak of it to have you understand me.”

“Okay ... We should stop it, then.”

Tokino stubs out the cigarette in the ashtray on the desk.

“I agree.” He stands up.

“The escape maneuver.” I slightly salute with one hand.

“Yeah ... Then ..., anyway, be careful tonight.”

“Same to you.” I smile.

-3-

I am coming to the hangar, for I am attracted to the light. I walk under the shutter, which is raised by about one meter, and recognize a Sanka and a Someaka at the back of the hangar. Two mechanics are sitting under the fuselage of the Someaka to work. It is Mitsuya’s aircraft. The spotlight is bright. I walk closer to it. The two are the mechanics who are usually not assigned to work in this hangar. They are dispatched here because that particular aircraft is also transferred here.

“Where is Mr. Sasakura?” I ask.

“He is probably in the basement.” One of them replies.

“Is he sleeping?”

“Umm, I’m not sure.”

“I have just been thinking about going to bed.” I hear the voice from behind.

Looking back, I find Sasakura appearing from beside the toolbox. He seems to have just climbed up the stairs. “Do you need any help?”

“No.” I say while walking toward him. “I just want to hear from you about the latest situation of your work.”

“The latest situation? Oh ...” Sasakura nods. Then, he suddenly lowers the voice

and whispers. “You mean, about the air intake charger?”

“That’s right. How’s it going? Do you think it is working well now?”

“No, I haven’t been able to make steps forward since then.”

While we were absent, he did not have to repair aircrafts. Has he not had enough time, I wonder.

“Come with me.” He leans his head sideways and makes signs with his eyes.

I follow him, and go outside. Sasakura lights a cigarette. The air temperature seems to be very low. The runway is so dark that I can easily visualize an illusion of a pond. I feel I can even hear fish making splashes.

“Actually, I have been developing another thing.” When we come to the point which the light cannot reach anymore, Sasakura confesses. I can hardly see his facial expression.

“Oh ..., what is it?”

“A new engine.”

“What type?”

“You know jet engines, don’t you?”

“Yes, a little bit.”

It is a propulsive system that was developed in Europe during the war 50 years ago. Like a rocket engine, it gets the propulsion power by blasting gas backward. However, its energy efficiency was extremely bad. Many problems popped up because of the lack of durability of parts that were exposed to high temperature. Also, it was difficult to control. Due to these factors, the very thought of the practical applications of the system was abandoned decades ago.

“They failed because they tried to copy rocket engines.” Sasakura says. “That is not what they should have done. It should be the extension of reciprocating engines. The concept that I have in my mind is like a radial multi-cylinder engine. Let me put it another way. If you keep on increasing the number of vertices of the polygon, the shape becomes closer to a circle. That way, the continuation of the small explosions around the engine will create a rotational motion.”

“You are not talking about rotating a propeller, are you?”

“No, we need not a propeller. Only fans are rotating. They forcefully intake the air and it is compressed even more. The propulsion is created with the generation of the exhaust pressure.”

“Then, after all, it is a type of jet engine, isn’t it?” I snort. He might be thinking that I am sniggering. “But, I am wondering if it is a technology that has been evaluated and tried.”

“No, there is a difference between today and 50 years ago about the standard of accuracy demanded on machinery engineering. Moreover, technologies for both heat-resistant alloy and heat-resistant surface treatment have remarkably improved. Honestly, I wonder why no one even tries my method.

“Hmm.” I pick up a cigarette and light it. “Do you think it will work well?”

“Definitely.”

“So, are you thinking of providing the proposal for your mechanical design to the boss?”

“I already have, to Ms. Kusanagi.”

“How was it?”

“That woman can never understand. Moreover, I’m not sure whether our company needs a new engine or not. I guess they don’t want to pay too much budget for development. The current situation must be good enough for the company.”

“Well, you might be right.” I nod. I understand well what Sasakura wants to say. “If we have the overwhelmingly advantageous edge in militaristic powers, then it will lead to the early termination of the war. It will endanger the corporate affairs of our company.”

“That’s right.” The tip of Sasakura’s cigarette is turning red. “And probably, I think the new type of engine will not be very suitable for a fighter aircraft. Since the revolution is very high, its response is ..., you know what I mean? It is designed to be even more effective, if it is loaded on a big aircraft flying at a stable, slow speed.”

“I know your character. You have already tried to produce the prototype, haven’t

you?”

“I made a prototype of a scale-down model. But, I failed miserably.”

“It doesn’t work well, you are saying?”

“No, it doesn’t. The small size is not good. Because of the problem involving the Reynolds number, the smaller size leads to the rise of far more difficult issues. But that was not a waste of time. I learned various things, and obtained the data to be used for the design. The principle is simple. Once I can find out the solutions to the accuracy and the durability of the blades, we can declare that we have cleared the obstacles of technical problems.”

“I don’t understand too well what you are explaining ..., but that sounds interesting.”

“For some reason, Ms. Kusanagi has not been herself since she came back here. Don’t you think so?” Sasakura says. I am hearing the unexpected turn of the topic so suddenly that I am surprised.

“You think so? In what way?”

“Somewhat cold and distant.”

“She has always been like that.” I laugh. “For once, has she ever been friendly in the past?”

I am looking at the office building. Then, I see the door being opened and someone getting out to the courtyard. It is very far away. But it has got to be Midori Mitsuya.

“Well ..., I’ve gotta go.”

“Are you going out somewhere?” Sasakura asks.

“No, I will go nowhere ...” I start walking. “I have a book that I want to read.”

“But you can deal with it at any time, can’t you?” Sasakura says.

“That is the case for everything, isn’t it?” I reply.

“Kannami.”

“What?” I stop and look back.

“Can you talk to Ms. Kusanagi, just in case? I mean ... you know, about that.”

“About the engine?”

“Yes.”

“But, she already knows it, doesn’t she?”

“Well, but I think she doesn’t understand what it really means.”

“Neither do I. I cannot explain it at all.”

“There is a difference between Kannami saying it and I saying it.”

“How are they different?”

“I’m not a pilot.” Sasakura is staring at me. I can see that he is telling a lie.

Still, I can understand his reason.

I see ...

He thinks I and Kusanagi are getting acquainted with each other.

Tokino, too, is misunderstanding something.

What ridiculous bunch of people they are, I think.

“Okay. I will talk to her.” I nod anyway, because it is getting bothersome. But it is obvious I cannot do anything for him about that. I feel bad as if I have just swallowed air. “What do you need for the revolutionary engine? Budget? Or, time?”

“Understanding.” Sasakura answers.

It is natural. But it would be the only thing he cannot get. Nothing is more valuable and harder to get than understanding. We always get it, by the time we completely do not need it anymore.

I am walking on a lane with iron railings that runs along the runway. I return to the billet in haste. The office’s window on the second floor is lit, and it is indicating that Kusanagi is still there.

Sasakura’s request is very realistic.

His request always has a shape and exists nearby.

It is in a place that is within the reach.

I envy that.

Compared to that.

What in the world is it that I want?

Pleasures for my life?

Or, the leeway to spare?

I don't know.

But ...

I can say it is anything but understanding.

Nothing is slimier and more awkward than being understood. I dislike it. I have lived my life, while refusing to be understood, as much as possible.

And, probably ...

The same is the case for Kusanagi.

Additionally, same for Tokino. Such type of character is suitable for being a pilot. The feeling that we do not want to be understood is a driving force to allow us to ascend to the higher sky.

I can fall anytime.

I can die anytime.

With the resistance, we cannot fly.

Maybe, Sasakura would never understand that. He has the duty to boost us up. He is a person who plants his feet on the ground. Do we care or not about coming back to the same place again when taking off from the runway? I do not care about such a miracle. When flying above the clouds and viewing the stars in the heavens, I can forget about the things that lie in the future. I can exchange my whole life with leaving the ground, or with the distance from the ground. I never doubt the outrageousness. The important point is whether we have such spirits of children or not.

Obviously, Sasakura is right. He is right, as a human.

We are wrong. We are wrong, as humans.

But, I can say one thing.

Even if we are wrong, we still live.

We are flying while being wrong.

In short, flying is being wrong.

He wouldn't understand that.

Probably, no one would understand that.

Then.

I do not want anyone to understand that.

I open the door and enter the hall of the billet. It is a door that lets out a beautiful scream like a damsel in distress tied to a railroad track. As I climb up the stairs, I notice that my cigarette is becoming too short. I throw it away into an ash tray at the corner of the corridor.

I wonder if Tokino is now meeting Kusumi. On the straight road to the drive-in diner, his motorbike is running. No fog. I do not know why the scenery comes up in my mind.

I have a bad feeling.

To begin with, I have never experienced a night with no bad feeling.

-4-

In front of the room, Midori Mitsuya is standing with her arms crossed. As I walk toward her, she lets her back leave the wall and unfolds her arms.

“I’m relieved.” Mitsuya says. “I thought you went out.”

“Oh, you think I’m that type of guy, eh?”

“Yeah ..., I was just beginning to think so.” Mitsuya combs her front hair with her hand, and gives her lips a slant.

I open the door, enter the room, and offer her a chair by the desk.

“Would you like coffee? By the way, there is no other drink here.”

“Coffee, please.”

I start making it. *I would be lucky if she first talks*, I think. But, what she says during the span of three minutes is just, “How is Mr. Tokino?” My only reply is, “His bed is the top of this bunk bed.”

I put a filled coffee cup on the desk in front of her, and sit on a chair by Tokino’s desk. There is about three meters of distance between she and me. Although I think the distance is too large for two person’s conversation, it is a relatively suitable range if I were to shoot a gun at her.

“So?” I ask after sipping my coffee.

“Yeah ...” Mitsuya nods slightly.

“Have you made your mind clear?”

“Yes.” She smiles. She has her eyes directed upward, and looks at the ceiling. “But, maybe, I cannot talk about it well.”

“It is not that I am paying money, so I won’t make a complaint.”

“Thank you. Well, err ... Right.” After sighing, she looks at me as if she has finally made up her mind. “Of course, I’m here to talk to you.”

“Go ahead, please.”

“Mr. Kannami, how long have you been dispatched here?”

“Umm, eight days, I think.”

“No, that is not what I meant. I mean, about the period when you were here before. When were you assigned here?”

“About the end of last summer.”

“Where were you before that?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I shake my head just once without changing my expression.

“How much of your flight time have you accumulated? How many years?”

“Are you coming here to talk about such a thing?” I sip coffee.

“No ... Well, I think I understand you Kildren. But, I still feel that it is mysterious. Only the ephemeral past and the eternal future. How can you deal with the

imbalance? Or, how can you interpret it? That is what I want to ask you.”

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

“Do you know that ‘Kildren’ was originally a trade name of our company’s product? In the middle of developing a genetic control agent, you and others were born suddenly. The term that was scheduled to be used for the product name became the name of the ones such as you.”

“You mean that we are different from you, don’t you?”

“Well, hold on, please ... About the topic.” Mitsuya closes her eyes and has her hand on her eyelid. “Kildren like you never age. They live forever. In the beginning, no one knew the fact. Those who happened to know the fact would not believe it. However, there was no way that they would not notice the anomaly. Some of them were convinced that they were the only ones suffering from the abnormal condition, and experienced the spiritual collapse. Of course, there were many cases in which the bodies rejected the acceptance of the phenomena. Still, about 10 percent of them adapted themselves to the situation, and survived. They are real ...”

“Perfect survivors.” I speak.

“Correct ... The survivors are the ones like you. So is Ms. Kusanagi. Rather, so are almost all of the people who do business in the war zone, like this. It is the big difference from the great war of 50 years ago.”

“Oh, you seem to know such an ancient history.”

“People in this country used to hunt fish and whales in the sea, to eat them as food. Then, they were accused by other countries around the world for doing it. However, on the other hand, feeding edible pigs and cows is a common practice widely shared by people around the world. To put it another way, the difference between them is that one is naturally provided and the other is cultured for eating. What do you think about this notion of the difference?”

“Ridiculous.”

“People who were born naturally must not kill others, whereas people who were artificially created for the purpose of fighting are allowed to do so. You call this a logic?”

“You must have been reading weird books.”

“I have done a lot of researches.” Mitsuya crosses her legs. She seems to be gradually regaining her confidence. It is as if drugs are beginning to work wonders on her. “Only about 20 years have passed since Kildren were created. At first, no one noticed it. But the rumor has been spreading little by little. They say, ‘There are those who never die unless they are killed in combat.’”

“Might they die from diseases?”

“We can ignore the number, if we take the modern medical science into account.” Mitsuya shrugs, and attempts to smile. “Maybe, in the first phase of the selection process, with only 10 percent survival rate, the strongest specimens have managed to emerge standing. But, I don’t give a darn about that. I just ... What I just want to know is how Kildren like you can deal with yourselves. That is the issue. How can you compare the repetitive present with the time from the past? Although it is my imagination, your ability to become very forgetful and to carry the vague feelings as if you were dreaming, is contributing in protecting your minds. The things that happened yesterday, last month, and last year. There is no difference between them. You feel they are all the same. You alter things that occurred in the past with what you see in your dream. Isn’t that right?”

“If you are talking about me, then it is almost correct.” I am gazing into the black surface in my coffee cup. Like the sea, this small world actually has a spherical surface. The center of the surface is elevated. A part of my brain, which is changing intermittently, is thinking about such a thing. “But it is the original of what I am. That’s the way it is. I have been like that since I was born. I have been this way since my childhood. I was always absent-minded. My mother often told me that she could not tell if I was awake or sleeping. I myself am not sure of what I was doing.”

“Whom do you think we are fighting against?”

“I have no idea ...” I am still looking at my coffee. “I have never thought about it. Why don’t you ask a banker the same question? Whom are you fighting against? A rival bank? Or, depositors? Or, the world economy?”

“Even though we are killing each other, we don’t know the opponents.” The pitch of Mitsuya’s voice goes up higher slightly.

“Killing each other?” I raise my head. “I think every business goes in the same

way. Those who beat the opponents and make profits are the winners. Compared to normal businesses, what we are playing is an inefficient, retrospective game.”

“In a game, we can kill enemies legally. Is it because you get the chance to be killed legally?”

“Yeah, that’s an interesting perspective.” I pick up a cigarette.

“Fighting always exists in any era, without disappearing completely. It is because the reality of the fighting has always been important for human beings. The reality in which someone is now fighting somewhere in the same era has been the indispensable factor in the system of the human society. It definitely cannot be created from lies. We cannot keep our peace without seeing the broadcasts of the actually dying people and their misery. Rather, we cannot even recognize the meaning of peace. When one tries to make others believe that wars are definitely terrible, despite not knowing jack about wars, telling just old stories in textbooks is not enough. So, private enterprises like our company do the dirty works.”

“How rational.” I chuckle. “By the way ..., how do you define yourself?”

“Hold on, please ...” Mitsuya opens her hand and moves it forward. “Sorry. Anyway, let me put it in the shelf for now. I want you to listen to me, without it. Please wait, a little more while. I mean ... I have yet to talk about Ms. Kusanagi. The most important part which I want you to listen to is about her.”

I light a cigarette. The lighter makes a slight sound and a small flame. What is holding it is my left hand. My right hand is quiet now. I wonder if it is sleeping.

“That woman gave birth to a baby.” Mitsuya says.

She shuts her mouth at the moment.

Of course, she is speaking of Mizuki Kusanagi.

“So?” I ask.

“It was a baby born from a Kildren.”

“So?”

“Don’t you get it?”

“I don’t get it.” I generate a forced smile.

“Ms. Kusanagi is, no matter how positively I put it, not normal anymore. She is a wreck. I wonder why the management does not make notice of it. They must know the issue about her kid ...”

“In my opinion, I think she deals with her work rather normally.”

“You think so ...? Even if she killed her subordinate?”

“It is the information I don’t know.” I exhale the smoke, and stare at her. “Are you talking about Jinro Kurita?”

“Yes. I only heard it from someone.”

“Who told you?”

“Mr. Yamagiwa.”

“I remember what you said this afternoon ...” I am still staring at her. She looks a little frightened. “You said it was Ms. Kusanagi’s delusion. However, you are now saying the opposite thing.”

“That is what I said, because I thought so.”

“How do you think about it now?”

“Now I mean it is my delusion.”

“Oh, you mean ... At least, you have the self-awareness.”

“If I’m aware of it, then what?”

“You’re not insane.”

“Just a delusion?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I don’t know, either ...” Mitsuya looks downward, and shuts her mouth.

She is slowly lifting her both hands.

After seeing them, she hides her face with them.

She starts crying.

What shall I do? I think.

Things are going as I have expected. She is coming here to cry. After being

prepared to cry clearly, she is coming to see me.

I should have declined it in the first place.

Tokino might have been right about what he said.

“I’m not sure ...” She shakes her head. She lets her shoulders shiver, and is breathing intermittently. She puts one hand on her forehead and the other on her knee. Then, she turns her tearful and vague eyes to me. “I wonder if I myself am a Kildren. What I have just talked to you about itself might be what I have dreamed. Is it a true event? Or, is it just an artificial memory embedded in my cells? You know ... somehow, I feel everything is fragmentary. I cannot recognize them as continuous memories. I don’t have a definite evidence that I myself have experienced them. There is no tangible feeling. I mean ... The very thought that only I am not a Kildren is too convenient, isn’t it? Since when have I been a pilot? Since when have I been killing other humans? I think every night why on Earth, when, where, I have lost my way and have wandered into this dead end. I don’t remember. I cannot recall anything. No matter how hard I try, I can only recall the limited memories of my childhood in the limited situations and the moments ...”

“You seem to love playing with children.”

“Yes ... but I just offered a place and helped the volunteers at the previous airbase, because I came to know them by chance ... I love watching children. I wish I could have had my own childhood. I mean, perhaps ... I might have been born as I am now. Only by thinking that I might have never grown up, I feel that I have lost the sense of standing on the ground ... Don’t you think that way? Don’t you feel any anxiety?”

“It is like the feeling that we experience when we are flying with our aircrafts.” I smile.

“Ms. Kusanagi shot the one named Kurita ... I guess, probably ... It was her way of showing her love, to terminate his life for him.”

Mitsuya looks at me.

Maybe, it seems to be the most important point that she has been wanting to state.

Because her eyes are looking like those being expressed right after shooting a

machine gun.

I am thinking of advising her that following her bullet trajectory with her eyes is a very dangerous act. If she does that, she should leave the zone soon. Looking back, looking upward, and looking downward more thoroughly is crucial. She has to move on to the next phase of the maneuver as soon as possible. The momentary standstill is the most likely timing to be the prime target. It is the moment when the motion of a pilot is delayed most. It is the most defenseless moment for humans.

I do not shoot her.

I will overlook her, I think.

I am not sure why I think so.

My right hand is calm today.

What's wrong?

“But, Mr. Kurita didn’t die.” Mitsuya whispers.

“Why?” I ask.

“He has become you.” She is still looking downward. “Reborn again and embedded with new memories, you were created this way. You are the reincarnation of Mr. Kurita.”

“Why is it that no one can notice it?” I remain calm.

“People’s impressions can easily be changed. A subtle change creates a different impression of the appearance on the surface. However, the interior is completely the same. If not, the methods and know-hows that Mr. Kurita once had would have been lost. The functionality as a pilot and as a weapon would have been lost.”

I am laughing.

That is an interesting insight.

“How do you like the coffee?” I ask, while putting out the cigarette.

“Yes, it tastes good. Thank you.”

“I ... find it to be interesting. Thank you.”

Midori Mitsuya is getting out of the room. By the time she is done with her coffee, her tears have completely disappeared and she is wearing a blank look as usual. She appears to be feeling good. I think I understand why. In short, her mind is cleared out. At times, she needs to give vent to her feelings. That is the way it seems to be. Either of the men who died in the previous battle must have been the listener of the conversation with her. At the end of her visit, she makes such a confession.

“Forgive me. But, that was a big help. I really appreciate it. You can say that you have saved me.” Mitsuya confesses in an indifferent tone. It sounds dry, as if she is devoid of emotions. She now looks like a completely different person from what she has appeared to become earlier.

“Good night.” Either of us says.

The door is closed, and the footsteps are fading away.

It is a little past 20:00.

Tokino has yet to come back.

I finish drinking the blood-cold coffee left in my cup. For some reason, I associate it with the puddle at the bottom of a sandbox. It is fresh water made from muddy water after being filtered. The taste of coffee has an effect to promote the retreat of my thoughts.

I wash the cup and put it back to the cupboard.

I light a cigarette again and open the window to let fresh air into the room.

I have decided not to think about what Mitsuya has told me.

It is the same as the proposition to try to understand if this very moment is a real event or a dream. We cannot decide that just one of them is true. It is no use making the decision. I have heard similar stories several times before. In this world, or in the field of pilots, it is a well-known story and a disease. Every pilot is always drunk. Even after we land on the ground, our minds are still levitating. It is an occupational disease without doubt.

Who am I?

Why am I flying above the clouds even though I'm a human?

Why am I shooting down other humans?

Why are the losers going back to the ground?

Why?

Why ...?

I can find the beauty only in sophisticated movements like performing a dance. I forget to love someone. I forget to make myself live. Knowing and recalling something are left above the clouds.

I just fly smoothly.

I whizz through the air and turn over.

At the moment, I see the void inside me.

But, I can no longer recall on the ground the dreamy feeling.

No matter how hard I try, I cannot do it.

Who am I?

Why am I living?

Smoke is drifting.

The air surely exists around me.

Have I ever wanted to die?

Probably, I have.

Even so, I cannot recall it anymore.

Is my memory circuit broken? Or ...

I wonder if the capacity of my memory is already full.

Am I living too long?

I cling to it.

I struggle not to fall ...

While I fly desperately, I miss the good opportunity to die.

That may be the case.

I guess.

If we don't think about this and that like Mitsuya does.

We cannot escape from the curses, as long as we live.

Same for Kusanagi, I suppose.

Same for me, probably.

No different for Tokino and Shinoda.

Shouting “No war!”, occupying the streets while brandishing picket signs, chatting at a café on their ways home, going back home, opening the fridge, and thinking, “Then, what shall I eat tonight?” ... Are we slightly better off than believing that such a pebble-like peace is real?

If we can obtain nothing by ourselves, how can we consider anything as ours? Are we slightly better off than thinking about that sort of thing all the time?

Anyway, there is no changeover switch.

I have a pain in my right hand.

Before I know it, I clench it firmly.

I hear a scream.

From outside the window.

I press the cigarette onto the ashtray.

My heartbeat is getting rapid.

A woman's scream.

A gunshot.

No, not a firework.

I hear a gunshot.

Is it a dream? I wonder.

One second.

I stand up.

I wish Tokino were here, I think.

Two seconds.

I exhale a rapid breath.

I gotta go ...

I will put on a flight jacket, I think.

Oh, I haven't got it back from Kusumi yet.

Why?

Now?

Such a thing?

Is that what I recall?

Three seconds.

I open the door and get to the corridor.

I walk to the stairway.

My pace is getting faster.

I run through the courtyard.

I run into the lobby of the office building.

Voices of women quarreling against each other.

I climb up the stairs.

Kusanagi's office.

The door is closed.

I knock the door.

Then.

I open it without waiting for the reply.

-6-

Suito Kusanagi is standing behind the desk.

Right in front of me, at the center of the room, Midori Mitsuya is standing. She is extending her both arms straight forward, and is turning a gun on Kusanagi. Cracks

are spread radially on the windowpane behind Kusanagi. The center of the cracks has turned white. I see the hole, through which a bullet must have flown.

“Please get out, Kannami.” Mitsuya says without looking back at me.

“Get out, Kannami.” Kusanagi commands in a low voice.

“I will get out, if you tell me what the trouble is about.” I step forward, and observe the two.

“Don’t you get it, just by looking at it?” Mitsuya turns around her face toward me. “I am trying to shoot Ms. Kusanagi.”

“For what?” I make one more step toward her.

“Hysteria.” Kusanagi utters behind the desk. “It is dangerous, Kannami. You should get out. This is my order.”

“I won’t say things like, ‘Calm down.’ or ‘Stop it.’” I position myself between Mitsuya and Kusanagi. “To be honest, it’s ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous, I know.” Mitsuya utters.

“Oh my ...” Kusanagi sighs behind me.

“Don’t misunderstand this.” Mitsuya lowers the gun. “I’m doing such a thing because she provoked me.”

“Yeah, yeah ...” Kusanagi murmurs. “That’s what you say ...”

“She said she wanted me to shoot her. She wants to die by being shot by someone else, she said.” Mitsuya is wearing a blank look. She is not looking too excited. “So, as a subordinate, I just decided to obey her order.”

“Really?” I look back at Kusanagi.

“May I sit down?” Kusanagi asks.

Mitsuya does not respond. Kusanagi sits in a chair anyway.

“You should put away the gun.” I extend my hand toward her. “Or, will you give me the gun?”

“This is my gun.”

“Then, will you let me borrow it?” I extend my hand farther.

“Why?”

“In your stead, I will obey Ms. Kusanagi’s order.”

“Are you telling me that, on my behalf, you will shoot her?” Mitsuya changes her facial expression a little.

“Good idea.” Kusanagi utters behind me.

“Why don’t you trust your senior?” I tell that to Mitsuya. The word ‘senior’ means that I have a longer career as Kusanagi’s subordinate than she has.

Silence.

During the moment, probably no one is breathing.

Mitsuya blinks once.

Then, she raises her arm, which has been lowered.

The muzzle of the gun is being directed toward me.

I am still stretching my left arm forward.

My left hand is approaching her hand that is holding the gun.

My eyes are locked onto her eyes that are glaring at me.

I hold the barrel of the gun.

Silence.

Mitsuya’s right hand lets go of the gun.

I breathe.

She breathes and looks downward at the floor.

“Good.” I utter. “When you are leaving the zone, you should quickly ...”

Check the surroundings!

Search for the next target!

I receive the gun with my left hand.

I shift it to my right hand.

I look back.

Beyond the desk, Suito Kusanagi is taking the seat.

“Mitsuya, get out.” While raising her chin, Kusanagi commands, with her eyes half-closed. “I don’t want you to see me die.”

“If you want to die, you should just die.” Mitsuya whispers. She warps her face a little.

She walks toward the door at a fast pace and grabs the doorknob.

“I am leaving.” She says, while glaring at me.

She opens the door, and gets out.

The door is shut loudly.

The footsteps fade. The sound of her climbing down the stairs, and that of the door in the lobby.

Isn't her room right next to this office? I ask myself silently.

Silence.

I am staring at the door.

As I notice what I am doing, I look back toward the desk.

Kusanagi is gazing straight at me.

Her right hand, which has been hidden under the desk, is lifted slowly. She is holding a gun, and is applying her finger on the trigger.

“Do accidents like this occur often?” I inquire.

“Quite often.” Kusanagi answers. “May I smoke a cigarette?”

“Why do you ask me? This is your room.”

“I want to smoke one cigarette before I’m killed.”

“Go ahead.”

She puts her gun on the desk, opens a drawer, and picks up a cigarette. I am looking at what she is doing, while standing at the center of the room. My right hand with the heavy gun is hanging down. Maybe, it is finally searching for its *raison d’être*.

Kusanagi exhales the smoke. She squints, and looks upward. She might be trying to see the sky, but the ceiling is blocking her sight.

“I think dying on the ground would be miserable, because the dead body would be exposed. I cannot stand it, especially if there is a jackass nearby.”

“Who is the jackass?”

“For example, my mother, my aunt ...” Kusanagi chuckles at the moment. “No, never mind ...”

“The story about your killing Mr. Kurita. Is it ...?”

“It’s true.” She nods simply.

“Did he beg you to kill him?”

“Of course.”

“Did you like him?”

“Yes.”

Kusanagi closes her eyes. The cigarette in her hand. Thin, straight, white smoke. I can predict what she is going to say next.

Could you please kill me?

Heartbeats.

Breaths.

Slight dizziness.

I swipe my front hair sideways.

I am sweating.

“Kannami.” While keeping her eyes shut, Kusanagi says. “Shoot me with the gun.”

“Is it your order?”

“Whatever.”

“If you want to die, a gun is there.” I tell her.

Kusanagi opens her eyes and looks at me.

Then, she stares at the gun on the desk.

What controls me is my right hand.

I cast cold words to her.

It is probably my self defense.

I do.

Always.

Just like that.

I have lived.

Without doing so.

I have not been able to live.

For somebody else's life.

I don't have time.

Kusanagi takes her breath softly.

She appears to be smiling.

She conveys the cigarette to her mouth.

It is glowing red.

She glances at me once.

My right hand shivers.

She presses the cigarette against the ashtray.

Her lips seem to want to say something.

But, only the smoke comes out.

Her hand is moving from the ashtray to the gun.

She is not looking at me.

She holds the gun.

She lifts it up.

Her finger is on the trigger.

She applies the muzzle onto her temple.

She is not looking at me.

My right hand is raised smoothly.

Without even a moment's hesitation.

I pull the trigger.

The explosive sound.

Kusanagi's body appears to be bouncing.

The afterimage.

From my right arm to the shoulder.

The impact is traveling through.

The reverberation.

The smell of the gunpowder.

The reverberation.

The white smoke.

The afterimage.

“Kusanagi.” My mouth utters.

My eyes lock onto her over the desk.

Suito Kusanagi is not moving anymore.

I slowly approach her.

The armchair.

The ashtray.

The thin streak of smoke is rising.

Kusanagi's arms are hanging down from the armrests.

I move around the desk, and kneel down beside her.

“Kusanagi.”

Her face is oriented obliquely.

Her eyes are closed.

Her mouth remains slack.

On her left chest, there is a hole.

The hole is punched through by my gun.

As I do during shooting trainings, I have shot her heart with the uncanny precision.

Her gun falls off onto the floor.

A little above it, her white hand hangs down.

From the hand, beautiful blood is dripping down.

My right hand is still holding the Mitsuya's gun.

I put it on the floor.

Then.

I touch her forehead with the same hand which has just killed her.

I imagine that her eyes are moving.

If she is still breathing.

I wonder if she would thank me.

It is a face like that of a little girl.

Peaceful.

Appears to be sleeping.

Looking satisfied.

I see the hallucination, in which I am falling downward.

Gaining the velocity more and more, I fall right straight downward.

Even if I deploy the spoilers to increase the air resistance.

The velocity is getting faster.

I see the bright light in the distance.

Toward it, I am falling.

I recall various things.

Even more so, I fail to recall various things.

I reach for the telephone on the desk and pick up the receiver.

“I need help ... Send an ambulance here.”

-7-

Before the ambulance arrived, Mitsuya and Tokino dashed into the room. I cannot recall what Tokino said. If I remember correctly, Mitsuya was crying. Anyway, my memory is vague like clouds in the autumn sky.

I have been staying in a different place for a while.

It is because the place is accepting me.

I do not know whether it is a hospital, the headquarters, or the police.

As I gradually make the progress in recovery, and my mental window that allows me to see outside me becomes clear, I am sitting on a bench by the tree shade in a large grass garden. No one is near me. But, I feel someone watching me from somewhere. As I turn around, I see a building with flat, white walls, from whose glass windows that are laterally lined up side-by-side, several human faces are observing me.

It is similar to an exhibition, I think.

Although I have never been to any exhibition.

But.

I feel good.

I want to smoke a cigarette, and search my pockets, but I cannot find it.

I look up into the sky.

In the part of the sky far above, I see a line of vapor trail. I cannot visually catch the figure of the aircraft. No other cloud is in the sky. The air is clear and chilly. I am wearing a thick sweater which I have never seen before. The season is probably winter. Judging from the position of the sun, I can say it is around 15:00. If it is the same sun as the one I know, that is.

The sound of an opening door.

It is the door near the window, through which I recognize a figure of someone. A woman in a white coat appears, climbs down the brick stairs, and walks toward me. She gets closer to me, and stops.

“Are you going back to your room?”

“Can I get on an aircraft again?” I ask.

Then, I look up into the sky.

Before I know it, the vapor trail is getting more vague and spread out wider, like the memory of the childhood.

“Yes, before long. How do you feel?”

“Clear.”

“Oh, what is clear?”

“My feeling.”

Epilogue

In my dream, I just fight. With the pure mind, I lunge toward the target because I just want to do so, without wishing for anything, for no one else. I lose against no one. No one can shoot me down.

I am a special child, and possess the senses that are slightly different from others. Because of that, I have the feelings that are different from normal by that much, and can execute the moves that normal people cannot do. I have tried to escape from the existence that encases me. In other words, it is equivalent to shutting myself in it. I have been contemplating for a long time, and have shown the resistance as well.

Probably, no one can understand what I want to say, through this expression.

I know no one can understand me.

I do not have to be understood.

However, I know only one thing for sure. It is the fact that she was the same as I am. I have come to know that. It is because she also possessed the purity with which she could fight, for no one else.

Even so.

Everyone around us prepares a lot of excuses. There are so many excuses in this world, to the extent that I am just fed up with them. The world is filled with excuses like trash. Since everyone drinks water contaminated with the excuses, even its mind gradually becomes opaque with excuses. The excuses get sedimented continually in their bodies.

So.

At last, they themselves want to become trash.

They are cornered.

For example.

She does not love me.

I do not love her, either.

It is because we do not need the reasons named love.

For example.

She made only one wish.

She wanted me to kill her.

So, I killed her.

It was.

It has become my only hope.

If I did not kill her, then she would have killed herself.

It would have been lonelier than anything else.

Even the solitude, with the excuses like trash.

Can become the concept that would taint the purity ...

But ...

If no one lights a match, trash does not burn.

I killed her.

Before she killed herself.

For her, I killed her.

I guess.

She will come back to life.

I will come back to life as well.

Repeatedly, we will probably keep on living.

Then, again ...

We will fight.

Like human beings.

We will fight forever.

We will kill each other.

Forever.

No reason.

No love.

No solitude.

For no purpose.

Wishing for nothing ...

This book was first published by Chuokoron-Shinsha in Japan in 2001 and translated in 2016 and 2017 for The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books.

The Interview About The Sky Crawlers with Dr. MORI, Hiroshi

B (Chief Editor of The BBB): Today, to commemorate the completion of the English version of the novel “The Sky Crawlers”, we would like to interview with the author, Dr. MORI, Hiroshi, and approach the profound appeal of this work. Dr. MORI, Hiroshi, is selected as one of the “Fall of Fame Authors” by Amazon.co.jp and we can regard him as one of the most popular novelists in Japan. He has been interviewed in Japanese countless times before, but I think this might be his first interview in English. We hope this interview will be widely read by Dr. MORI’s fans living in English speaking countries. Dr. MORI, thank you so much for sharing your time with us today.

MORI, Hiroshi: You’re welcome. First of all, thank you for translating my works every time. I appreciate it.

B: Before you first published “The Sky Crawlers” in 2001, you had mainly written works which were categorized into the mystery fiction genre. I had an impression back then that you flamboyantly took a step forward into a new field that was discontinuous with your previous works. Had you been developing in your mind the idea of “The Sky Crawlers” for years? Or, did you come up with the idea, after a publishing company or an editor said to you, “You can write any work as you like.” or something of the sort?

MORI: I wrote this work by request from an editor, who wanted me to write a story related to aircrafts. In my case, I hardly write a story that I want to write. I remember, at the time, I was asked to write a story related to aircrafts or doctors, or something like that. After the request, I had planned to write the story for about a year. I had already written a story related to doctors, so I chose a story related to aircrafts that time around.

B: I see. You once wrote, “Authors are manufacturers who provide products that are catered to the requests.” I now understand how this work was born. About your writing novels, you have made the remarks like, “Once the title is decided, I can say half of the work has already been done.” several times. May I ask when and how you came up with this impressive title “The Sky Crawlers”? When you were coming up with the title, were you already imagining much of the whole story that is worth

the amount of this full-length novel?

MORI: After deciding to write a story related to aircrafts, I first thought about the title. I think I had spent nearly one year on trying to come up with the title. As I tried to decide the title, the setting and the story were naturally looming up in my mind. At first, I assume the geographic condition like the arrangement of mountains and cities, and then the layouts of the buildings. After that, I decide the names of the characters. What type of characters they are and what kind of story it is. Such matters are always come up with when I am writing the novel. Once I start writing, I can imagine, two or three works ahead into the series.

B: You mean, you were already imagining the sequel novels in this series when you were writing “The Sky Crawlers”, the first novel of the series. When you were writing “The Sky Crawlers”, to what extent did you assume this work would be read by the people outside Japan in the future? Do you have anything, such as parts of the contents, with which you were taking the readers outside Japan into account?

MORI: I always consider the cases in which my works are translated outside Japan. That is the way for every work of mine. So was the series of “The Perfect Insider” (*One of the most successful series by Dr. MORI. The series was made into the TV drama and TV animation series in Japan.) I might be able to say I’m not all that conscious of Japanese readers in particular. Since I mainly read works translated from non-Japanese languages into Japanese, I naturally end up being that way. I mean, I don’t have any particular part, with which I take the readers outside Japan into consideration. In other words, I take the readers into consideration with all parts of the story.

B: Surely, I have always been feeling the atmosphere from Dr. MORI’s works that is similar to works translated from non-Japanese languages into Japanese. Speaking of such translated works, at the beginning of each story of “The Sky Crawlers”, the quotes from “Nine Stories” written by J. D. Salinger are introduced. Also, you named your first English story collection “Seven Stories”. Do you have special attachments to “Nine Stories” or to the novelist named J. D. Salinger?

MORI: I do. He is one of my favorite authors, and the work is my favorite. I feel his imagination and perspectives are great and sharp. At any rate, I try not to get close to my favorite authors.

B: Is the method of “not to get close to the favorite authors” based on the possibility that the act of increasing the proximity might destroy beautiful feelings such as admiration and respect within you? You have many enthusiastic readers. So, I am thinking that to tell your fans, “Do not get too close to me in real life.” can be considered a sophisticated technique of keeping them in check. Some of the readers outside Japan would naturally hope they want to meet Dr. MORI, Hiroshi, someday.

MORI: No, that’s not what I mean. “Not getting close” means not to write similar books. I mean, if I have a favorite author, I will try, to the best of my ability, not to write works in his or her home field. It is because there already are the masterpieces in those cultivated domains. If there is a favorite style of mine, then I won’t do the similar thing. It is my basic stance. In order to value the originality, I naturally need the defensive maneuver like this. My favorite tastes and styles naturally ooze out on my works, anyway. So, intentionally avoiding what I like works ideally by ending up maintaining the balance, I think.

B: In “The Sky Crawlers”, the descriptions of aviating aircrafts and their movements are amazingly realistic and overwhelming. I know that building model aircrafts is your hobby, Dr. MORI. But, I wonder if you can write the details to this extent, just by basing them on the knowledge of model aircrafts. Other than model aircrafts, have you seriously studied the dynamics and mechanics of airplanes since a long time ago?

MORI: I don’t make plastic model planes, but radio-controlled model planes that can actually fly. The principals of both actual airplanes and models are completely the same, so the knowledge pertaining to them is also the same. I know almost nothing about the actual airplanes. Especially, since I don’t have any interest in fighter aircrafts, I know nothing about them even today. Everything is based on my imagination. I have never done any research on anything for the sake of writing my novels. I don’t write non-fictions. So, I think my novels need not to be the same as the real world. Rather, I believe that the novels that are different from the reality are better.

B: I see. I now notice there might be no profound descriptions about the functionalities of fighter aircrafts, or weapons and such, which you just mentioned that you don’t have any interest in. Since the descriptions of the aircrafts are

overwhelmingly realistic, I didn't notice your indifference about the weapons. It's a new discovery to me. Also, your remark, "I don't write non-fictions. So, I think my novels need not to be the same as the real world." is very strong, and it defines what you are, Dr. MORI. Let us talk about the topic pertaining to what differs from the reality by how much. Although the readers outside Japan may not be able to notice this, many characters in "The Sky Crawlers" have unusual names that even we, Japanese, have never heard of. (For example, Uroyuki, Mugiro, Koime, Aragi, Saiga, etc.) May I ask if they are the symbols indicating that this story takes place "in the future" or "in a different world"? Or, do they convey any other special meanings?

MORI: No special meaning in particular. I came up with such names that have Japanesque tones. Because I imagine, when authors outside Japan try to write stories that take place in Japan, they might decide that the characters would assume such names.

B: About the terminology of "Kildren" indicating "children living forever". Does it include the meanings of both "kill" and "dorei" (meaning 'slave' in English), aside from the fact that it is created from combining the words "kill" and "children"? Does it happen to be similar to the sound of "dorei (slave)" by chance?

MORI: I just named it "Kildren", based on "children". I didn't intend to let it carry the meaning of "kill". I chose the name just from the phonetics, not from the meaning.

B: You did not let it convey the meaning of "to kill". I am surprised by the fact that the persuasive echo of the term "Kildren" had managed to still be borne out. With regard to the "Kildren", I understand that the laws in "The Sky Crawlers" differ from those in our world because it is the story in the future or in a different world. Even so, the Kildren, who are supposed to be children, smoke cigarettes and drive drunk on a daily basis. Are those behaviors the intentional symbols to indicate that they are not afraid of dying?

MORI: I imagine that the characters are probably about 20 years old, so I wrote the stories as those characters in the age group would behave naturally. We know that, back in the old era, even those who are in late teenage years would do such reckless things rather casually.

B: Surely, you're correct. The Kildren have the appearances as children forever.

Still, I get the impression from them that they somewhat seem to take philosophical views after they have matured inside them as much as they have lived. According to the several lines of sentences described at the beginning of “The Sky Crawlers”, the reader can comprehend that the author Dr. MORI values the importance and wonderfulness of “being children forever”. A Japanese novelist named Mr. Takafumi Takada once described Dr. MORI as “a perpetual handicraft wunderkind”. I think many Japanese readers admit that Dr. MORI still has the purity like children have. Is it that Dr. MORI’s inborn nature has continued since your childhood? Or, do you try to be conscious of the issue, by thinking “I have to be like a child as much as possible.” to a certain extent?

MORI: First, about the Kildren, I imagine their appearances to be those of the people in their 20s. I mean, they just recognize themselves as children. Or, from the perspective of elderly people, 20-year-old people should still be regarded as children, correct? Moreover, whether Kildren really exist or not isn’t explicitly written in the book. They might be their own illusions. Then, as for myself, being a child is still one of my wishes. About the only advantage of becoming an adult is to be respected by others.

B: About “The Sky Crawlers”, the animation movie version directed by Mamoru Oshii, a world-class film director, became a big topic of conversation. Dr. MORI, what impression did you have on the movie version?

MORI: I feel that it’s a really wonderful movie. I still think it must be THE masterpiece of the Mamoru Oshii’s movies.

B: The Japanese version of “The Sky Crawlers” series was concluded in five novel volumes and one story collection volume. Dr. MORI, you tell us that “The Sky Crawlers” is your masterpiece, or the *mágnum ópus*. May I ask if it is the evaluation of just one volume of a novel titled “The Sky Crawlers” itself? Or, is it the evaluation for the entire series, consisting of five volumes and one story compilation volume?

MORI: Back then, I thought the first novel was the best. During the first decade of my activities as a novelist, I thought it was the best novel. However, that is not quite the case anymore, because I managed to write the better piece during the decade in the later half of my career as a novelist. But, I admit that the volume titled “The Sky Crawlers” is still one of my masterpieces. I guess many readers might not

think so. As a series, for the stories which I have managed to develop all the way to the end as planned, it would be difficult for me in the future to write anything that surpass “The Sky Crawlers” series.

B: I understand that not only the first novel of “The Sky Crawlers” but also its whole series are the masterpieces of Dr. MORI’s works. When I heard just a moment ago that there is actually a work that is superior to “The Sky Crawlers” during the decade spanning the second half of your career as a novelist, I felt compelled to lean forward more extremely than at any part of the day so far. May I ask what work it is? If you would like to keep it secret, I will accept it, of course.

MORI: I have never announced it to the public. But, exclusively in my fan club, I mentioned it in my lecture and wrote it. “Lady Scarlet Eyes and Her Deliquescence” is the best work during the decade spanning the second half of my career. Also, I think “The Blood Scooper” and “The Lost Cat” are ranked next to that.

B: Among the numerous works of Dr. MORI’s, I surely think “The Sky Crawlers” is a vertex of a polygon. At the same time, Dr. MORI, even though you have many other masterpieces, you regard “The Sky Crawlers” as THE masterpiece. Is it because of the balance of various factors comprising the novels? Or, is there any other particular reason?

MORI: Although it is difficult to express it with words, if I dare to say so, it is based on sensitivity. It also means that I cannot create the same work twice. I guess one of the reasons is that I was being selfless for this novel. I could focus on writing the series because, in the beginning, it was not popular and was not selling well.

B: About “The Sky Crawlers” series, you publicly admitted, “It sells well, thanks to the movie.” Surely, it sold well, partly thanks to the public attention it was getting from being made into a movie by the world-class film director Mamoru Oshii. For the sake of argument, let us define the sales of the whole series, before the movie project was revealed, as 100 percent. By what percentage has the sales figure swollen seemingly?

MORI: Six years had passed from the publishing of the first novel of the series to the announcement of the movie. The sales figure after that was approximately 200 percent of the sales that preceded the announcement. In other words, thanks to the

movie version, the total sales had tripled.

B: “The Sky Crawlers” is the first novel to be published in the series, and, at the same time, the last story in the timeline of the whole series. The second novel “None But Air” is the oldest story in the timeline. Did you come up with the idea because you wanted to conduct an experiment to test which work would sell more, “the first novel of the series to be published” or “chronologically the earliest in the storyline of the series”?

MORI: I thought the story was too difficult to easily understand and hard to be serialized, so I wrote the final episode of the series first. Because the movie project started after that, I was given the chance to write the sequel novels. In the initial phase, it didn’t sell at all, as expected. Additionally, readers in general read serialized novels in particular orders, and tend to recommend others to read books in that same order as well. Many of them even declare, “You should read this first, before reading that.” I thought I would intentionally publish the works in the unconventional order, to go against such a cultural trend. The reason is that, after all, I think the order in which readers experience the series of books should not matter at all. If I wanted the readers to experience in the certain fixed order, I would have put the numbers on the volumes.

B: Surely, your series usually don’t have the numbers of the volume and you often say, “Readers can read any work in any order.” You said earlier that you wrote the first novel according to the editor’s request. You also said you could get the chance to write the sequels thanks to the movie project. Which means that there is no request for writing in multiple volumes from the beginning. In your work, you once wrote, “The number of times ‘The End’ is written becomes the career of the author.” On what phase did you decide to conclude “The Sky Crawlers” series with five volumes of novels and one volume of a story collection?

MORI: While I was writing the series, I gradually came to know to some extent how many works I needed to conclude the series. Even though I may decide the number of volumes I plan to write to conclude the series, it would not be easy to make things go as planned. The more I describe the inner being of the main character, the more thoroughly I write everything to the level that there is nothing more for me to write anymore. That makes it difficult for me to continue the series. About this series, when I was writing the third volume, I felt I would need two or

three more volumes to complete.

B: Dr. MORI, you have many popular series. I have the impression that you seriously analyzed what percentage of the readers of the first novel can follow the storyline in the series until the conclusion. Are the percentages of the readers following the series, all the way to the fifth volume, also known as the final novel titled “Cradle the Sky”, and reaching the story collection “The Sky Eclipse”, satisfactory for you?

MORI: For any series, the percentage of the readers starting from the first volume surviving to the final volume would be less than 50 percent. There is nothing that I can do about it. I am neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with it. Everyone continues to read what he or she likes. Conversely speaking, those who continue to read the series are good customers. So, the deeper the series goes, the more the readers are willing to accept anything. They would get the special pleasure from the series. Compared to my other series, the gap between the sales of the first and the last volumes for “The Sky Crawlers” is small. In other words, I can say it is the series in which the percentage of the readers who have read all the books in the series is high. Also, another unique feature of the “The Sky Crawlers” series is that its hard cover versions have sold more than the pocketbook versions.

B: Oh, really? That’s interesting. While I’m listening to various episodes regarding the “The Sky Crawlers” series, I can now more clearly understand that “The Sky Crawlers” is the series which has the special meaning for the author himself. The first volume “The Sky Crawlers” itself is Dr. MORI’s masterpiece, of course. But, at the same time, the novel is also the prologue of this magnificent series and the final chapter. I hope the series, which is now taking off to the sky of the whole world, will be loved by the readers all around the world, in the days to come. Dr. MORI, we would like to express our gratitude for sharing this time today.

MORI: It is I who should thank you. I appreciate it.

This interview was conducted in December 2016, exclusively for The BBB: Breakthrough Bandwagon Books.