

●ヤマグチノボル

1972年2月茨城県生まれ。『カナリア〜この想いを歌に乗せて』（角川スニーカー文庫）でデビュー。『魔法薬売りのマレア』^{ポジション}（角川スニーカー文庫）、『ゼロの使い魔』シリーズ（MF文庫J）など、レーベルの枠を越えて活躍中。空はいいものです。青くて、どこまでも続いている。ああ、空を自由に飛べたら最高だろうな。



ストライク

ウイッチーズ

弐ノ巻

ストムスいらん子中隊恋する

STRIKE WITCHES

Shimada Humikane & Projekt Kagonish

The world had received the attack from the existence of the mystery that appeared suddenly. Only girls who have magic can fight against them. They install arms in an own body, and fight in the sky, the land, and the sea. Fights of girls who defend the world start now.

著: **ヤマグチノボル**

原作: 島田フミカネ & Projekt Kagonish

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Strike Witches - Suomus Misfits Squadron - Volume 02 - Suomus Misfits Squadron in Love

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Chapter 1 - Dark Clouds Over Suomus

Note: The dashes indicate missing sentences. Only a couple of them I couldn't translate at all, so most of them should end up here soon.

Note 2: Lines encapsulated by square brackets have been added by a novice translator filling in the missing sentences, and should be double checked.

“Everybody! Liiiiine up!”

F/O Elma’s voice echoed throughout the bitter chill of Suomus.

Her light blonde hair ruffled gently in the cold wind as she looked to the front, courage welling up inside of her.

Lined up in front of her were all the members of the Independent Volunteer Squadron.

Standing furthest to the right was a girl of small build from Karlsland – Sgt Ursula Hartmann. She was gripping tightly onto a large tube with both hands.

Concealed inside the tube she was holding were homemade air-to-air

rockets.

Next to her was P/O Katharine O'Hare of the Liberion Naval Aviation force, her fair hair glistening. The winter uniform she was wearing highlighted her bountiful chest area.

On her legs shone the glamorous Brewster Buffalo Striker Unit – it suited her body shape well.

Following on from P/O Katharine stood grey-eyed P/O Beurling - the misanthropic beauty.

Her eyes were fixated on F/O Elma – her gaze lacking any interest. It wasn't as if she had a particular reason to be so unwilling... she just had a naturally miserable face.

Only one girl among them stood nervous before a sortie.

She was Sgt Sakomizu Haruka – adorable with her bobbed hairstyle.

She was staring lustily at the beautiful girl with gorgeous black hair standing next to her. The dignified looking girl stood a good two heads taller than Haruka, her body wrapped in a Miko uniform.

Following ancient tradition, she held a beautifully crafted katana. She thrust it into the ground with both hands - and then immediately looked to her front.

She was none other than Pilot Officer Anabuki Tomoko.

Her long black hair swayed softly in the bitter wind - leaving behind a trail as fine as silk. Her eyes were perfectly slanted. Her pupils held a look of deep resolve – glistening like black gemstones set against her pale white skin.

Stood upright in the ground was her Fuso-made katana – giving off an aura of dignity.

On her legs she equipped the Ki-27 Striker Unit. Haruka had been staring intently at Tomoko's figure, so fine in its execution that it was almost like a work of art – since they lined up.

"... Sergeant Haruka. What *are* you doing?"

Tomoko kept her eyes front as she asked Haruka, her lips pursed ever so slightly.

“I’m trying to grab hold of, and fondle your buttocks with my right hand.”

As she spoke, Haruka put her hand to her mouth as if she’d said something she shouldn’t have.

“Pilot Officer Tomoko, ma’am. I am reporting that I am trying to grab hold of, and fondle your buttocks with my right hand.”

“Just speaking like you’re in the military isn’t enough – how about you *act* like it for once?”

Tomoko brushed Haruka’s hand away – her body trembling as she did so. In response, Haruka shot Tomoko a dirty look.

“P/O Tomoko is a liar.”

“Uh...”

“Didn’t you say you’d sleep with me if I put the glasses on? And yet, you switched places with F/L Ahonen and I was engaged in a *despicable* act. You don’t catch commissioned officers of Fuso’s Imperial Army doing things like that and lying now, do you?”

["Tha, That's because... it was also convenient..."]

I’d sleep with Haruka. ’

If I hadn’t said that, there would have been no way we could’ve taken down that Diomedia.

I can’t do anything about it.

Well of course, there’s nothing to feel uneasy about in saying that I’d sleep with her in the first place.

After all, Tomoko was straight.

Subsequently, under the simple guise of keeping to her promise, Tomoko had switched places with F/L Ahonen in the darkened bed. That was seemingly the sole reason for Haruka holding a suitable grudge

against her.

Feeling she had the legitimate right to do so, Haruka began to fondle Tomoko's body.

"That doesn't mean a thing. A promise is a promise."

P/O Elma and the members of the Independent Volunteer Squadron that she commanded stared at the exchange between the pair – completely dumbfounded.

"If you're gonna flirt, get a room!"

"We're not flirting!" Tomoko shouted, balling her hand into a fist. Haruka snuggled up to her closely.

"This is a sign of divine love. To call it something like 'flirting', why, that's *dishonourable*."

"It's not a sign of anything!"

Beurling pointed helplessly to the front. The two followed her gesture, looking forwards. They stood confused as to why F/O Elma had become so tearful.

"Um...that is...um, this is a little hard to say but, from now, we're meant to be going on a sortie..."

"Y-yes! Understood. Squadron commander, ma'am."

Tomoko gave a stiff salute. F/O Elma was the pitiful, cowardly squadron commander.

That very squadron commander had been in the middle of giving the pre-sortie briefing.

Now wasn't the time to be mucking around.

"I-it's alright if you don't listen to my orders but, I mean, P/O Tomoko is an ace and all, sniff, but for the time being I'm the squadron commander... Hic, sniff" At long last, F/O Elma began to cry.

"Ah, ah, ah, F/O Elma started crying!"

"Tomoko, don't make the squadron commander cry." Beurling said in a cold voice.

"I'm the one who wants to cry." Tomoko muttered in a sorry tone.

"I want to cry too... P/O Tomoko really is stubborn..." The siren echoed throughout their otherwise peaceful exchange.

F/L Häkkinen's bellowing voice gushed out of the speaker.

"How long are you going to keep standing around for!? The 1st Squadron are already well on their way to intercepting the enemy!"

Today, the usual sobriety in Häkkinen's always-calm voice was cracking.

"Y-yes ma'am!"

The Independent Volunteer Squadron, led by Flying Officer Elma – danced along the runway.

'Runway'.

With their magic engines painting a faint trail of light behind them, the witches flew into the vast sky.

Tomoko revved the engine at full throttle.

She felt light as the Ki-27 advanced ahead of formation.

As her wingman, Haruka followed on behind.

They were putting into practice the 'lotte' formation that they had used during their first training session. P/O Tomoko was paired with Sgt Haruka, P/O Beurling with P/O Katharine and finally F/O Elma with Sgt Ursula.

"Today's enemy is a little different from the usual." F/L Häkkinen's voice could be heard through their wireless earpieces.

"Um... when you say they're a little different um, what exactly do you mean?"

"Is it that Diomedia again?" Beurling asked.

“No.”

The atmosphere amongst the squad members was that of relief.

“It’s nothing but a Laros formation of 30 units, unaccompanied by bombing armaments.” F/L Häkkinen spoke with voice so cold, it was as if it had ripped that relieved atmosphere to shreds.

“If that’s it then it’ll be a breeze! I mean gee, we’ve got Tomoko on our side. We’re practically invincible against that kinda Neuroi!”

“It isn’t *merely* the Laros.” Häkkinen responded in disagreement.

The Independent Volunteer Squadron was moving at high speed along the border, with an altitude of 6,000 metres. After fifteen minutes, they began to see small black spots drop out of the gaps in the clouds bit-by-bit.

That was the battlefield.

It was from that point that Tomoko realised that the Neuroi’s behaviour was indeed a little different. If it were an average Laros formation, then it wouldn’t be lingering around at such a high altitude.

[1st squadron had approached from high altitude planning to use the sun and the clouds for cover, probably to chase off the Laros while diving from above.]

[Today however, 1st squadron and the Laros formation had both become mixed, and a large dogfight seemed to be unfolding.]

“It looks like F/L Ahonen is struggling.” Tomoko murmured.

Even if F/L Ahonen led her squad more like it was some sort of harem as opposed to an actual squad; she was highly skilled.

It was largely thanks to the excellent leadership and great success of the 1st Squadron that Kauhava Air Base had been so well protected against Neuroi bombing raids up until now.

Even with growing military success thanks to the likes of Beurling and Tomoko – The Independent Volunteer Squadron still had a long way to go until their squad-wide achievements could match that of the 1st Squadron.

The successful, skilled 1st Squadron; who were currently struggling.

Tomoko felt a single bead of cold sweat trickle from her hairline. It ran along her cheek and down past her jaw. In the instant that it dripped off her face and separated from her magic field – it froze.

“Fuso Number One to Suomus Number One: I’m going on ahead.”

“P/O Tomoko, please be careful! Somehow I’ve got a really bad feeling about this.” As Tomoko nodded in agreement, she told Haruka the following:

“Sgt Haruka, whatever you do, don’t get separated from me. I’m not expecting you to take down the enemy – just stay focused on keeping me in your sights and nothing else.”

“Yes ma’am! You can bet that I’ll do my utmost best to protect P/O Tomoko!” Haruka said heartily.

Even though they were dependable words, it was hard to put any faith in them.

[Haruka was completely out of her element in a dogfight with the melee neuroi that accompany the straight flying bombers.]

The A6M3 was a decent Striker Unit, but it was Haruka who was the problem – being amateurish and having a lack of experience.

She could forget about protecting Tomoko – for Tomoko was the one who had to do twice as much work, having to supporting Haruka and engage in aerial combat simultaneously.

It was a difficult job.

Even so, she couldn’t just tell Haruka to lie idle behind her.

That was because countless times before, in both training and real

battle – Tomoko had to provide the squadron with the strength to fight.

Throughout the battle with the Diomedia, Tomoko's driving motivation had been raising the overall military success of the entire squad – not just adding to her own achievements.

The enemy was drawing closer.

[She was feeling impatient]

Tomoko turned her gaze towards one of the members of 1st squadron, who was being pursued by two Laros. Appearance wise, they seemed no different from the usual Laros.

Their silhouette was like that of a squat fly. Short wings extended from both sides of the body.

In a movement as delicate as linking a single piece of thread, Tomoko slipped behind the two Laros.

"They really aren't the usual Laros."

She equipped her 7.7 mm machinegun, setting her sights on one of them. It was in the middle of pursuing that member of the 1st squadron and therefore wouldn't notice Tomoko... or so she thought.

"!"Tomoko let out a silent groan.

The Laros she had aimed at began to swivel right around to face her.

"Pretty impressive."

If they were anything like the Neuroi they'd fought before, Tomoko would have easily been able to start shooting at them from behind, and they wouldn't have had a clue...

Tomoko deftly came around the rear of the Laros that had just pulled evasive maneuvers.

However, it began to roll from side to side – making it difficult to get a good shot in.

"To think that all they used to do was fly..."

The Ki-27 was a first rate-fighting machine. Tomoko gave chase of the escaping Laros as if her life depended on it. Somehow she managed to fix her crosshair on the bulk, squeezing down on the trigger.

[Just like before, it's behaviour was such that Tomoko was unable to aim at the engine or control surfaces.]

The 7.7 mm rounds sunk into its squat body.

Even if I can't blow it's weak spot clean off, hopefully it'll go down just from being riddled with bullets...

However, the bullets just scattered across the surface with a spark!

"Defensive armour!? On a body this small!?" Tomoko's expression twisted into a mixture of frustration and shock as she carefully unsheathed her beloved katana from her waist.

If the machinegun has no effect, then I'll have to cut it down with the Bizen Osafune.

Tomoko revved up her magic engine to full throttle, furiously drawing closer to the Laros that she'd lost sight of. In the instant that she raised her katana in position to bisect the wings... the enemy reversed – and did a nosedive!

"Ugh!"

As soon as Tomoko dipped down to chase after it, the Ki-27 let out a deep roar. For all its merits and finesse in movement, the Ki-27 couldn't maintain pursuit of the descending Neuroi.

Tomoko chewed her lip out of aggravation, and then she suddenly heard Haruka yelling over the wireless:

"P/O Anabuki! I'm being followed!"

She swiveled around instantaneously, only to see that three Laros were in hot pursuit of Haruka!

“Haruka! Turn hard!”

Haruka turned her body 90 degrees, forcing herself into a sideways turn. For the duration of her movement, the Laros formation’s kept its line of fire on the space that Haruka had now vacated.

One of them turned its attention towards Haruka, with the other two going after Tomoko.

Tomoko did a second loop-the-loop – bringing herself up behind the two Laros.

She finally sliced through the wings of the Laros she had been after – letting the remaining one slip away in the process.

I’m on a roll, so now’s my chance to make a daring attack. If things get bad I’ll have no choice but to withdraw.

“... It clearly seems like today’s enemy doesn’t want to give me a hand-to-hand fight.”

If you don't show that sort of resolve to your partner during a dogfight, you’ll lose.

The Laros was hot on her tail, and even though her life depending on going in the opposite direction; her beloved machine, the world’s finest fighting machine the Ki-27 – was failing to live up to its reputation.

“P/O Tomoko! P/O Tomoko! I can’t shake off the enemy! Kyaa! Kyaa!”

As she looked, two Laros were chasing Haruka around. One of them was the Laros that she had just let slip. As soon as she’d shaken it off, it had moved onto the counter offensive.

Tomoko was trembling with trepidation.

They weren’t kidding when they said today’s enemy was different! They won’t engage in hand-to-hand combat, but they sure are skilled at aerial combat!

“P/O Beurling! Behind! Behind!!”

“I know!”

"Sgt Ursula! Pleeease help me! I'm being chaaased! Kya! Bullets! They're shooting at me!"

The squeals of the entire squadron could be heard; mixed together over the wireless.

"We can't carry on like this; everyone, retreat from battle! I'll provide covering fire!" Tomoko cried out, rushing over to deal with the Laros that was pestering Haruka.

During the 1st Squadron and the Independent Volunteer Squadron's desperate struggle against the Laros near the border..

Back at Kauhava Air Base, a different kind of danger was unfolding. The first person to notice that danger was a soldier performing sentry duties in the watchtower.

"A black spot just dropped from the clouds! It's huge! 3, 4... 10! Whoa! There are more than thirty! What is that... looks like a Kefalas!?"

The base siren rang out.

[In the announcement room, F/L Hakkinen's expression was gracefully strained.]

From the window the Kefalas formation could be seen fast approaching.

The base defense squad had started firing with anti-aircraft artillery but... the Kefalas paid the barrage no heed and continued onwards.

They received an urgent report from the watchtower: "It's not just the Kefalas! There's a Laros formation too!"

The Laros began to drop out of a cloud so thick it looked as if it would burst – and started machinegun fire.

At the same time, they dropped small bombs one after another. And one by one, the anti-aircraft artillery were silenced by the Laros' assault.

".... I suppose this means that the Laros formation from before was a

decoy." F/L Häkkinen murmured, her voice shaking with rage.

The 1st Squadron and the Independent Volunteer Squadron had already left to intercept the enemy near the border. Right now, there wasn't a single mechanised air infantryman left at the base.

They deployed a fighter squadron formation near the border, and subsequently drew all the witches away from the base. Once they'd done that, they deployed a separate squad at a lower altitude to assault the base...

"A commendable trick." Behind her glasses, her intellectual look was muddied with remorse.

I had a bad feeling the moment I received the information: 'Today's Laros have a different air about them' from the reconnaissance unit of the 1st squadron. I suppose this is what they mean.

It's unforgivable that we fell for the enemy's trap.

[Until now, they have only ever attacked directly; could the enemy also have steadily picked up how to fight us?]

Moreover, is the enemy going all out, I wonder?

Maybe all of the battles up until now were diversions to get us to reveal our hand.

I'm annoyed at how reckless we are. 'We got ahead of ourselves after we took down that Diomedia... and that egotism is what brought about our negligence today.

The Kefalas had arrived above the base – showering it in bombs one after another.

500-pound bombs obliterated the airfield, the mess hall, the hanger and the barracks into tiny little pieces. It seemed like the munitions store to the West had been taken down in a single hit.

There was a deafening explosion sound, followed by small shards of glass shattering from the window.

F/L Häkkinen immediately threw herself onto the floor – the blast wave roared above her head.

As she lifted her head, she saw what an abysmal state the announcement room was in. All around the room, the cries of those injured by the broken glass echoed.

F/L Häkkinen grabbed a hold of the overturned receiver.

“This is the announcement room! We’ve been hit!”

It was no use – the phone was dead.

It’s likely that everywhere is disconnected. F/L Häkkinen shook her head, heading towards the injured to offer aid.

Suddenly, one of the base’s messengers appeared.

“T-This is bad! Really bad!”

“I know. In an instant this place ended up like some sort of hell.”

Häkkinen’s voice returned to its usual sobriety as she tended to the wounded.

“That’s not it! A Neuroi ground unit is invading Slussen! The enemies are wrapped up in a miasma – the army can’t even get close! It’s only a matter of time before Slussen falls!”

Flight Lieutenant Häkkinen, who had earned the nickname of ‘Snow Woman’, had in an instant – lost front completely.

Today was the second time.

Slussen is a small town to the back of Kauhava Air Base. During the first time, the town had been victim to an aerial attack carried out by a bomber formation.

And now there was news that the town was being taken over by a Neuroi ground unit.

All the town has is the army... The army is helpless against the Neuroi.

That’s why the one’s who battled the Neuroi were the mechanised air infantrymen the ‘witches’ – their bodies were protected by their magic

field, so they could get close the Neuroi's miasma.

The army was equipped with ordinary weaponry, and could provide no opposition to a bombardment.

"... Which means it's a threefold trap."

From outside the window, F/L Häkkinen observed the widespread damage done to the base.

The coldness in her eyes was lost – instead they sparkled with burning fury.

Throughout the town of Slussen, the siren echoed. Everywhere, soldiers were trying to direct evacuees.

One of the soldiers spoke into a megaphone he was holding in both hands:

"Calm down, and please evacuate according to the military's instructions!"

An old woman gripping onto a leather bag with both hands, and with a huge rucksack slung over her back stopped in front of the soldier.

"What on earth is the military doing? Ever since the Neuroi started their attack it seems like they've done nothing but run away!"

Nearby civilians joined in with the old woman's outburst.

"Are you saying we're supposed to leave the town we were born and raised in!?"

"We've been tossed out of our houses, we've got absolutely nothing left, yet you're telling us what to do!"

The young soldier was flustered in the wake of the civilians' outburst.

"It's just a temporary evacuation! It won't be long until the military recapture the town!"

Then go chase after the attacking Neuroi! The civilians burst into a fit of rage.

“You say that, but you can’t even get close! You can think about wanting to help all you like, but the only ones who can get anywhere near the Neuroi’s miasma are the ‘witches!’”

The civilians were enraged – what on earth were the witches up to!

Just as the soldier had thought of some way to apologise to the civilians, a commissioned officer with the civilian evacuation unit came to set them straight.

“If you’ve enough time to complain, then get a move on and evacuate!”

The soldier gave a steadfast salute. The officer looked towards the commotion caused by the people of Slussen, and gave a warm smile.

“Don’t worry. It’s just that it’s important that we have time to prepare. This is merely a measure to prevent any unnecessary injuries, so you have absolutely nothing to worry about.”

The civilians gave relieved expressions at the words of the important looking officer.

Suddenly, a deafening explosion sound reverberated from the now fully evacuated area.

The soldier and officer looked over.

The bulk of a single brickwork building looked as if it were going to collapse... before falling in on itself.

The building that had just collapsed swallowed up the white plaster temple that had been standing next to it, destroying it cleanly. Cracked bricks and bits of debris flew up into the air – and dust began to fall as if from a raincloud.

The evacuees and instructing troops stared blankly – words failing them.

From the dust appeared a sinister, huge ‘Neuroi’; breaking the silence in an instant.

“W-What the hell is that...”

Seeing the Neuroi for the first time invoked trepidation in the officer.

Its shape largely represented that of the tanks used by the Suomus Army.

On top of its box like body was a turret, from which it could shoot large cartridges.

The tanks used by the army moved using a track, but the Neuroi was standing up on four legs, which protruded from the four corners of its body.

The most surprising thing was the size of its body. It was roughly around four times the size of a standard military tank. The body was around 20 metres wide in all four directions – the legs were each around 10 metres long.

It made slow, crab-like movements as it moved closer through the desolate wasteland of destroyed buildings.

As the legs moved with a sching! Across the ground, it began to shake as if there were an earthquake.

The size wasn't the only thing that was surprising - from around the tank spewed a deep black plume of smoke.

It was the miasma.

Man's enemy, the Neuroi, used the miasma as a sinister means of exerting control – normal humans couldn't get anywhere near it.

The appearance of the humongous Neuroi tank sent everyone in a wild panic. They refused to listen to the instructions of the troops, and it was every man for himself as they began to flee.

“Please calm down and listen to our instructions!”

The officer gave the soldier who spoke a rough pat on the shoulder.

“Everything will be fine! I'll try my best to get the civilians to listen to my instructions!”

The officer shook his head.

"You need to start running too."

"... Eh?"

"... That Neuroi's opponent isn't a mere soldier like us."

The officer tutted to himself.

Where the hell are those witches, and what on earth are they doing?

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Chapter 2 - Mikkeli Temporary Air Base

“Sigh...”

In the temporary air base set up in the town of Mikkeli, 80 kilometres west of Slussen – Tomoko let out a deep sigh.

The town of Mikkeli was next to a lake – Saima Lake.

The lake froze over completely during winter, so they were able to use it as an airfield.

In terms of scale, the temporary base was much smaller than Kauhava Air Base.

They had taken over an old brick primary school that was due to be demolished; and put up a command centre and barracks. The inside was a disorganised mess – reminiscent of a warehouse.

Tomoko and the other members of the Suomus Independent Volunteer Squadron had been provided with a single classroom, which was to be used as sleeping quarters with the simplest of beds.

They had first sought refuge in Mikkeli Temporary Air Base in the early

evening, three days ago.

After that, threatened by an above ground Neuroi invasion, they had been tasked with protecting escaping evacuees living in towns near the border – one town after another.

Fortunately, the Neuroi had only gone as far as taking over Slussen – then stopped.

Although we helped the evacuees get as far as Mikkeli...

“That’s a very glum look, P/O Tomoko.” Haruka said in a concerned voice, herself seated next to Tomoko.

All around the base you would find similar faces, everyone wondered around aimlessly with all the free time they had.

Morale had risen after they had taken down the Diomedia, and it had seemed like nothing could stop the endless joking and smiling however... the squadron was yet again gripped by the heavy atmosphere of days long past.

The sound of footsteps pattering on the tile reverberated – and the door swung open.

It was F/O Elma, her arms swamped with official papers and documents.

“There we go!”

F/O Elma placed the wad of documents on top of the desk – then made a sweeping look at everyone.

As Haruka asked: “What is that?”, F/O Elma replied with a sullen look.



“It’s aerial reconnaissance photographs of the Neuroi stationed at Slussen, along with official reports containing analysis.”

“It’s aerial reconnaissance photographs of the Neuroi stationed at Slussen, along with official reports containing analysis.”

“Reconnaissance? Who went to get that?”

“The 1st Squadron. Without the armaments, the fuselage of the Messerschaff is light so they went on a sortie.”

Tomoko and the others gulped as they looked at the reconnaissance photos. They were clear photographs of the Neuroi occupation in Slussen.

“What... what is this...?” Haruka asked, a dumfounded look upon her face.

Dead in the centre of the road was a huge over ground artillery battery... It was the first time any of them had seen anything like it - It was the shape of a Neuroi ground unit.

“It’s kinda like a huge creepy-crawly!” Katharine offered her opinion in a

sleepy tone.

It was of a quadrilateral shape, with a turret sitting on top; at first glance it looked just like a tank. But thanks to the mechanical legs extended from each of the four corners, it understandably looked like an insect.

However... there was one thing that certainly made it different from an insect.

Its size.

"It's huge." Tomoko said.

The bicycles that were parked around it looked to be nothing more than toys. It looked to be three times the size of a normal military tank... no, four times the size.

"That turret looks like it's of 200mm calibre." Beurling said in a composed voice.

"That's cruiser class. Not the sorta weapon you'd have on a tank." Katharine remarked.

That wasn't all, on its sides it had equipped the hedgehog-like machineguns. When you drew close to it, they showered you in bullets.

"It seems like there are several of these in the town."

Silence reigned among them. The military couldn't do a thing against the Neuroi, who were protected by the miasma.

They had no choice but to do something...

"Anyway, we have no choice but to try and bomb them but... we can only carry bombs of 60kg at most..." F/O Elma said, her words mixed with a sigh.

For the witches of Kauhava Air Base, the Striker Unit was everything. They were machines that had been developed to give air superiority over the Neuroi. There was no excuse for them to do their bomber duty poorly – but it wasn't their primary occupation.

Frankly, the supposed 'advantage' of sending them was a little suspicious.

"Regardless of that, we've got absolutely no choice but to go, I suppose?" Tomoko said in a stiff voice. Elma nodded in response.

"Exactly. Tomorrow at dawn, we; the Independent Volunteer Squadron will go to where the Neuroi is stationed in Slussen and launch an assault."

"But I haven't taken any bomber training."

"Me neither."

"Nor I."

"I haven't either, but orders are orders." F/O Elma spoke with a bitter facial expression – as if she'd drunk some foul tasting tea in one gulp.

That night...

Tomoko was restless, staring blankly at the ceiling. Because they'd set up makeshift barracks in a classroom, there was no longer the luxury of individual rooms like in Kauhava Air Base.

Noticing Tomoko's incessant tossing and turning, Haruka, who was in the adjacent bed, spoke up.

"P/O Tomoko, are you having trouble sleeping?"

"A little." She responded in a chagrined tone.

Ahh, my beloved P/O Tomoko is suffering. It's surely because she can't bear losing a battle. As her wingman, it's up to me to provide her with all the comfort she needs!

Haruka stealthily slipped into Tomoko's bed.

"W-what?"

Tomoko's confused voice was sending Haruka over the edge.

She's confused! Ahh, somehow this is adorable.

"I, as your wingman, will hereby comfort you."

"Sure. I'll pass on that."

"Don't worry - you won't have to do a thing."

Haruka snuggled up tight to Tomoko.

"Everything will be fine. P/O Tomoko is strong. Didn't you take down that huge bomber formation, after all? Haven't you only lost once?"

"I'll like that one time to be the last time."

"It's f-i-n-e. P/O Tomoko will stop at nothing during tomorrow's bombing duties. All we have to do is take that huge ground unit with the bombs. Compared to shooting down enemies in midair, there shouldn't be a single problem."

Tomoko let out a deep sigh.

"You *still* fall short in experience."

"Exactly! That's why I was thinking of getting some experience with P/O Tomoko..."

With her face-flushed red, Haruka gingerly slid a hand into the gap in Tomoko's hanten.

Because Tomoko wore nothing but a hanten to bed, she was able to run the tips of her fingers along her smooth skin just by slipping her hand through that gap.

As it gradually got warmer, Haruka was so deeply moved by her beloved P/O Tomoko's bare skin that she wanted to cry.

"Honestly you... what *are* you doing?"

"Comfort-ing you."

Haruka covered Tomoko's breasts with her right hand.

Ah, they're not too big and not too small. Tears of joy are streaming down my cheeks. Sergeant Sakomizu Haruka of the Fuso Imperial Navy

has attained the target of the number one mission. From here on, I'll shoot down...

As her morse code flickered through her mind, Haruka whispered in an entranced voice:

"These breasts are perfect... Why do they paint such a subtle curve?"

As she asked that, Tomoko firmly seized her head and shoved it away. Haruka gave a disapproving frown.

"P/O Tomoko is a liar."

"What're you on about now..."

"After all, you *did* say you'd sleep with me..."

"Look, I'm not interested in that sort of thing. I humbly apologise! Now just go to sleep already."

However, Haruka continued to frown – seemingly having no intention of sleeping. She playfully messed around with an already annoyed Tomoko.

"Hey, What kind of girl do you like P/O Tomoko?"

"What do you mean by 'girl'. I'm straight I tell you!"

"Please tell me what kind of girl you like! I'll, try my best!"

As Haruka drew closer, Katharine who was sleeping in the same direction as Tomoko - interrupted their conversation.

"You guys are loud... go do your pillow talk in the hallway."

"Shut up. I can't sleep."

"We've got a sortie tomorrow!"

"... I can't read this book."

Tomoko kept a silent grip on Haruka, throwing her back onto the adjacent bed she had come from.

Lying flat on her face, Haruka pounded her legs against the bed like a protesting child.

In contrast, Tomoko couldn't sleep; chewing on her nails. As she closed

her eyes, her unsightly form from the other day burned onto her eyelids.

I couldn't do anything against that new model of Neuroi...

My Ki-27 is most likely the world's greatest fighting unit.

Then there's the dogfighting.

Is the enemy going to use its speed to get us with hit and run tactics?

Tomoko noticed that her anguish was somewhat of a luxury.

Tomorrow we have bomber duties.

It'll be nothing like aerial combat. Never mind hand-to-hand combat and hit and run tactics, we can't provide opposition in case we end up getting knocked down.

With her heart swirling with feelings of anxiety and restlessness... Tomoko didn't manage to get even a little bit of sleep.

The next morning: 10:00am.

Being close to the Arctic Circle, Suomus' winter nights were long. It was around now that the sun began to rise in the East.

There were only around 7 hours in the day.

So that they could successfully set up an assault in that small time frame... the members of the Independent Volunteer Squadron were lined up on the frozen lake – the makeshift airfield of Mikkeli Temporary Air Base.

Next to them stood the members of the 1st Squadron, led by Flight Lieutenant Mika Ahonen.

All of them held bitter expressions out in the harsh chill of the Suomus wind.

Stood in front of them was the commander of Kauhava Air Base: Häkkinen.

Noticing new Squadron Leader rank strips sparkling on her shoulder, Tomoko gave an admirable salute.

“Congratulations on your promotion, Squadron Leader, ma’am.”

Häkkinen responded with a small salute.

“I am Squadron Leader Häkkinen, the commander of Mikkeli Temporary Air Base.”

Even though she already knew them, Häkkinen introduced herself as if she had never seen them before.

“What happened to base command?” F/O Elma asked.

Sqn Ldr Häkkinen responded with a pitiful look.

“In the air raid a few days ago, many important members of the base command centre were injured and therefore had to withdraw from the front line. It’s on those grounds that I have been appointed as the senior officer.”

The mechanised air infantrymen chewed on their lips. It had been their responsibility to protect the base.

As if reading their minds, Häkkinen continued to speak:

“You’re not to blame. The responsibility for our loss lies with the command centre that issued you orders. We simply misread the signs.”

Everyone looked up at Häkkinen with sincerity. With the slightest touch of emotion in her voice, the Squadron Leader handed down her orders to the witches.

“However, I am not at all amused by this. Please relinquish control from the Neuroi.”

The 1st Squadron and the Independent Volunteer Squadron saluted all at once.

The maintenance crew wheeled in the aerial bombs on a trolley.

“The success of the military taking back Slussen depends entirely on whether or not you can take down that blasted Neuroi. I expect great

success.”

She explained the plan.

The Independent Volunteer Squadron would take down the Neuroi’s four legs using 60kg bombs. The 1st squadron would provide covering fire.

Tomoko and the rest of the squad yelped as they took a hold of the 60kg aerial bombs.

“We’re gonna have a dodgy take-off if we something this heavy!”As Katharine spoke, Beurling furrowed her eyebrows.

“Flying is about all we can do with these.”

Haruka couldn’t carry the bomb in addition to the 20mm motor cannon she already held, so she had to equip a mere 8mm handgun. There were no doubts that a firearm like that would be useless in aerial combat.

Elma was in a similar situation.

The only person who had a magic engine with a strong enough power outlet to give some leeway was Ursula, but, even if she could somehow carry the bomb – there was no hope of her pulling the aerial maneuvers of previous battles.

With a hoist, Tomoko could just about carry the 60kg bomb herself.

Thanks to their magic power the witches were several times more powerful than the average girl but...

“Couldn’t we at *least* have 30kg bombs?”

As she humbly put forth her proposition, Tomoko was put down by Sqn Ldr Häkkinen.

“Truthfully, we'd like you to have 250kg grade bombs... I mean, if it were *possible*, we'd have you carry 250kg bombs.”

Words failed Tomoko. Those were the kind of bombs used by specialist bomber squadrons.

“We’re a fighter squadron. We’re not capable of the raw power needed

for bombing duties. As soon as we encounter enemy units, we'll end up dropping them – I'd like to ask for permission to engage in aerial combat instead."

Sqn Ldr Häkkinen stared intently at Tomoko... then shook her head.

"Permission denied. You, as the Independent Volunteer Squadron, have a mission to take down the enemy ground unit by bombing it. The 1st Squadron will protect you. Please give the mission your utmost commitment."

"But!"

Sqn Ldr Häkkinen merely shook her head at Tomoko's interruption.

"Recapturing Slussen is of utmost importance. There is absolutely no reason for a town of my motherland to be occupied by such a huge anomaly."

Tomoko remembered the huge line of evacuees that had headed from Slussen to Mikkeli.

There were more than a thousand evacuees... They had been chased from the home that they were born in and loved – and pushed into cramped barracks under the cold Suomus sky.

"P/O Tomoko..."

F/O Elma looked towards Tomoko, a look of concern upon her face. Tomoko closed her eyes and let out a sigh for just one second – before shouting out loudly.

"Understood. I, Pilot Officer Anabuki Tomoko, will do whatever I can to fulfill my duty."

As the Suomus sky ripped open with the first light of the day; the witches were on the runway, heading in the direction of Slussen. In both hands the members of the Volunteer Squadron held bombs – flying

behind the 1st Squadron, as it was dangerous to have them flying unsteadily out front.

Tomoko was the vanguard of the formation. The reason being that the Ki-27 Striker Unit that she equipped had the weakest engine power. Her striker roared out from her legs under the weight of the heavy bomb.

“If they enemy comes at us now, they’ll get us in one hit.”

Haruka said to Tomoko who was adjacent to her; in a shaky voice.

“Jeez, it’s just like Haruka says huh.” Katharine added.

“Well, we’ll have to deal with that when the time comes.” Beurling said in her usual manner.

Tomoko snapped her eyes to the front as if she’d thought of something – yet didn’t respond.

The morale of the Volunteer Squadron had dropped with the irony of their mission – bomb the town they had been protecting up until now.

Even the talkative Katharine looked suitably depressed.

After around an hour of flying, they were only a short way away from Slussen.

Only a little bit further and they would have been above Slussen... that was when everyone in the squadron heard the one thing they didn't want to hear over their earpieces.

“I’ve spotted the enemy!”

It was the voice of F/L Ahonen, the leader of the 1st Squadron.

[1stsquadron began climbing in a disciplined manner. Gaining altitude, they were surely planning to strike the neuroi as they came to intercept.]

At around the same altitude of the 1st Squadron, small black spots began to drop diagonally to their right.

“It looks like the Laros.”

As Tomoko mumbled, F/L Ahonen’s voice came flying over the wireless.

“My, well if that isn’t the rumoured new model.”

“New model?”

“They’re different from the Laros we’ve been fighting up until last year. Their existence was first confirmed on the frontlines of Karlsland; a new model called Laros ‘Kai’. It would behoove you to take a good look at it. The wings are shorter, and the body larger.”

As the black spots drew closer, it wasn’t long until they morphed into the fly-like shape of the Laros.

It was a formation of around 10 units.

With the bodies painted a deep shade of grey – they looked every bit the same as the usual Laros. However, the more you looked at them the more you noticed the things that you hadn’t noticed before.

“They really are the new models!”

“Thanks to those wings and the powerful engine, they’re much faster than the Laros, their ability to roll is improved. That’s not all, the scary thing is... do you remember?”

Tomoko asked. She remembered the new hit and run tactics and aerial movement skills of the new Laros formation.

More daunting than the capabilities of the new model was... the number of units.

Instead of heading towards the 1st Squadron convoy, the Laros Kai are coming this way.

“T-T-They’re c-c-coming this way!” F/O Elma’s frightened voice blared over their wireless earpieces.

Haruka, Tomoko’s wingman, flew into a panic.

“P-Pilot Officer T-Tomoko! The enemy is coming for us!”

“Calm down. It’ll be no good if you get into a panic.”

As she spoke, Tomoko's heart rate began to rise. She was bitter at how helpless she was whilst carrying the bomb.

[Having gained altitude with their Messerschmitt strikers, 1st squadron began to fire upon the steadily approaching Neuroi formation from above. If it had been the Neuroi from last year, here they would have scattered, tried to escape, and thus be pursued... However based on reports, the Laros-kai weren't like that at all.]

[In spite of several enemy craft bellowing smoke and being shot down, their formation was not thrown into disarray.]

Tutting, Tomoko decided that she would drop her bomb.

If I carry on like this, I'm just a target.

F/O Elma called out over the wireless straight away.

"That's n-n-n-n-not allowed! You're not allowed to throw away the bomb!"

"This is no place to be saying things like that!"

F/O Elma was unusually serious – it seemed she planned to stick to her bombing duties at all costs.

The single Laros Kai in front of them began showering F/O Elma in bullets - as she was at the front.

"Kya!" With a small squeal, F/O Elma accidentally dropped the bomb she had been holding.

Even though it exploded, it didn't seem to prove fatal.

F/O Elma was spinning round and round, but somehow she managed to stay airbourne.

"Everyone! Dive under the enemy!"

Tomoko shouted out, as soon as the enemy got within point-blank range.

At the sound of Tomoko's cry, everybody dipped their heads down, maneuvering out of the enemy's line of sight. Considering they were still

holding the bombs, the movement took a lot of effort.

The Laros Kai formation and the Independent Volunteer Air Squadron passed by each other in an instant.

Tomoko's impromptu movement had managed to prevent them from getting taken down in one shot, but they might not be so lucky next time.

They were all so wobbly midflight with the bombs in tow; there was no doubt that the enemy could take them from behind.

If that happened... they'd be annihilated.

I can't take it anymore!

Tomoko let go off the bomb she was holding in both hands, reaching out to her back and grabbing a hold of her cherished sword – the Bizen Osafune.

"Tomoko! You weren't supposed to drop your bomb!" Katharine said in a surprised tone.

"What else was I supposed to do? If we carry on like this we'll be *obliterated!*"

The Neuroi reversed, looking in the direction of Tomoko – who was dancing about in the air.

There was no point in holding onto them anymore, so the remaining members of the squadron also dropped their bombs.

They fell aimlessly into the snow-laden forests beneath them.

The Neuroi formation they had just evaded from began their ascent. Afterwards, the 1st Squadron began chasing after them.

"Watch out!" Tomoko felt danger approaching – shouting out into her microphone out of reflex.

Tomoko's premonition was spot on.

The ascending Neuroi turned right round, launching themselves at the 1st Squadron who were directly beneath them.

It was a spectacular maneuver.

The 1st Squadron had abruptly come face to face with the Neuroi following their turn.

“F/L Ahonen! Don’t fight them head on!”

However... it was too late.

As the Laros Kai squadron passed by the 1st Squadron, they began a fierce exchange of machinegun fire. The white trail of the tracer bullets flashed in Tomoko’s eyes.

She shuddered in fear at the sight of the Neuroi’s meticulous and unparalleled attack.

The sight of the 1st Squadron who had been hit – appeared before her eyes one after another.

The magical barriers that the mechanised air infantrymen used to protect themselves had absorbed as much as possible... but they had a limit.

With their Striker Units broken, their bodies twisted in the air – and they began to fall down.

One of them lost consciousness in the blast – their head slumped down, and they descended dizzily.

Tomoko’s face twisted in pain as she took a hold of the Bizen Osafune, twisting towards the Laros Kai.

However, it looked like the Laros Kai had no intention of continuing the battle any further. They nosedived, retreating as fast as they could.

Tomoko and the others had relinquished their bombing attack, and it had ended up being an interception task. They were completely lost for words at the sight of such a impressive performance.

Waiting for Tomoko back at the base was a flight prohibition reprimand

lasting three days. The operation to bomb the enemy ground unit in Slussen had been a failure.

The damage to the 1st Squadron was four casualties.

The mechanised air infantrymen were somehow managing to get past their suffering, but it had been a great loss to squad at Mikkeli Temporary Air Base.

After having every last drop of information squeezed out of her by Squadron Leader Hakkinen... Tomoko entered the barracks and slipped into bed – burying herself underneath her futon.

Haruka attempted to start some sort of conversation with her – but she didn't respond.

The atmosphere in the squad barracks was even heavier than it had been last night. Katharine had stopped speaking completely. Haruka yet again couldn't sleep, and was thinking of a way she could comfort Tomoko tonight when suddenly... Tomoko's bed moved.

I wonder what's happening? Haruka watched on as silver hair glistened in the light peeking in through the window.

Well if it isn't P/O Beurling.

With a rustling sound, P/O Beurling climbed into Tomoko's bed. Haruka was shell-shocked.

N-No way P/O Tomoko! And... P/O Beurling!

[Wh, while someone like me... when, even though we're not really involved,]Haruka worried endlessly, biting firmly on her bedsheets.

Tomoko looked at Beurling with a curious look.

"W-What are you doing all of a sudden?"

"I'd like to have a word with you."

"Do it tomorrow. Why did you have to go so far as to get into my bed?"

"The sooner the better. Not to mention this seems to be the only way to get you to listen to what people say."

P/O Beurling brought her face much closer. Her grey pupils were shimmering. Without knowing why, Tomoko's face flushed – and she suddenly turned away.

"W-what is it you want to talk about?"

"Do you understand the reason that we lost?"

"The enemy's gotten stronger." "Is this all she wanted to ask at this hour?" Tomoko thought as she answered.

"Wrong." Beurling shook her head.

"It's the first time that the ability of our machinery hasn't matched up to that of the enemy."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Co-ordination, speed, firepower... that Laros Kai is a machine from a completely different era from the old Laros. That's not to say it's invincible. It's just that we happened to take all the damage instead of the enemy. Even the 1st Squadron with their Messerschafs ended up with the same result. Well, the result is unimportant..."

Tomoko rebutted P/O Beurling's statement:

"No way, we can't possibly equip Strikers without proper thought! It goes without saying that it's certainly better to use a Striker that you're used to. Don't you agree? If you didn't then you'd equip the new Spitfire instead of clinging onto your beloved Hurricane. Are you denying your own cherished machine?"

"Well, the Hurricane is certainly a good machine. I feel at home with it." P/O Beurling murmured in a lonely tone.

"Comfortability aside... it's reached its limit. I can't win with the Hurricane anymore. Times have changed. We're not the ones who get to decide that."

"I've requested for new supplements. One of these days you'll surely

get your share from the Fuso Empire. "

"Don't act on your own accord."

Beurling brought her face even closer to Tomoko.

"Listen, Tomoko. We're in the middle of a war. Upping our military achievements means nothing. If you just fight in the way *you* like, with the machine *you* like, you'll never raise your accomplishments anyway."

"I understand that more than anyone else. I've devoted myself to my current style of battle. I'm not going to change it just because a couple of battles went wrong."

Beurling shook her head, her silver hair swaying from side to side.

"Hand-to-hand fighting ability probably won't apply anymore. The enemy will continue playing the same hand. How do you expect to chase after them with your Ki-27?"

"If I can't chase after them, then I'll think of a way to take them down without chasing them. I'm sure there's some way. And let's not forget that the Ki-27 is *unrivaled* in all other aspects."

"You really are a stubborn girl!"

"I'm not going to part with the Ki-27. It's a part of me. There's no way I'll change it after such a long time."

Beurling closed her eyes, and crossed her arms. She frowned, and got out of the bed.

Tomoko chewed on her lips.

It might be just as Beurling says.

I've used that machine from the start. We've always fought together.

Tomoko had done such a good job owing to the Ki-27.

To abandon the Ki-27 would be to abandon myself – Anabuki Tomoko.

I'll definitely increase my military achievements with the Ki-27.

Of course, I won't work alone, I'll co-operate with my comrades... When

I was running along the individual path, I didn't know a thing about how to conduct myself in an aerial battle.

As she lay in bed, Tomoko tried several times to talk some sense into herself.

In contrast, Haruka who was lying in the bed next to her had worn herself out worrying about something completely different.

What is this?

How can P/O Beurling possibly climb into P/O Tomoko's bed so easily, I don't believe it!

I wonder when they got so intimate.

Is P/O Tomoko... that sort of girl, how should I put it, is she like an older sister? Impossible, it looked like they were into each other! I suppose the reason is that she can't have a small girl like me as her partner.

I won't lose.

I won't lose to that eccentric silver haired islander!

Haruka had found a rival – her heart fired up despite her obvious misunderstanding.

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Chapter 3 - Stuka Squadron

Upon the frozen lake, some unusual aircraft came gliding in with a *ZaZaZaZa* Sound. The number of aircraft was twelve; one squadron. They were painted in a white winter camouflage, but the strikers had been stained black with oil here and there, demonstrating their long military service.

The female vanguard unfastened her goggles and aviator's helmet, revealing her long golden hair typical of those from Northern Europe.

Her sharp eyes shone with a deep azure. Above her nose, ran a horizontal scar, giving her a strict sort of beauty.

The entire squadron were wearing strikers of a boorish design. They were an old fashioned form, clad in sturdy medieval-esque armour.

“what are they? I've never seen aircraft like those—” katherine muttered.

“Ju87... The Stuka.” Answered Pilot Officer Beurling, looking at the aircraft design.

“That's a Stuka?” Tomoko had also heard of that name. At one point, Fuso's army had also imported these aircraft for a trial. However because Tomoko was a fighter pilot, she wasn't involved in those trials.

It was the dive-bombing striker that Karlsland was so proud of. Diving down to drop bombs on ground units, that method of attack is what they're made for; ground attack aircraft.

Tomoko had heard that during the struggle to evacuate Karlsland, their precise bombing ability had dealt the Neuroi more than a little damage.

The Stuka equipped girls prepared some temporary tents on the bank of the lake... and after everyone had arrived at the command post, they gave a Karlsland style salute in unison. Sqn Ldr Häkkinen returned the salute.

“Flight Lieutenant Hanna U. Rudel and the rest of Karlsland Air-force's 2nd dive bombing wing, 10th squadron, reporting for duty.”

Sqn Ldr Häkkinen assessed F/L Rudel's face, and smiled. “Welcome. To think that a dive-bombing ace such as yourself would...”

“Daytime air superiority is already being stolen in Karlsland. Dive-bombing squadrons cannot fly through the sky complacently.” Rudel responded with a seemingly regretful expression.

While carrying bombs, dive-bombing squadrons were slow. If they were attacked by the enemy's melee weapons, they would be defenseless. With the continuing fierce battles in Karlsland, and increasing losses, daytime sorties were probably becoming impossible. Therefore, with a relatively slack aerial disadvantage, it seems they were dispatched to Suomus.

With a nod, Sqn Ldr Häkkinen said; “May I introduce the members of the Suomus 3rd air battalion. They will be your shield of Aegis”

Tomoko's group formed a row so that Häkkinen could introduce them to F/L Rudel. At that moment, Beurling's shoulder shifted slightly, something that her neighbor Tomoko, did not overlook.

As if measuring their ability, Rudel looked over each member of Tomoko's group, before coming to a stop on Beurling. “Long time no see, Pilot Officer”

“It's been a while, Flying Officer” Beurling replied with a slightly stiff tone.

“It's Flight Lieutenant now, isn't it.”

“A promotion, congratulations.”

“Demonstrating that 'John Bull' mannerism here as always are you?” Rudel said in a scornful manner.

“Are you two acquainted?” inquired Sqn Ldr Häkkinen; to which Rudel nodded.

“We flew side by side in Ostmark with the air-wing for international Neuroi observation. The Neuroi invasion began at that time, we both went through hell. Isn't that right, Pilot Officer?”

Ostmark, that was the second time that the Neuroi had invaded, and the entire country had disappeared during the initial assault. Beurling had previously been fighting there.

“And the squadron you're attached to now is?”

Sqn Ldr Häkkinen, came to her rescue; “The Independent Volunteer Air Squadron.”

“The misfits? It's well suited for you, Pilot Officer”

Tomoko responded to that remark; “With all *due* respect, Flight Lieutenant; We are by no means misfits. We have leveraged the distinctive skills of each and every member, to become an unparalleled team.”

“Unparalleled? With each and every scrapped Striker unit implemented; a foreign legion? And then, in what sense are those 'skills' you mentioned distinctive? In the case of Beurling there, running off for the sake of her own personal shoot down count, completely forgetting about her allies' defense, so is that what you'd call a distinctive skill?”

Tomoko recalled that Beurling had once been competing with her rival's personal shoot down count. Consequently, Beurling had lost that rival, which had brought about her now pessimistic outlook...

“What the hell do you think you're saying!” Tomoko demanded as she approached Rudel. Tomoko might well have had the impetus to seize Rudel by her lapels, but Beurling intervened.

“She's a Superior officer! Compose yourself.”

“It's not easy to keep silent when she's looking down upon a comrade.”

Rudel waited to see what would happen, then gave a smile. “Is this oriental fit

to be in the mechanized air infantry?”

“You!”

Being looked down upon herself this time, the prideful Tomoko became infuriated. But when she went to draw her sword, the entire squadron pounced upon Tomoko to stop her.

“For you to be angered to this extent, maintaining the composure required for escort duty is probably impossible.” F/L Rudel turned to face Sqn Ldr Häkkinen.

“Sqn Ldr Häkkinen ma'am, please remove her group from escort duty”

“However, with only the 1st squadron it would likely compromise the escort.”

“Allies with a disorganized pace, are a threat other than that of the enemy. We learnt that much from the defeat of Ostmark.” With this, F/L Rudel ended the negotiation by walking off.

As she left she muttered at Beurling; “No hard feelings, Pilot Officer. I just don't want to add any more scars to my face you see.”

“She hasn't even seen our way of fighting, so what's with that attitude!” The squadron had returned to their living quarters with an enraged Tomoko. Seeing her like that, Haruka let out a sigh.

Aah, my dear Pilot Officer Tomoko, getting angry to that extent for the sake of Pilot Officer Beurling. aaahh, I knew it, there's no mistaking it, Pilot Officer Tomoko is...

Haruka recalled her morning consultation with Flying Officer Elma Leivonen.

Somehow or other it seems that Pilot Officer Tomoko and Pilot Officer Beurling are becoming intimate, it's so frustrating. How can I also become Pilot Officer Tomoko's emotional support, like Pilot Officer Beurling has?

Thus, she had consulted Elma.

The ever earnest F/O Elma had seriously thought about it, and suggested to Haruka; “If that's the case, becoming like Pilot Officer Beurling would be fine wouldn't it?”

Air-headedly, Haruka had been thinking along the exact same lines, and pounded a knee with her fist.

Now is my chance to try it out...

Tomoko had been flaming for quite a while.

That damn fool Flight Lieutenant Rudel, just you come and see how powerful we are, we'll show you, after all if you don't have air supremacy your just a potato who can't do anything at all; and in spite of that she still speaks in that horrible manner.

Pilot Officer Tomoko will be returned to her senses with a few pessimistic, sarcastic, but clear words. My unexpected coolness, surely Pilot Officer Tomoko will love it from the bottom of her heart... Haruka chuckled.

Walking determinedly to Tomoko, Haruka then listlessly brushed aside her hair. "Phew."

However, Tomoko completely didn't notice her. So she continued by nestling up to Tomoko; "Come now, compose yourself" She murmured.

"What."

With a casual glance, she carefully regarded Tomoko; nihilistic abandon would do no good here. Haruka firmly endured, she took out the bourbon prepared for a time like this. "A drink! To calm your mind. Heh."

Tomoko confiscated the bourbon immediately, and forced it to Haruka's mouth.

"GoBo! GoBoGuBo!"

"Ya know, you're really irritating."

"Puhaa~!" With that, Haruka dropped to the floor. Not being used to alcohol, her mind was spinning.

"Pilot officer Tomoko... that's cruel... even though I adore you..."

Tomoko's eyes widened at that remark. "Hey, Haruka?"

"ye... yes... *hic. ~uugh."

"Now, we both know what a mortifying sentiment that is right? You

understand don't you? Nevertheless, you're a member of the independent volunteer air squadron right? My wingman, right? Good grief, why is this kind of floundering girl my wingman..."

At Tomoko's remark, Haruka felt like she had been struck by a hammer. With a trembling voice, Haruka continued. "I, I just, want to comfort Pilot Officer Tomoko somehow, I just thought that..."

"I don't need things like comfort. What I need is an excellent wingman!"

"When you're feeling depressed, I'll comfort your heart as well as doing an amazing job as your wingman!" Haruka waited with tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Say that kind of thing, when you can at least hit the enemy fair and square."

Haruka's heart broke with a *Pikin!* sound. Eyes full to the brim with tears; uwa~n! and ran crying from the communal room.

"That was a little too harsh don't you think?" Katherine chided, but Tomoko shook her head.

"That kid, she's always worried and caring, but lacks a sense of seriousness. Sometimes it's for her own good."

After that, Tomoko prompted Beurling to come out to the corridor with her.

"Hey, about what she said back there... is it true?"

Beurling shifted her gaze like she was looking at a distant place, and nodded. "In the middle of an escort mission... I chased an enemy aircraft too far; another enemy formation took that opportunity to attack the bombing squadron, and the operation failed. At that time, the bombing squadron's commanding officer was Flight Lieutenant Rudel."

"You're not like that now though are you? After all, you don't compete with anyone's personal shoot down count anymore."

"True."

"Tomorrow, my flying restriction will be corrected. Escort duty will be sorted out, and by carrying it out perfectly, we won't allow that flight lieutenant to outwit us."

“But, like I keep telling you; our strikers aren't up to guarding against the Laros-kai.”

“I have a plan.”

“Plan?”

“Right, in my country, we have a saying for this kind of situation. 『肉を切らせて骨を断つ』 or in Britannian; 'Allow your flesh to be cut, so that you can sever their bone'.”

Next day, the bombing raid against the town of Slussen was promptly planned out.

F/L Rudel would lead the 10th Stuka squadron, to strike the ground force occupying Slussen using 125kg bombs.

Flight Lieutenant Ahonen would lead the 1st squadron serving as their escort... that was all well and good, but what to do with the independent volunteer air squadron had been a problem.

“huh~ are we also going on a bombing mission?” asked F/O Elma; seeing the lined up bombs.

“But since we have the Stuka squadron, why would we need to go so far as bombing~” Katherine continued.

“Even dropping a small amount of iron-bombs is invaluable.” Sqn Ldr Häkkinen said in a thoroughly composed tone.

“But, our ability to carry bombs is really limited, right~ Flying like that with even a small bomb makes us unsteady, when we're like that it seems we just become a good target for the enemy~”

Katherine kept on, yet Sqn Ldr Häkkinen wouldn't change her opinion on the matter. Having been silent up until then, Ursula sighed and muttered; “We are that target. Point is we're a decoy.”

F/O Elma, who would normally submit to orders meekly, now snarled at Sqn Ldr Häkkinen. “Tha! That's awful!”

“With Your equipment, you can't oppose the enemy's new model. I don't see a benefit in putting you on escort duty, if that were the case I would have put you on the escort.

“So even with escort duty, you don't expect us to do well~”

“Our objective is not the shooting down of enemy aircraft. It's the destruction of the enemy ground forces, and is absolutely essential. If there's even a small possibility, we must take it.” Sqn Ldr Häkkinen stated plainly.

“But, but!”

The members of the independent volunteer squadron still opposing Häkkinen were interrupted by Tomoko. “Understood. We'll deliver the bombs.”

“Tomoko!”

“But, grant us one condition.”

“Which is?”

“In a situation where carrying the bombs further is judged as too dangerous, we have permission to discard them.”

For a short while, Sqn Ldr Häkkinen and Tomoko glared at each other... eventually Sqn Ldr Häkkinen gave in. “Understood. In that situation permission to discard the bombs is approved.”

“It's very much appreciated.”

Meeting Tomoko's stare, Sqn Ldr Häkkinen let out a sigh.

“At any rate, I'm not going to change my methods, is that understood? Because I too, don't want to enforce a flying restriction on what precious little mobile air infantry we have.”

Like that the dispute ended, but as the time to prepare for the sortie arrived, Haruka was no where in sight.

“Honestly; that kid, where has she gotten to?”

Struggling with an awkward bomb held under her arm, Sqn Ldr Häkkinen looked out over the airfield, behind her was the quiet, light grey, type-12 experimental carrier fighter.

"Haruka!" "Sortie!" Tomoko yelled as if, Haruka would dash over with her head hung in shame.

"What is she doing! **"Get over here right now!"**

Thereupon, a Messersharf equipped F/L Ahonen briskly came walking as Haruka's representative.

"Miss Haruka, has now joined my squadron."

"Wh! Wha! What was that!"

Tomoko stared in disbelief as F/L Ahonen declared; "You, apparently said to miss Haruka thus; 'my wingman is inadequate' did you not?"

"I did say that, or rather I should say that it was simply for the sake of motivation."

"Silence. That sort of cold-hearted leader can't be entrusted with a lovely nymph like Haruka. Therefore I will be taking care of her. Got it?" F/L Ahonen brushed her hair aside, she put her arm around Haruka's shoulder and left to return to her troops. Haruka hesitated for a moment, looking awkward; her eyes met Tomoko's.

Tomoko's shaking shoulders betrayed her feelings of bitterness... she suddenly pointed at Haruka's back and yelled. "Suit yourself!"

At that the members of the independent volunteer squadron came running to Tomoko side.

"What do you mean 'suit yourself', she has to be your wingman, you're worried about this right~!"

"Tha, That's right! Isn't Haruka our comrade?"

Katherine and F/O Elma shook Tomoko by the shoulders, Tomoko declared with a twitching temple; "Those lot are more reliable aren't they! That's fine. I don't need a kid like that!"

Even so... Katherine and the others exchanged looks, until Tomoko scolded them. "Oy hurry up! Pick up the bombs! Sortie!"

On that day, January 15th, at 10am; twelve members of the 10th Stuka squadron, nine members of the 1st squadron, and the independent volunteer air squadron's five members, soared into the heavens. In total, there were 26 aircraft.

Here in Suomus, a large formation flew for the first time.

“Wow, with so many gathered it's quite the spectacle isn't it~”

F/L Rudel cut into Katherine's musings. “These numbers are nothing to be surprised at. This is actually a very carefree battlefield.”

“Is Karlsland's situation really that bad?” Tomoko enquired.

“Yes, eastern Karlsland is already in the enemy's hands. If only the newspaper could write nothing but good things everyday.”

“Mmn...”

Tomoko's close friend Pilot Officer Katou Takeko weighed on her mind. Until a fortnight ago when Tomoko had received the letter, they had not been in contact... *But she's doing fine though isn't she?*

However, now was not the time to be worrying about her friend. First the battlefield before her eyes would need to be dealt with. The idea came to Tomoko last night, while turning it over in her head.

Would it work? No, I'll make it work.

Biting her bottom lip, Tomoko steadied her breathing. However, her pounding heart wouldn't settle down. If it went badly? As that kind of thought began to seize her mind, Tomoko embraced the bomb with her right arm, with her free left hand tightly grasping the hilt of her military issue sword.

Out in front, the figures of the 1st squadron escort could be seen. Below and to the rear, F/L Rudel led the 10th Stuka squadron who were assembled in a very solid, close-flying formation that was worthy of praise.

The vanguard of the Independent volunteer air squadron's formation was F/O Elma, who was paired with Ursula in a two-aircraft arrangement called a Rotte. Below and to the rear of them was Tomoko, who flew mid-way between, Beurling on her left, and Katherine on the right. Because Haruka was not there,

they had formed a three-aircraft formation called a Kette.

“Anxious?” Beurling called out from beside her.

Tomoko smiled and gave her a thumb up. *Timidness cannot be displayed to a comrade here.*

The formation advanced at an altitude of 5000 meters, maintaining Vigilance against surprise attacks while flying beneath the clouds.

After about thirty more minutes in flight... The vanguard of the 1st squadron flying out in front, began to bank left and right. It was F/L Ahonen. At the same time, her voice came through on the wireless radio.

“Enemy aircraft spotted! From here on out, take offensive positions.”

Tensions suddenly shot up within the formation. The small dots now visible in the distance, numbered as many as twenty; as numerous as they were the other day. As the distance steadily decreased, the black dots took on the appearance of the Laros-kai.

1st squadron began climbing as usual to avoid a direct confrontation.

Now. Tomoko switched radio frequencies. “Fuso-one, taking the lead!”

“It', it's dangerous! Pilot Officer Tomoko!”

With that, and without responding, Tomoko's magic engine erupted as she shot off towards the airspace 1st squadron had been occupying until now. Reluctantly, Katherine and Beurling also followed on to flank her.

The Laros-kai formation, without paying the slightest attention to 1st squadron, came straight towards the bomb-carrying group led by Tomoko.

“Flying Officer Elma! Even though it's presumptuous of me, I'm taking command! All aircraft follow my lead!”

“R, Roger!” Completely clueless, F/O Elma nodded at Tomoko's assertion. *I have no idea what to do when it comes to this kind of thing. I have no choice but to entrust Tomoko with tactical command.*

“Flying officer, dive down gradually!”

The independent volunteer squadron and the Laros-kai formation of 20 aircraft passed by one another... in an instant, Tomoko had dived. The rest of the squadron followed on, unstably beginning to dive while holding their bombs.

A perfect target.

The Laros-kai formation climbed and circled around. Then like wolfs targeting abandoned fawns, they came rushing in.

“Tsh! They're coming at us all at once! Kyaa! Kyaaaaaa!” Katherine and F/O Elma's shrieked, but this situation was precisely what Tomoko had been aiming for.

“It's fine! Hold on until we escape to low-altitude! Without breaking formation!”

Tomoko's group dropped their altitude in one go, until they were practically skimming across the surface. Right behind, the Laros-kai formation pressed them onwards. Unsteadily roaming about at low altitude embracing bombs; Tomoko's group, were an ideal target. The range was immediately reduced, and they received a volley of enemy fire.

*“**Tomoko!**”* Isn't this our, total destruction~!”

The Laros-kai had fallen for the feint and approached to 300 meters, Tomoko's group planned to lure them in with their distress. Tracer bullets grazed past, and the group caved in to panic, while still clutching their explosive charges.

Any time now.

Tomoko judged their altitude by eye. **Approximately 50 meters.** The fuse's safety position was not in operation, just barely enough altitude. Glancing behind, Tomoko gauged her timing with the enemy formation.

To get a better line of sight on Tomoko's group, the Laros-kai formation lowered their altitude even

more for a moment... Tomoko shouted. “Squadron! Drop the bombs!”



“Squadron! Drop
the bombs!”

With that order, everyone released the bombs they held. Five blasts scoured the earth as the fuses detonated.

BWoom!

Kuoom! PhOom!

BwOom!

Bwoom!

Snow, soil, rocks, and dismembered tree limbs were thrown up in the blast.

Having approached from behind, several of the leading enemy aircraft were engulfed in that blast, and became nothing more than shrapnel themselves. Shrouded in the remnants of the explosion, some of the enemy craft crashed the ground, and some into one another.

Within the white snow-cloud, the number of Laros-kai had decreased by half.

In an instant, Tomoko was giving her commands to the squadron. “Elma and Ursula bank right! Katherine! Beurling! Bank left! Follow my lead!”

Tomoko's body had become comparatively light after abandoning the bomb, and she now banked left as hard as she could.

Because of the bomb-blasted snow cloud, the Laros-kai momentarily lost sight

of Tomoko's lot who were scattering left and right. In that moment, the fates of the two groups were dealt. Amongst the Snow-cloud debris, Tomoko and her comrades circled round and took the Laros-kai's tail.

“UoooooooooooooooooO”!

With that roar, Tomoko unsheathed her sword; the Hizen Osafune. Using all the resentment and anger she had built up until now, she would strike the remaining Laros-kai down, and prevent them from proceeding.

At low altitudes, escaping into a nose-dive would be impossible. The Laros-kai would probably try to raise their speed to escape, however at low altitude, the light and agile mechanized air infantry had an advantage in acceleration.

In no time at all Tomoko was dogging an enemy aircraft, and cut off it's wing. She then nimbly adjusted for her next cut, and severed the Laros-kai's fat body in two. Beurling also unsheathed her gorkha knife, piercing an enemy's engine, and left it spewing out smoke.

Katherine drew her revolver from her waist, and hit into a Laros-kai with .45 caliber shots.

F/O Elma and Ursula also made one Laros-kai resemble Swiss cheese, using 9mm pistols from point blank range.

Close range combat at very low altitude... what Tomoko had been aiming for, was precisely this. Firstly, make use of the bombs and confuse the enemy, thereafter destroy them via side-arms. If it were very close range, even without primary weapons like a machine gun they would somehow succeed, Tomoko had conceptualized as such, and had now moved on to implementation.

From above 1st squadron came rushing in to provide support, at roughly the same time as the last Laros-kai met it's destruction.

“Tomoko! Your strategy was a total success!” Katherine screamed as she clung to Tomoko.

“It worked out really well huuh.” Beurling's voice was also slightly more lively than usual.

Tomoko sheathed the Hizen Osafune with flushed cheeks. A Hot sigh met icy

air, and stained it white.

How was that?

Did they see it?

Even using an old model striker, one can oppose the Neuroi with ingenuity.

Staring at the Stuka formation still visible at high altitude, Tomoko muttered. "The rest is in your hands. Flight Lieutenant Rudel."

Having observed the dogfight that just unfolded under her eyes, the corners of F/L Rudel's lips expressed the hint of a smile.

"Adelheid. That oriental, she's not half bad." Rudel said to her adjutant, who had a beauty similar to that of a frozen rose.

"It's not so surprising. On the Karlsland war front, the Fuso Empire's heroic soldiers are not earning inferior military achievements compared with us Karlsland Luftwaffe pilots. Lieutenant Takeko Katou, Lieutenant Mio Sakamoto..."

"I know that. I'm not in the habit of judging ability based on skin color."

"Well then, why?" Adelheid turned towards her superior officer with a doubtful expression.

Why then earlier, was she provoking that Anabuki pilot officer with the 'oriental' designation? And so she enquired as such.

"I wanted to know her boiling point. The most important thing for the mobile air infantry, above all else, is the ability to make calm judgments. My conduct was simply to ascertain whether or not she is possessed-of that. I was worried because her boiling point seems somewhat low, but she pulled off something interesting here."

"Did she pass?"

"For the time being, and yet; next time I wonder. A clever scheme won't work twice, because tactics are the accumulation of regular practice. Using an old model striker will result in failure sooner or later. Now then, I wonder if she's

capable of realizing that.”

The clouds opened up, and the Town of Slussen came into view ahead of them. From an altitude of 3000 meters, it became apparent that the town was in the process of being transformed.

The buildings were coming to pieces as if they were dissolving, from here and there dusky fumes were rising up. A grotesque enemy; the Neuroi were emitting their miasma. They would dissolve the town, and harvesting the metals, humans were not able to live near an area that was being changed.

Those uninhabited towns were draped in a deathly silence.

Seeing the town of Slussen like that, F/L Rudel let out a a sigh. In her homeland, she had constantly seen such spectacles. Unless swiftly recaptured, Slussen too would eventually become completely uninhabitable by humans, just like a countless number of towns in the Neuroi occupied Karlsland where the assimilation had been completed.

“In any case, that oriental did her job magnificently, as was expected. Now then, shall we go do ours?”

“Agreed.”

“All right Stuka squadron, follow on.”

F/L Rudel maintained squadrons 'V' shape formation, and entered Slussen's airspace at high altitude.

Anti-aircraft fire shot up from the Neuroi battlements stationed in the town, but the Stuka squadron's formation was not thrown into disarray. They had considerable training.

With the detection of their target, the Stuka witches commenced their bombing run starting at the back of their 'V' shaped formation.

Targeting the enemy ground unit, the bomb embracing witches rolled over in flight and began a sharp nose-dive. Their movements resembled that of a Kingfisher diving down towards it's underwater quarry.

Plummeting to an altitude of 100 meters, their bombs were released. The bombs trajectory did not waver, explosions resounded, and the armour shaped

humanoid Neuroi were blown away.

Stuka squadron inflicted a brutally composed raid, with each bomb Neuroi ground units were torn apart. F/L Rudel was the last to conduct her bombing run, scoring a direct hit on the huge multi-legged Neuroi tank. The tank was blown apart, smoke and fragments rained down all over the place.

Stuka squadron escaped out of the range of the anti-aircraft guns, and once again assembled into a solid formation.

“Humanoid Neuroi, numbering fifteen, and five multi-legged tanks destroyed. Suitable results.” The outcome of the assault was quickly consolidated and reported by Rudel's adjutant Pilot Officer Adelheid; however F/L Rudel's expression was cloudy.

“Look. Adelheid.” F/L Rudel pointed at the as still writhing enemy ground units in Slussen.

“Based on the data we received from Sqn Ldr Häkkinen, the Slussen enemy units were supposed to be roughly one squadron of humanoid Neuroi, and several multi legged tanks.”

“True.”

“If that had been the case, our combat achievements this time would be suitable. However...”

It didn't seem like the enemy units in Slussen had decreased at all.

“Ultimately, those lot are multiplying. It's just like Karlsland.”

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Chapter 4 - New Model Ki-44

January 22nd

One week after the first successful bombing raid in response to the Slussen enemy ground forces...

A closed elementary school was being utilised for the temporary Mikkeli air base. The command room was situated in what was once the principles office.

Squadron Leader Häkkinen sat behind an antique mahogany desk, with her eyes fixed upon a report that had been filed, she sighed deeply.

“Results of the bombing raid, have been insubstantial due to...” *hmm?*

That was the truth of the matter.

Once every three days, the bombing raids on Slussen had continued, but clear results were not being attained. The number of Neuroi had not fallen in the slightest.

Flight Lieutenant Rudel was filling in the gaps of that report.

“It's the same as Karlsland. Through the destruction of towns, those things

multiply using the obtained metals, wood and other materials. It seems to contradict my purpose, one is unable to say whether bombing urban areas has much effect or not. And besides the Neuroi, building's are also completely destroyed. So it's like we're granting those things the materials they need..."

Sqn Ldr Häkkinen shook her head, "On the other hand, we can't possibly just discontinue the bombing raids."

F/L Rudel nodded, "That's true. If we were to interrupt the raids, the enemy would just keep on multiplying."

"So when it comes down to it, we have no choice but to hold back the enemy's increasing numbers by keeping it up... They're not increasing but, neither are they dropping. It's like doing the same thing over and over again isn't it."

Bombing the Neuroi occupying built up areas, was little better than prolonging the life of a patient on the verge of death. It would not provide a fundamental solution.

"Besides the raids, if we could find a way of eradicating the Neuroi..."

"Somehow or other, we have to discover such a method. Until then let's keep up the bombings."

The telephone on the desk rang.

Sqn Ldr Häkkinen picked up the receiver. With a few words, and an unchanged facial expression, she replaced the telephone receiver.

"Is it good news? Bad news?" F/L Rudel enquired.

"Unusually, the former. New equipment has arrived for the Independent Volunteer Air Squadron."

The new equipment had arrived in a huge airship, and been taken to the hanger. Consequently, the maintenance crew had begun lining up the striker units for installation and testing.

Seeing that situation, the witches of the Independent Volunteer Air Squadron smiled cheerfully.

"Uuwa~! This engine, it's amazing right~!" Katherine cried out upon seeing a

new model of magic engine installed into her own Buffalo.

The aircraft mechanic explained with a smiling face; “Pilot officer, this new model of the cyclone engine is incredible! The magic output is thirty percent higher. Ascending power, and speed too can't even compare to what they were before.”

“That's wonderful isn't it~! With this, I won't get left behind in the sky anymore~!”

Beurling and Ursula held new machine guns that had been dispatched from their respective home countries.

“Is this, a 20mm?” Beurling said, pointing at a heavy machine gun placed upon an oil cloth.

Opening the ammunition box beside her, the mechanic replied with a smiling face, “That's right Pilot officer Beurling, it's a Hispano-Suiza. The heavy weight bullets aren't the same as an Oerlikon's. Have a look at them, they're Just like beer bottles.”

Beurling nodded as she was handed an enormous 20mm round taken from the ammunition box.

“If one of these guys hits the mark, something like a Laros would be ripped apart!”

Ursula was also holding the machine gun she had been sent, and was tampering with it here and there.

“This, what machine gun is it?” Katherine stuck her face over, to which Ursula responded.

“...MG151. 15mm auto-cannon.”

“15mm? That's a subtle calibre~” Katherine teased, F/L Rudel who was watching everyone with folded arms shook her head.

“I hear that the Mauser 15mm is the favoured calibre of top aces. They say it flies accurately to the point at which one has aimed . But since I fly a Stuka, I don't know the full details.”

“That's great isn't it! With this you'll become an ace too~”

F/L Rudel was fixedly staring at Ursula's face, with a puzzled expression she eventually enquired; "You're... Pilot Officer Hartmann? Are you not Pilot Officer Erica Hartmann of 52nd Squadron?"

Ursula shook her head. "...That would be, my older sister."

"I see. The more I look at you, the more I think you're a splitting image of her."

"You had someone like a big sister all this time~?"

Ursula gave a sudden little nod. "Twin sister..."

F/L Rudel gazed at the intermittently talking Ursula, "It seems you have a very different nature from that of your sisters reprehensible disposition. However your older sister is an excellent mechanized air infantry woman. If you're also a Karlsland Luftwaffe pilot, with that MG151 your performance won't lose out to your sister's conspicuous achievements."

With a superior officer of her country's air force saying so, Ursula bit her lip slightly, then gave a sharp little nod.

What has been lain out for Flying Officer Elma, was a Messerscharf E Striker unit that had been transported from Karlsland.

"Wo, Wow! It's so shiny!"

Considering that it was the same equipment as 1st Squadron used, F/O Elma looked delighted.

Tomoko surveyed the area restlessly, *I wonder what I've been sent?*

However... she could not find any writing from the Fuso Empire's army printed anywhere on the lined up boxes of components.

Have I not been sent anything? Well, I guess that's fine, Tomoko nodded to herself.

With this Ki-27, I have all I need. If I'm handlin'g the aircraft that I'm most familiar with, I'll show that I can deal with any kind of enemy. Satisfying herself with that thought, her eyes met Haruka's, who was standing in a corner.

Thinking about it, we haven't spoken since she ran out on the squadron.

Because it would be impossible for their relationship to break down for good, Tomoko tried to feign a composed voice as best she could. “Yo. What have you been supplied with?”

Haruka simply turned her back on the forcibly smiling Tomoko.

Wha, what's up with this kid... is she still sulking?

Tomoko was highly offended, but managed to control herself. Once again Tomoko spoke out to her. “What were you sent, I wonder～”

Tomoko moved closer, but was quickly obstructed by F/L Ahonen.

The comparatively tall F/L Ahonen looked down at Tomoko, and while twirling her curly hair with a finger, she triumphantly declared, “That's enough, will you please stay away from my little sister?”

“Huh? Why!”

Ignoring Tomoko's yell, F/L Ahonen put her arm around Haruka's shoulders, and brought her lips close to Haruka's ear. “Pretty–little–my–sister. What is it that you've been supplied with? Tell your big sister.”

Haruka picked up the huge aircraft auto-cannon that had been placed on the floor next to her.

“This is it. Big sis.”

“Oh my! It's a magnificent gun isn't it! Explain to your big sister how good it is.”

F/L Ahonen began caressing Haruka's hair as if displaying it to Tomoko, who was scowling at them from behind. Tomoko honestly did not have that kind of preference, but Ahonen's behaviour made her very angry.

“This is a Type 99-2 auto cannon. Compared with the Type 99-1 that I've used until now; it has a longer barrel, the muzzle velocity is... aah,” in the middle of her explanation, Haruka let out a somewhat coquettish noise. F/L Ahonen had given Haruka's ear a gentle nibble, and slipped her hand into the opening of her shirt.

“What's wrong? Can you try to fully explain please?”

“Ye-ahu, Yes... Wh, where was I... Nn! Umm, the drum capacity has increased

from sixty rounds... hya, to one-hundred... Nn!”

“That's excellent. You explained very accurately,” F/L Ahonen said while fondling Haruka's small chest with her slender fingers.

“Ye, Yes... It's an honour to receive your praise... Nn!”

Ahonen slid her other hand up Haruka's skirt, overcoming her with an outrageous feeling.

“Fu, Flight Lieutenant... What are... Yha...”

“Shall I give you your reward? Little kitty...”

Haruka stole a glance in Tomoko's direction with flushed cheeks. Tomoko's face was blushing as red as a lobster.

While trembling all over, Tomoko's outstretched finger wavered up and down.

“Wait! You two! This is an aircraft maintenance hanger, a sacred place! Wha, wh, wh,wh, wh, wh, wh, What the hell do you think you're doing!”

“Because of the scary Pilot Officer here, shall we go somewhere else? Fufu, fufufufu.”

F/L Ahonen, who was still wrapped around Haruka's shoulders, left the hanger with her.

“Wh, what's with those people...” Without the willpower to pursue them, Tomoko took a deep shaky breath. Her chest was pounding strangely.

They're complete lesbians, even though I shouldn't be myself...

Grrraah, I've never dated anyone myself, so seeing their involvement with one another might be a little too stimulating for me. Even though they're both girls.

What the heck was that, thrusting her hand up Haruka's skirt; grr, groping her breasts like that, to think that flight lieutenant would do all those things to Haruka!

...Tomoko became intensely irritated. At any rate, It seems that Haruka has been corrupted by that complete pervert Ahonen.

“Even if you come crying for forgiveness, you won't get it!”

With Tomoko yelling as such, a voice called out from behind her.

“You seem angry. Pilot Officer.” It was a firm, but gentle voice.

“Haa! I, It's not that I'm angry.”

“I wonder if you're mad about your sweetheart getting stolen?”

“What do you mean sweetheart!”

Tomoko whipped around about to slap them with a scythe-like hand, But that hand was firmly seized. Standing before her eyes, was a young man. Moreover...

“...A Fusan?”

Like Tomoko, the man in front of her was from the Fuso Empire. He had carefully combed black hair, and his black eyes radiated an intellectual light...

He was clad in a pretentious white business suit, and wore a matching plaid hunters cap. The man looked like a playboy from the upscale Ginza district in Tokyo. But the strong light in his eyes was drowned out by his show-off atmosphere.

It was the first time a young man had brought his face so close to her's like that, Tomoko once again blushed bright red.

Seeing Tomoko like that, the man gave a smile. “I'm surprised. Tomoe Gozen of the Fuso sea is a truly beautiful woman.”



At having her physique admired, Tomoko's heart leapt for an instant. But at the same time she also felt a rush of anger at being regarded like that, *and what conceited praise that is!*

“Wh, What did you just say!”

“Calm down don't be angry now. Your beauty will be ruined. No, you're three times more beautiful than in the film.”

The man reached out a hand towards Tomoko's chin. Tomoko slapped it away.

What a simpleton!

“Sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. Itokawa Mamoru of Nakajima Striker Units.”

Nakajima Striker Units, was one of the companies manufacturing the aircraft for mechanized air infantry pilots like Tomoko. Nakajima Striker Units K.K. was boasted as the largest among them. Tomoko's own Ki-27 was one of the aircraft they had developed.

“So that would mean, you're a civilian employed by the military?”

“That's right. I've brought a new model, just for you. Your gratitude is welcome, Pilot Officer Anabuki Tomoko.”

However, even though it was a common occurrence for new models to be sent, an engineer coming along with it was not.

“For what purpose did an engineer like yourself come with it?”

“The new model I brought is the result of a newly developed engineering concept, it's undoubtedly a restive horse of higher speed, and greater power. As we both know, it takes some time to analyse and adjust a new technology. Which is why I was sent along with it,” Itokawa finished his explanation with a wink.

Although his behaviour was rather affected, Itokawa couldn't possibly have meant that sarcastically. On the other hand, Tomoko couldn't stomach it if he were being serious. She felt somewhat suffocated, and turned away from him.

“A restive horse? That kind of aircraft, I do not need.” Tomoko icily declared, turning to face this unusual and discomforting kind of man.

To which Itokawa just bowed his head and gave an earnest request. “Not at all. By all means put it to good use. This new model undoubtedly has the potential to completely revolutionise aerial combat from here on out. I also took part in it's

development.”

That kind of overly self confident mannerism just compounded Tomoko's irritation.

If this kind of simple guy developed something like an aircraft, it certainly can't amount to much. That being the case... trying to employ it in combat would be an utterly stupid thing to do.

A broad grin spread across Tomoko's face. “Hmm. What do you call this aircraft?”

“The Ki-44, Type-2 Single Fighter. The designated pet-name is 'Shouki'.”

'Shouki' was the name of a grim bearded god. That icon was considered to be a ward against evil spirits.

“That's an extremely austere name isn't it.”

“Indeed. A malevolent god to exorcise the Neuroi.”

“I hope it can live up to that name. Alright. If it's only for a trial I'll test it for you. However, if I'm not pleased with it, you'll take it back with you in it's current state.”

“I expect that you'll be completely satisfied by it, and by me also,” Itokawa said with a grin.

Tomoko blushed once again.

A truly detestable guy!

Equipped with the Ki-44, Tomoko approached the front of the Hanger to commence the trial. Outside of the hanger, she continued down a gentle slope towards the lake that served as their temporary airfield.

For her flight uniform, Tomoko had changed into a short length Miko outfit that was entirely inappropriate amid the fiercely blowing winds of icy Suomus.

However, she was not as cold as she might appear to be. From Tomoko's body, there emanated a magic field. With one's legs integrated into the Striker Unit, a faint magical aura provided the wearer protection from the open air.

Using the Ki-44, Tomoko was shocked at how that magic engine amplified her power. “Sure enough... it has a huge output at the very least.”

Next to Tomoko, Itokawa stood up from his chair and nodded in apparent satisfaction.

“How do you find the Ma-41 engine? It has one-and-a-half times the output of the Ki-27's. In terms of horsepower, it won't be outdone by the West's leading aircraft.

“But, this Striker Unit is rather large though isn't it,” Tomoko complained.

The new magic engine certainly had great horsepower. However in exchange for that, the engine's diameter had increased. Consequently, the Striker Unit's silhouette had also become unfavourably wide. That thickness was not on the level of Katherine's Buffalo, but felt hard to handle for Tomoko who was accustomed to the slender Ki-27.

“That can't be helped. By perfecting one thing, another has to be compromised. In any case, if it raises you to the heavens there's no need to worry about the the thickness,” Itokawa said in a detached manner.

That was certainly the case, things like appearance had no relation to aerial combat. What was worrying Tomoko, was just the performance and handling of such an aircraft.

“First of all, I'll test the rate of ascension.”

“Pay attention to the throttle. If you treat it like the Ki-27, you'll crash.”

Tomoko huffed indignantly. “Do not make light of me. How many years, do you think I've been a mechanized air infantry-woman?”

Itokawa replied in a jesting tone; “Sorry-sorry. Was that needless advise for 'Tomoe Gozen of the Fuso sea' I wonder?”

Taking action, Tomoko suddenly opened up the throttle.

“Who'll crash... hmpf! Uwa!”

About to be left behind by the acceleration of the Ki-44, Tomoko hurried to stabilise herself. *It would seem that he wasn't just boasting by saying it had one-and-a-half times the power of the Ki-27.*

The speed couldn't even compare to usual, as the surrounding scenery rushed away behind her.

~GaGaGaGaGa! an intense vibration engulfed Tomoko's body, she frantically adopted a take-off posture.

Am I going to crash? she asked herself as bits of the frozen lake surface were thrown up.

With a whoosh! the Ki-44 easily rocketed towards the heavens.

Giving it full throttle, the Ki-44 began a sharp climb.

Itokawa's voice came through on the wireless radio. "Test test. Can you hear me?"

"Unfortunately, I can hear you just fine."

"By the way, in terms of ascending power the Ki-44 is currently the top ranking Striker Unit for the Fuso Empire's Army and Navy."

"That certainly seems to be the case."

With frightening speed, the Ki-44 continued to push Tomoko towards the heights of the skies.

It certainly passed the mark for ascending power, but... Tomoko was a fighter pilot. In the case of an interception mission one couldn't remain idle at low altitude, but while while moving to engage, ascending power was not of great importance.

"However, even with so much power, if it's poor in combat then it's all meaningless isn't it."

"Test it first."

To begin with, Tomoko tried several barrel-rolls. The ki-44 responded to her will, and rotated her around the longitudinal axis.

The rate of rotation was not bad, or perhaps one should say it was actually quite good. Tomoko was astonished at that performance.

"The rolling capabilities don't look bad. The tailplane response is also above average." The Ki-44 responded sharply to Tomoko's will. If anything, it felt a little

overly sensitive.

“The reaction might be too sharp. Don't you think it's a little bit dangerous?”

“That aircraft is not intended to be handled by a spring chicken just out of flight school. I want Ace's like yourself to utilize it, and designed it with that in mind.”

“What an honour. However, the problem is regarding actual combat. Even if the response is that sensitive, it'll come to nothing if it fails on the battlefield.”

If this were a mock battle, the aircraft's performance could be ascertained at once... while worrying about that, a different voice cut in on the wireless radio.

“Tomoko. Shall I play the role of your opponent?”

Looking around, Beurling was ascending from below. Her real strength was not outmatched in a mock battle, so it seemed that Tomoko would be able to measure the Ki-44's true value.

“Thanks, I'd appreciate that. Would you like to move to an equal starting position?”

“Nope, my disadvantage is fine. You're not familiar with that aircraft right? A Handicap.”

Tomoko huffed at Beurling's disregarding reply. Not that Beurling was actually making light of Tomoko, it was just in her nature to speak like that.

“Well I expect you to go all out then!”

To keep Beurling under her control, Tomoko Swooped down upon her from above.

Beurling easily evaded Tomoko's assault, and left her back open as if inviting Tomoko in.

“What was that! Are you even trying!” She yelled, and moved to pursue Beurling.

Thereupon, Beurling entered a right turn as if to tempt Tomoko. That completely amateur manoeuvre just enraged Tomoko all the more.

And then, when she tried to follow Beurling's turn, 'that' happened.

“Hah?”

Fuwosh! Together with a strange roar of wind, Tomoko's Striker unit suddenly entered a stalled condition.

"Kyaaaaaaaaa!"

Without warning Tomoko's body dropped like a rock. She became disorientated for a moment, falling head first; regaining some airspeed, before somehow managing to recover her posture.

If this were an actual battle... I would have been shot down for sure.

“Wh, what the heck *is* this... It's outright unable to turn.”

Itokawa's voice resounded from the wireless radio. “Ah~, Pilot Officer. You mustn't make such unreasonable turns. Please turn slowly and carefully while keeping an eye on the control surfaces.”

“Unreasonable? What's that supposed to mean! That would mean things like close-quarters combat aren't even possible!”

Tomoko once again tried to follow Beurling.

However... if she was forced into close-quarters combat, she would be at a disadvantage. The Ki-44 was completely outmatched by the Hurricane's turning circle.

Three times... Tomoko stole Beurling's tail three times, and was utterly defeated each time. If it had been her familiar Ki-27, she was confident that those three matches would have been winnable. By the end of it all, Tomoko had long since decided that the Ki-44's performance was inferior to the Ki-27's by far.

That's enough already! With her rage burning brightly, Tomoko put a stop to the mock battle.

“What's with this Ki-44! It's completely useless!”

“Ah~ Pilot Officer Anabuki. I want you to be very careful when landing...”

“It can't even turn, it just stalls immediately, it can't possibly have been manufactured by the same company that produced the Ki-27!”

“Pilot Officer, Pilot Officer, listen to me for a moment.”

Tomoko had been enraged to the point that Itokawa's warnings did not get through to her. It just entered through her right ear, and exited out of her left.

Consequently, Tomoko ended up making a fatal mistake in her landing procedure.

While approaching the airfield, she steadily dropped her airspeed for touchdown, but...

“Huh? Isn't this still too fast?” Tomoko was genuinely frightened by the high landing speed of the Ki-44.

“Hol! Hold on! Landing at this kind of velocity is... but I'm not slowing down... Kyaaaaaa!”

Having totally misread her landing speed, Tomoko over-ran the airfield. In the blink of an eye she had passed over the frozen lake surface, and plunged into a grove of trees on the shore.

“Crash! I'm gona crash! Iyaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

~Thunk!

Tomoko just managed to stop herself from colliding head on with a tree trunk. But the crash still caused the accumulated snow on the trees to come falling down with a *fwoosh, burying Tomoko's body.

The Independent Volunteer Squadron members and Itokawa came rushing over to where Tomoko had been buried in snow.

“Like I said... be very careful of the landing speed. The Ki-44 is very different from existing aircraft, it's a high speed Striker Unit.”

“Enough, already...” Tomoko muttered half crying, her pride as an ace smashed to pieces.

“From now on, listen properly to what I say, with practice there's nothing to worry about, alright? Firstly, until now close quarters combat using the Ki-44...”

Tomoko suddenly stood up and thrust her finger at Itokawa.

“SHUT IT! What kind of 'revolutionary aircraft' is that! Imposing this kind of defective thing on me!”

“The Ki-44 is not anything like a defective aircraft! Your handling of it was just bad!”

“You're saying that I'm just an unskilled pilot then?”

“That's not what I meant.”

“In any case! I will absolutely not use an aircraft that is so difficult to control!”

Tomoko threw off the Ki-44, and set off towards the hanger in long strides.

That evening...

Tomoko was drinking heavily by herself in the dining hall. It was a local concoction called Koskenkorva.

This spirit had an abnormally high alcohol content, the most suitable drink for icy Suomus. Even if there was no heating, it felt as if one's body was being warmed from within.

However, even drinking and drinking did not suppress her mood. The disgrace from earlier still tormented her.

“That's exactly why I said that I detest using new models!..”

Tomoko knocked on the desk with her fist. *This idiot failed at landing... By now the maintenance crew and the soldiers protecting the base will be gossiping about it between themselves, that's for sure.*

Tomoko's face was burning, and it wasn't just from the alcohol. Naturally, on account of Tomoko's abundant pride, she could not possibly allow herself such a foolish mistake.

Her self-loathing subsequently turned towards that engineer Itokawa.

Because of that guy making me take part, I wound up in that such a situation.

Itokawa's face came to mind, which for some reason caused Tomoko's cheeks to flush red.

Such an uncontrollable reaction just served to irritate Tomoko even further, without thinking she yelled out. ***“What the hell! That Itokawa guy!”***

“You called?” Turning around, Itokawa was standing in the doorway of the dining hall.

“I did not call!”

“Drinking alone in a place like this, in the dead of night? Looks like fun.” Itokawa walked over briskly and sat down next to Tomoko.

“What do you want...”

“I was thinking I'd like to solve your little misunderstanding of course.”

“Misunderstanding? What misunderstanding.”

“Why are you so adherent on using the Ki-27?”

“Operating the Ki-27 feels just like moving my own body. On top of that, it's almost unrivalled in close-quarters combat. Isn't that enough?”

Itokawa brought out two cups, and filled them both to the brim with water.

“What the heck is that supposed to be?” Tomoko asked disdainfully.

Pointing at the two cups of water he had poured, Itokawa said, “These two cups represent the Ki-27 and the Ki-44 respectively, at an altitude of three-thousand meters. Consider the water they contain as their potential energy.”

“Huh? You want to give me a physics lecture at this hour? I did all that stuff at aviation school.”

“So let's put it to a bit of practical use. Listen closely.”

Itokawa picked up one of the cups.

“This one is the Ki-27. Moving to engage one enemy squadron, the Ki-27 immediately enters level close-quarters combat... I'm preaching to the choir here, but a corner stone of close-quarters combat is tight repeated turns. Anyway, at an altitude of three-thousand meters, if the Ki-27 repeatedly engages in close-quarters combat...”

Little by little, Itokawa was pouring away the water in the cup.

“Whenever one turns, the kinetic energy that the aircraft possesses is decreased. As well as it's speed, the air resistance upon turning also steals away an aircraft's potential energy. So let's say, you the ace shoot down five aircraft

while piloting the Ki-27. And yet, that outcome results in you becoming completely drained of energy.”

Itokawa pointed at the empty cup. “This, is the Ki-27 after engaging in close-quarters combat. Altitude; one hundred meters. Speed; on the verge of stalling. So, what if a new enemy arrived while you were in this condition?”

Tomoko was at a loss for words. That situation would be called a 'Checkmate' in Shougi.

“And now the Ki-44. It's different from the light-combat Ki-27, as it is classified as a heavy-combat aircraft. Although it's called 'heavy-combat', it's not actually the Striker Unit itself that's heavy. What we mean by 'heavy' is that it suffers from a high ratio of weight distribution over the surface area of the wings when turning, or 'high wing loading'. Putting it simply, compared with what you're accustomed to, the Ki-44 has inferior turning performance. You are absolutely correct in pointing out that it can't turn.”

Itokawa picked up the the other cup of water. "Because of that, the Ki-44 has a completely different method of engaging enemies than that of the the Ki-27. Altitude three-thousand meters, with the enemy formation visible below, the Ki-44 moves to engage and strikes from a nose dive...”

Itokawa emptied the water from the cup into the sink. "By lowering ones altitude, potential energy is lost just like with the Ki-27. However, the Ki-44 is able to replenish that energy. Do you understand why that is?”

Tomoko shook her head.

Itokawa turned the tap and topped up the cup with water fresh water. "It's the speed, this new water represents the kinetic energy. The Ki-44 does not lose the speed obtained from diving down. Because, 'it doesn't turn'. Instead of chasing the escaping enemies too far, one immediately changes their priority to climbing, and by doing so one can convert that kinetic energy back into potential energy."

Itokawa pointed at the cup filled with water.

“Now, by repeating the tactic, the Ki-44 has shot down two aircraft. Because it can't pursue at close range, the same shoot down count has not been attained, but in doing so it holds the same energy as it had before the battle. Even if a new

enemy comes into view, it can be dealt with at once.” Itokawa peered into Tomoko's face.

Tomoko's cheeks heated up at how close he was. “...Even so, in a setting where one is able to shoot down five aircraft, one *should* shoot down all five of them. Decreasing the enemy numbers brings about a true tactical advantage. For that purpose, the ability to engage in close-quarters combat is essential.”

While breathing a sigh, Itokawa muttered. “The air-force also... no, not just them, the navy and the upper echelons of Nakajima Striker Units too. That is to say, the general trend of the Fuso Empire's entire aviation community share the same opinion as yourself on this matter. People such as myself and my team are in the minority. But the reality on the Karlsland war-front, is that the methods I just described are being employed. From here on out, things like close-quarters combat will be unnecessary.”

At those words, Tomoko thought of her friend Takeko. She had also been saying something like that. But Tomoko had her own thoughts on her fighting style.

“When I can no longer fight close-quarters, I'll consider fighting in a formation.”

Itokawa nodded. “I guess you won't compromise at all... Only time itself will reveal which of us is correct.”

After a brief pause, Tomoko decided to enquire of Itokawa; “Why did you want me to use of the Ki-44 so badly?”

“Are you not a famous ace? If such an ace were to utilise the Ki-44 for us, our concept would be verified as correct.”

Tomoko felt somewhat let down. *The heck? So he didn't just want me to use it after all... or rather! Why am I disappointed?*

Inducing a strange burning sensation... Itokawa wrapped his arm around Tomoko's shoulder, and whispered into her ear, “I do have one more reason though.”

“What!”

"I'm genuinely in love with you."

"Wha? Wha? What? What the hell do you think you're saying! Such stu! Saying such stupid things just pisses me off!"

"I didn't say anything stupid. In fact, I fell in love with you at first sight. It took me by surprise."

Itokawa reached out for Tomoko's chin without further preamble. Although she was highly offended by his overbearing actions, Tomoko was unable to resist.

"ah..." She was pulled towards him, and her lips were stolen. In that instant, Tomoko was unable to comprehend what was what.

A short while after their lips met, Itokawa slowly pulled away.

"Wh, Wha, Wh..." Although she wanted to condemn him, the words just wouldn't come out.

"Forgive me. You're just too beautiful... your forever graceful, long black hair. Not to mention your dark and honest eyes... you're the epitome of beauty on every count."

Trembling all over, Tomoko struck Itokawa across the face.

Tears were now filling those dark eyes.

"Oh, I wonder, was that perhaps... your first kiss?" Itokawa said quietly, while rubbing his cheek.

Tomoko fled from the dining hall with her hands covering her face.

"Despite that childish behaviour, she's still charming... Tomoe Gozen of the Fuso sea," Itokawa said to himself while watching her back disappear through the doorway.

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Chapter 5 - Tomoko's Unrest

The very next day, an opportunity to utilize the new equipment came in the form of a sudden order to sortie.

As they stood in line, it was clear to the other witches that Tomoko was not in her usual condition. She was fidgeting and shifting uneasily; sometimes blushing with tightly pursed lips, muttering vehemently, or stamping her foot in frustration.

“Pilot Officer Tomoko?” inquired Flying Officer Elma with a puzzled face.

“Ah, no, it's nothing. Yes.”

“It's like, your minds somewhere else~” Katherine said while she raised her hand and waved it up and down right in front of Tomoko's eyes.

“I'm fine!”

“You don't look *'fine'* in the slightest.” Beurling walked over and put her hand on Tomoko's forehead.

“You don't seem to have a fever.”

“What's wrong Pilot Officer Tomoko? What on earth could be bothering you... Even though you're the most reliable~” Utterly confused, F/O Elma sounded like she was about to cry.

Meanwhile, Ursula had been fixedly staring at Tomoko's face...

“Wh... What?”

With her head tilted to one side, Ursula breathed out a single word;

“Love.”

“Wh..! What the heck are you saying! This bug-eyed girl! If you screw around I'll smash those glasses to pieces!”

“What! Tomoko! You, you fell in love~! Who? Who is it~?”

“I'm **not** in love!.. **I'm not I tell you!**”

“That denial was a bit suspicious, wasn't it~ You said that about your mysterious companion very fast, didn't you~” Clinging to Tomoko, Katherine launched savage tickle-attack on her.

“That's true.” Beurling put her hand to her chin and nodded.

“Who is it!”

“Say, is it that engineer who came from your homeland? Am I right?”

“**You're not right! You're wrong! That's absolutely wrong!**”

Falling into a state of panicked confusion, Tomoko began firing her machine-gun.

Because they had been allowed to fly a normal escort mission this time, everyone was equipped with their main armaments.

“**Uwaa! You idiot! Don't shoot!**”

Looking on at the disturbance, F/O Elma cried out in a heartbreakingly tragic voice; “Even though we were just asking... it seems like that was unreasonable~”

Meanwhile, a certain figure was staring intensely at Tomoko from within the ranks of the 1st Squadron.

It was the little girl with the bobbed hairstyle.

Haruka's chest was burning with jealousy. Recalling what she had seen in the dining hall last night...

What she had witnessed there, was Itokawa and Tomoko enveloping each other in a hot embrace. If it had just been a hug, that would have still been acceptable. Perhaps it could also have been explained as some kind of impulse...

But, but..!

“But, but! A kiss! Because... It's just not possible!”

“What's not possible?” Flight Lieutenant Ahonen swung back her curly hair and wrapped her arm around Haruka's shoulders. A chorus of complaints arose from the other members of the 1st Squadron, which their Flight Lieutenant completely ignored.

“Ah, it's nothing.”

“It's not; 'nothing' is it?”

F/L Ahonen slipped her hand into an opening in Haruka's flight uniform, and whispered while making her squirm. “Were you not just looking over at Tomoko? You troubled child, have you still not forgotten about her?”

“That's... It's not... Aah!”

“Have I not already said? Your body, and your heart too, those things are mine alone. This is the law of First Squadron... You're a naughty girl, aren't you.”

“Ah, Aaah.... Lieutenant~”

“It's 'big sister' isn't it?”

“Aah, ye, yes, b, big sis~”

F/L Ahonen continued to grope Haruka's breasts with her well-practised finger techniques.

While looking back and forth between the pre-sortie spectacles created by 1st Squadron and the Independent volunteer Air Squadron, Flight Lieutenant Rudel

commented to the capable adjutant standing beside her.

“I guess there's no such thing as a carefree battlefield, Adelheid.”

With a face like a frozen rose, Adelheid replied in her forever consistent tone of voice, “No, I don't suppose there is.”

At a point fifteen kilometers outside of Slussen, along the usual flight path for the bombing raids, the witches of the Temporary Mikkeli Air-Base encountered a violent Neuroi interception.

Through a break in the clouds came a formation of the usual Laros-kai, numbering twenty aircraft.

1st Squadron moved to engage, and an intense air battle kicked off.

F/L Mika Ahonen lead 1st Squadron's assault, utilizing the Messersharf's proficiency in boom and zoom tactics.

The entire manoeuvre was conducted in formation, and in a remarkably solid manner.

Taking the role of F/L Ahonen's wingman was Haruka, and there had been many opportunities to see her fly with the 1st Squadron. Until last week, she had been flying in a completely different manner while paired with Tomoko in a Rotte. Despite being bewildered by the difference to begin with, Haruka had gradually become accustomed to the new techniques.

Before engaging the enemy, F/L Ahonen would always have her formation ascend. Gaining even just a little altitude, she would then usually strike from the enemies' side.

“My cute little sisters; proceed as usual!” When F/L Ahonen gave orders like that...

“Understood! Big sis!” ...all her witches would reply.

Flying as if they were a single entity, the witches of 1st Squadron clashed with the enemy.

F/L Ahonen fired into the broken enemy formation. With that signal, the entire

squadron split into their designated Rotte units, and opened fire with each wingman shadowing their leaders aim. Initially having targeted three enemies, four were left severely damaged, but F/L Ahonen did not pursue.

Each respective Rotte then broke off and once again began to climb. Thereafter, the crippled enemies were brought down one by one.

Certainly, it did not compare to Tomoko's showy personal shoot-down count. However, Injuries to Ahonen's allies were also rare. Occasionally a witch might be shot while exchanging gunfire from the front.

Today as usual, Haruka was keeping tight on F/L Ahonen's back.

With a volley of fire, the enemy formation had fallen into chaos.

Before long, F/L Ahonen seemed to focus her attention upon a single aircraft. Under pressure, the Laros-kai wavered back and forth unsteadily, but F/L Ahonen was hot on its tail.

Although the Flight Lieutenant was shooting from close range, her attack failed to connect. No longer able to continue her pursuit, F/L Ahonen promptly broke off, and switched to gaining altitude instead.

Haruka considered this while watching from directly behind.

If it were Pilot Officer Tomoko... she wouldn't have let an enemy escape in a situation like that. Skillfully twisting her body, she would eat away at the enemy's tail, showing that she can out manoeuvre and shoot them down spectacularly.

Pilot Officer Tomoko...

Flight Lieutenant Ahonen's methods are reliable, but in spite of that, Tomoko's magnificent close-quarters dogfighting really suits her. Haruka whispered in her heart.

Haruka shook her head to expel her daydreams. They were in the midst of a battle after all, and it was Haruka's turn next.

The Laros-kai seemed to be preoccupied with F/L Ahonen, and thus did not notice Haruka as she approached from behind.

Steadily drawing up to the enemy that Ahonen had missed, Haruka

commenced her attack from near point-blank range with her 20mm auto-cannon. Due to the increased barrel length of the type 99-2 machine gun, the bullets did not arc down as quickly as they did before. The shots flew straight as if being drawn into the target.

One of the wings of the Laros-kai was completely ripped off, sending it spiraling down towards the earth.

“Yahaa~!”

F/L Ahonen's words of encouragement came through over the wireless radio. “That wasn't half bad!”

“Thank you very much! Big sis!”

“When we get back, I'll have to give you a suitably ample reward. ~uFuFu...”

Aah... Haruka scrunched up her body by reflex.

The person I want to be admired by... it can only be her. I want Pilot officer Tomoko to praise me.

But... just thinking about Flight Lieutenant Ahonen's touch makes my body tingle.

From Pilot Officer Tomoko's cold attitude... it seems, she thinks I'm a hopeless child.

With those feelings of mingled joy and sorrow, Haruka searched for Tomoko amidst the sky of fighting and swirling gunpowder smoke.

Off in the distance, she located Tomoko in the midst of a battle against challenging odds.

Somehow or other, it seemed that Tomoko and the Independent Volunteer Squadron had gotten themselves surrounded by a huge number of enemy craft.

Haruka immediately wanted to fly off to assist, but she was now under F/L Ahonen's command. A wingman going off at their own convenience was absolutely not permitted. In a worst case scenario, it could even be deemed as such a serious case of insubordination as to warrant a minimum of ten years in a military prison.

With her heart pounding in her chest, Haruka watched Tomoko's battle.

“Damn!” Tomoko absent-mindedly cursed to herself while pursuing a Laros-kai.

A new formation of Neuroi reinforcements had appeared at around the same time as F/L Ahonen and the 1st Squadron had engaged the main force.

The count was a mere six aircraft, and so the independent Volunteer Squadron had moved to intercept at once. Numbering roughly the same as Tomoko's group, the enemy force had apparently lost the will to fight, and began a gradual evasive dive.

Lacking the will to fight, and not having the numbers to over-power the witches, Tomoko had declared them 'easy pickings' and initiated the pursuit.

That... had been a miscalculation.

There were not just two enemy squadrons. As soon as they had been lured to low altitude, no less than twenty more Laros-kai came raining down upon them.

Just like that, Tomoko's group had been dragged into a brawl with such an unfavourable odds.

Under normal circumstances, Tomoko would consider this a prime spot for such a fight. But today, she was not in good form.

“Tomoko! Behind you!”

While forcedly pursuing a single enemy target, Tomoko's attention was shifted to the rear by Katherine's voice flowing from the radio. Two Laros-kai had taken her tail.

“Ah, thanks!”

As she expressed her gratitude, Tomoko turned her body and prepared to line up her next shot.

Her 7.7mm machine gun was not very effective against the Laros-kai, but they could eventually be brought down in flames by continually shooting the weak points. At first glance the Laros-kai was a difficult opponent, but it was not an

undefeatable enemy so long as one remains calm.

With a skilful twist of her body, Tomoko out-maneuvred the pursuing aircraft and stole their backs.

“Just give up!” she yelled, sending a stream of bullets at the tail-plane of one of the enemy targets.

The machine gun bullets grazed the Laros-kai's surface with a *BaChi-BaChi. It was the sound of the bullets ricocheting off its metal armor.

I can't seem to hit its weak points! Why, why can't I aim properly?

The moment she asked herself this, the face of Itokawa surfaced in her mind.

Leaning in to kiss her...

Her heart was pounding.

'Wh, What am I doing!' she reprimanded herself.

This is not the time think about that incident. Not now, in the midst of a battlefield!

GaGaGaGaGaGa! A shock suddenly travelled through her body.

“Tomoko! Tomoko's been hit!”

“Eh? Eeh?” For a second or two, she was not able to grasp the situation.

Looking behind, the initial Laros-kai she had been trying to pin down had approached unnoticed from behind, and was ripping into her with its twin machine guns!

The bullets were accurately deflecting into Tomoko and tearing through her magic field.

“Damn it!”

Tomoko twisted her body, but couldn't control her manoeuvre.

“Wh, Why can't I..!”

“You're emitting smoke!” Beurling's voice came through once again.

Upon checking her Striker Unit, it was indeed fuming. The magic field protecting the body of the machine had been ripped through, and her Ki-27 was

hit.

“I, I can't turn!”

The tail rudder had clearly suffered damage.

This superior combination of Tomoko and her nimble Ki-27, had now had its mobility sealed, and been driven into a corner from which it could not escape.

“Why! Turn and evade!”

“I said I can't! Aaaah!”

Under continuous fire, the Striker Unit on her left leg finally gave in and exploded. At the same time F/O Elma and Ursula, who had come rushing over to assist, managed to shoot down the Laros-kai, but it was already too late... Tomoko was already spiraling down towards the earth.

Tomoko would surely have crashed had her arm not been seized by Katherine, who's diving speed with the Buffalo outstripped anyone else's.

By this point, 1st Squadron had torn through the initial enemy squadron and came to join the fray. They began to break up the Laros-kai formation that was building on its momentum against Tomoko's group.

Having somehow escaped a crisis, the Independent Volunteer Squadron all rushed towards Tomoko's position.

“Tomoko! Are you alright?”

Tomoko nodded. Her own body had miraculously avoided serious injury, but on the other hand...

“My Ki-27...” Tomoko muttered feebly as she took in the tragic state of her favorite aircraft.

The unit from her left leg had been completely blown away, leaving her bare leg exposed. And the surviving right leg of the Striker Unit was also tattered from machine gun fire.

As the propeller driven by the amplified output of the magic engine ground to a halt with a scraping noise, the right leg of her Ki-27 took on a truly lifeless appearance. Staring at the machine that was now full of holes, Tomoko didn't

even try to hold back her tears.

Because only one half of the Ki-27 remained, nothing could be done to repair it.

Deciding to dispose of it was the only practical choice.

It had been her favourite aircraft ever since the Fuso Sea incident. Upon losing it, Tomoko had returned to the base, and was reported to have hurried straight to her quarters.

Tomoko could not have been delivered a bigger shock than losing her prized aircraft.

She pulled her quilt up over her head, continuing to condemn herself without paying and heed to the concerned words of her comrades.

“How could I have been so preoccupied... I've failed as a mechanized air infantry pilot...”

Images of her Ki-27 and Itokawa's face floated around in her mind.

The Ki-27 Striker Unit, Type 97 Fighter...

With which she had shared all her joy, sorrow, and honor...

Which felt like an extension of her own body...

Which had now been lost due to her own negligence in battle.

“I don't have what it takes, to fly...”

Hiding away under the quilt with tears streaming down her face, Tomoko had fallen asleep before she knew it.

The members of the Independent Volunteer Air Squadron worriedly crowded around Tomoko's bed. But it was Katherine that took the initiative to speak.

“Tomoko. It's hopeless isn't it~ Like just now, saying she would quit the mechanized air infantry and stuff?”

Even though she was the quietest member, F/O Elma cried out. “At times like

this, I think comrades should lend each other their strength!”

“That's for sure,” Beurling added.

“But, what should we do? I don't understand it~ Even if my Striker Unit was destroyed to that extent, I'd be alright, so how should we console Tomoko? I just don't understand. After all, it's just a tool right? I can't comprehend what's bothering her~”

“I think they say in the Orient, that spirits can also dwell within tools. That kind of emotional attachment is probably beyond what we can imagine.”

Beurling's comment left everyone speechless.

For a little while, silence permeated the room... until F/O Elma resolutely raised her hand into the air.

“What is it?”

“Umm... I, for a long time I've been thinking this. Moreover, I'm wondering if the time to put it into practice has come...”

“What are you talking about?”

F/O Elma gathered everyone around and began whispering conspicuously.

Hearing that, Katherine stared at her with wide eyes. “Flying Officer Elma, that's... are you serious?”

“I'm totally serious!” F/O Elma threw out her chest determinedly.

“well, I agree with you but... bringing it up at a time like this...”

With a worried expression on her face, Katherine's eyes travelled to the form of Tomoko wrapped up in the quilt.

“We should do it precisely because of a time like this! Because no matter what; our war potential is plummeting with *Flying Officer* Tomoko feeling down!”

Beurling nodded. “I also agree.”

“Beurling, you're being unexpectedly adventurous.”

“Eeh. As far as she's concerned, it might be a good chance to free herself from the title of a mere ace.”

Katherine turned her attention to Ursula, who was sitting in a chair and reading.

“Hey Ursula, were you listening just now?”

Ursula gave a sharp little nod.

“What do you think?”

“Do as you please,” was all she had to say.

Katherine began tampering with Ursula's face by placing a hand on each side of her head and rubbing them around. “You're gonna live a long life aren't you~”

There was one more figure concernedly watching over Tomoko as she confined herself in depression.

Stealthily peering into the communal room from the hallway window, was Haruka.

“Aah, Pilot Officer Tomoko... looking so hurt... *sniff, If I'm lucky I might...”

While she was muttering to herself, a breath applied to her ear made Haruka contort her body in surprise.

“Ah...”

“You're a naughty girl aren't you? Who are you so worried about I wonder? Are you not a sister of 1st Squadron? Didn't I say that feelings of affection towards another group are not permitted?”

“Bu, but, but... Pilot Officer Tomoko became so... and I was worried... ah!”

She twisted her body once again. F/L Ahonen had let her hand slip into Haruka's uniform, and spread her fingers across her sensitive chest.

“Lieu, Lieutenaaant...”

“I told you to refer to me as 'big sister' didn't I? Look here. Look at me. You're my partner through and through right? Is looking away permitted?”

“I, I'm very sorry... big sis...”

“Not good enough. Who is your master? I shall firmly engrave it upon your

body for you.”

F/L Ahonen's fingers slid up from underneath Haruka's short skirt. Skillfully seizing her trigger, Ahonen opened fire.

“Ah! Ah! Big sis... Forgive mnn! Please! Ah! Aauhh! I, I'm a bad girl! Aah!”

“Well now. Look at me! Was it your former leader, or someone else who taught you how to reply so well? Allow me to show you! Hoho! Ohohohohoho!”

Haruka's feeble voice begging for forgiveness, and F/L Ahonen's gentle laugh, no matter what, these sounds would be clearly audible to anyone inside.

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Chapter 6 - First Love under the Aurora

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Chapter 6 - First Love under the Aurora

From February 1st the bitterly cold weather of Suomus began to deteriorate even further.

Regardless of whether or not it was to the benefit of Tomoko's condition, a week long blizzard was sweeping across the country. As such, the assaults on Slussen which had been conducted roughly once every three days were now suspended.

With such a raging storm, training was also an impossibility.

Consequently, all three squadrons of witches that were currently stationed at the Mikkeli Temporary AirBase were savouring their time off as if it were a gift from the heavens.

Except for Tomoko that is, who just whiled away her time of anguish in bed. Everyone in the squadron brought her food at meal times, which were also eaten in bed.

Before long, Tomoko was summoned to the command room. Without any particular inclination to do anything, and not knowing what to do about the

emptiness in her heart, Tomoko mechanically got up, and put her clothes on as if she were in a trance.

“Come on now, you have to comb that beautiful black hair of yours 'K? It's all over the place~”

Unable to let it pass, Katherine began combing Tomoko's hair for her.

Ursula also put down her book and came over to correct the crossed buttons on Tomoko's uniform.

“Let's wash your face next~”

“mmnh”

Katherine fetched a bowl of hot water, and wiped Tomoko's face clean for her.

“Open your mouth.”

“mmn?”

Thrusting a toothbrush into her mouth, Ursula began brushing Tomoko's teeth.

Tomoko just stood there.

“...Tomoko? Why aren't you wearing any...”

The uniform of a military witch almost always included a miniskirt of some variety. This was due to the practicalities of equipping a Striker Unit. It also meant that the witches tended to stand out, or perhaps one should say; they were always precariously close to exposing themselves completely.

Tomoko was not in the habit of wearing underwear to bed, which is why she would always put them on first thing after getting up. Today however, she had neglected to do even that.

“...ummn”

“...Oh come on now, get dressed properly 'K?” With an exacerbad tone, Katherine made Tomoko put on her underwear.

Upon losing the Ki-27, a gaping hole had clearly formed in Tomoko's heart.

With a face devoid of motivation, Tomoko arrived at the command room;
“...Pilot Officer Anabuki Tomoko reporting.”

Squadron Leader Häkkinen, with her usual expression, handed Tomoko a single sheet of paper.

“...this, what is this?”

“It's your promotion orders,” replied Sqn Ldr Häkkinen as she adjusted her spectacles.

Tomoko became confused; something was said that she couldn't quite comprehend.

“Promotion?”

Gazing at the letter in confusion, Tomoko saw that it was written in both Fusan and Britannian.

『Fuso Imperial Army Pilot Officer Anabuki Tomoko; the afore-mentioned individual is henceforth assigned the rank of Flying Officer.』

At the end of the document was the signature of the Suomus military attaché.

In appearance, it was similar to a field promotion... but in this case, there was an official notice of appointment.

Sqn Ldr Häkkinen handed over the brand new rank insignia to Tomoko, who was still completely dumbfounded. It featured a single gold line running across the centre, upon which were affixed two stars. It was without doubt, the insignia of a Flying Officer.

Grasping it tightly, Tomoko enquired with a flustered stutter; “Wh, why? Why have I been pr, pro, promoted to-”

“The rank of Pilot Officer isn't suitable for commanding the squadron is it?”

“Commanding a..?”

Tomoko's mouth was hanging open wider and wider. With a face that couldn't have looked any stupider, she continued her attempts to comprehend the situation.

“Wh, What, do you mean?”

“We would like you to command the Independent Volunteer Air Squadron.”

“Huh? But isn't Flying Officer Elma already commanding the squadron?”

In response to this, the figure of F/O Elma timidly revealed itself from behind a curtain. Evidently, she must have been hiding there the whole time.

“What the heck were you doing?”

“Aah, umm... Pilot Officer Tomoko, ah no, now it's Flying Officer isn't it... Flying Officer Tomoko, I was the one who recommended you for the position of squadron commander.”

“That again... Why?”

Looking a little embarrassed and hanging her head, F/O Elma spoke towards the floor.

“I've always admired your aptitude for command. That time we took down the Diomedia, and recently, when we completely destroyed the Laros-kai formation with bombs... Under my command, I think we would have failed... or rather; is it not the case that you're already leading the squadron? So I would like you to take this opportunity to become the commanding officer in name, because that's the reality of the situation.”

“But I disgraced myself and lost my Ki-27 due to my own incompetent-”

“Flying Officer Tomoko is **not** incompetent or anything like that! It could happen to anyone if they get distracted! A child like me should be called incompetent! I'm cowardly, and I have no talent for aerial combat... and...”

F/L Elma's outburst left Tomoko feeling as if she had been struck in the head with a baseball bat.

While feeling so down about her own shortcomings... she had been hurting the feelings of her younger superior officer. Realising that, and considering her own self-centred attitude Tomoko was moved to tears.

“Flying Officer Elma...”

“I'm just, a useless child. I can't be a good commander while I'm so incapable;

it's always been your responsibility, really.

Because she appeared to be quite upset, Tomoko walked over thinking she should try to comfort her. But thereupon, F/O Elma emphatically raised her head.

“In any case! I want to study while fighting under Flying Officer Tomoko's command! That way I can become a prominent commanding officer myself!”

F/O Elma grasped Tomoko's hand, and forcefully shook it up and down.

“Because of that; Please, you have to accept to position!”

“You are not a pilot of the Suomus air-force. We have no authority to order you to do so. Therefore I can only ask; please, I request that you to do this for us.”

“But, I no longer have a functional Striker Unit.”

“Don't you have that Ki-44?”

“Well then, what do you say to taking command?”

Up until now, I haven't really been able to decline.

It would seem that both Sqn Ldr Häkkinen and F/O Elma are expecting this of me. That aside, lying in bed all day just left me in a rut...

With a nod, Tomoko gave a vigorous salute.

“Understood ma'am. I, Flying Officer Anabuki Tomoko of the Fuso Imperial Army, shall assume the role of squadron commander.”

Upon exiting the command room Tomoko was hailed by Beurling, who was leaning against a wall.

“Yo, squadron commander.”

“Why have I; who was shot down, been made squadron commander? What on earth are they thinking?” Tomoko muttered while wiping the tears from her eyes.

Her voice came out sounding quite irritated due to how awkward she found

the current situation.

“Everyone wants to see what you're capable of with that state-of-the-art aircraft.”

“The 'state-of-the-art aircraft' that I couldn't even land?”

“Everyone has trouble when they use an unfamiliar Striker Unit for the first time.”

Tomoko turned away and set off towards the barracks. Beurling followed on right behind her.

“Oi, Oi, are you really not going to use that Ki-44?”

“Don't make me repeat myself. I can't possibly use it.”

Beurling's tone of voice was becoming more irritated.

“Hey! You know, that's a fine Striker. If all your country's witches were equipped with those Ki-44s, the Fuso Empire would become the world leader in military aviation.”

“You're overvaluing it by a ridiculous amount. It's a useless thing. The engine might be pretty good, but that's all. Now the Ki-27, it operated like a part of my own body. The difference is insurmountable.”

“You, are an excellent mechanised infantry pilot... but your one major flaw is that obstinate lack of flexibility.” Beurling said as if letting out a sigh.

“Until a new Ki-27 is delivered, I will not be engaging in combat. Until then, I want you to do your best in my stead. Have you considered that recent battle? Where we lured the Laros-kai down to low altitude, didn't we completely obliterate them? Even that feat was made possible by the Ki-27's flight performance.”

“You're wrong,” Pilot Officer Beurling denied it plainly. “That achievement was brought about purely by your own talent. That is why I'm saying this to you; the Ki-44 is ready for action. You need to learn to use it; we're the least dispensable pilots in our squadron.

Shaking her head, Tomoko walked away.

Beurling shouted at her receding back; “Hey, Tomoko! This might sound strange coming from me, but once in a while; try to be more honest with yourself! That which was unseen, may well become visible when you do!”

Tomoko seemed to pause for a moment... before determinedly walking off.

Unable to approach her again, Beurling just stood there watching her disappear.

“...It seems like you're dealing with some rather ill-fitting burdens.”

Looking over her shoulder, Beurling noticed that Flight Lieutenant Rudel was staring at her from behind.

She immediately averted her eyes to the floor and made an attempt to leave.

“Hold up. I have something that you'll want to see.”

Rudel led Beurling as far as the hanger.

“So, what is this thing you wanted to show me?”

At Beurling's enquiry, Rudel pointed towards a corner of the hanger. There were as many as ten large wooden crates lined up, and draped in waterproof sheets.

“What are they?”

“Try opening one.”

Beurling removed the lid from one of the two-metre tall crates. Upon seeing what lay within, Beurling's breath caught in her throat.

“Are you trying to establish your own army or something?”

Rudel shook her head.

“Nope, this is all top quality equipment. As we both know, bombs are not effective against urban areas filled with Neuroi. Because no matter what we do; those things are able to use the scrap resources and multiply.”

Beurling nodded. From mid-January onwards, the bombing runs on Slussen had been kept up tirelessly... but as of yet, there had been no report of the

Neuroi occupation weakening in any way.

“When this blizzard clears... a full scale operation to re-capture Slussen will begin. At that time, I intend to wage an all-out duel with these armaments.”

“.....”

“We'll be relying upon our faithful escorts. Whether or not this plan succeeds or fails, depends entirely upon whether or not you lot can maintain air-superiority in the skies of Slussen. I'm sorry to say this, but I want our escort to succeed even if it means you have to crash into the enemy to pull it off.”

F/L Rudel lowered her head to Beurling.

Feeling constricted, Beurling unconsciously reached into her pocket, took out a cigarette and placed it between her lips, then remembering that she was in the hangar, immediately returned it to its packet.

“Why are you telling me this? I was the one who brought about that scar across your face.”

“Pilot Officer Beurling, you're not your former self are you? You have a different look in your eyes now. Do your former comrades know, or the newspapers back home; that you are no longer so recklessly fixated on your own personal shoot down count? I didn't mean to eavesdrop on your conversation with Flying Officer Anabuki, but *'our squadron'* you said? I don't think such a thing would ever have been heard from your former self.”

Beurling remained silent for few moments, before opening her mouth wearily.

“I can't guarantee the escort you want. At any rate, we're lacking that kind of military strength. If I understand what you're intending to do, we'd need a further two squadrons.”

“I know that.”

“However, we will fight to our last ounce of strength; that much, I can promise you, Herr Kapitän.”

Beurling demonstrated a textbook example of a Britannian air-force salute. Which F/L Rudel returned, along with a rare smile.

“We dive bombers must choose our shields, it is the sorrow of the spear. But

because you wouldn't ever just give up, I think you ladies make a fine shield. It's what I expect of you, Silver Fox.”

Silver Fox...

That, was Beurling's call-sign during her time with the Air-Wing for International Neuroi Observation in Ostmark.

Before long, the two of them left the hanger shoulder to shoulder. Night came early to the skies of Suomus, and the sunlight was already being driven away.

That icy sky was now shrouded in a curtain of wondrous light.

“Look,” F/L Rudel said, pointing towards the sky.

She was pointing at the aurora. A spontaneous florescence brought about by complex interactions between the earth's magnetic field and a flow of charged particles from the solar wind... Such a spectacle was often visible from Suomus.

“According to folklore in this part of the world, the northern lights are caused by light reflecting off the armour of Valkyrie.”

“Beautiful armour isn't it? It's worlds apart from our Striker Units.”

Without responding to Beurling's cynical comment, F/L Rudel continued as if speaking to herself; “Should we not pray that this aurora guides us to victory? Will we become the modern era's Brünnhilde, and bring about the twilight of the gods? Or become Beowulf, magnificently destroying Grendel?”

“From the perspective of a Britannian, I would like to support the Beowulf analogy... But personally, I also like The Ring of the Nibelung, so I can't honestly agree with your preferences towards poetry.”

“That sounds like a truly Britannian remark.” F/L Rudel laughed.

The two of them continued to gaze at the aurora shining across the sky.

Meanwhile, Tomoko had tried to return to the common room in their living quarters, but had been stopped in the doorway by the tall figure of an engineer calling out to her.

“Pilot Officer Tomoko.”

Looking back, Itokawa was standing there with a smile on his face. Tomoko turned away in disgust.

“Have your injuries healed? I was worried about you.”

Fury welled up inside Tomoko at that remark.

Worried about me? Even though he didn't so much as visit!

Ignoring him, Tomoko tried once more to enter the room and distance herself from the source of her smouldering rage.

“Hey wait a minute; I need to speak to you.”

“No thanks. I'm not going to talk with a shameless person like you who doesn't understand common courtesy.”

“You really hate me don't you?”

“Who is the one doing things to be hated for?”

“How rude; this time I was even going to give you time to resist.”

Tomoko's face was dyed bright red. Without even a thought, she sent a slap flying is way.

Pa-Shiin!

A dry sound pierced the air.

Itokawa had not made a single move to avoid Tomoko's strike.

“What..! What did you say! What did you just say to me!”

“As I was saying; today I came to apologise. My behaviour the other day when I kissed you, was the result of my true feelings getting the better of me, but my discourteous behaviour will not change. However, there must be an order to things.”

“Apologise?”

“That's right. We have a reservation at a restaurant.”

“Haa~?”

“We'll head into town and have a meal. Because of the snowstorm, there won't be any sorties for a while anyway right? A cute witch like you needs a day

off once in a while.”

Eventually, Tomoko's resistance broke down and she got into the tattered Karlsländ-built Ford that Itokawa was driving.

To get to Mikkeli, they had no choice but to traverse a battered agricultural track that was clearly meant for farm vehicles.

Tomoko grasped hold of the empty window frame by the passenger seat to keep herself stable.

“Oww, what kind of restaurant are we going to anyway?”

“A popular one.”

Approaching the town, there was a steadily increasing number of small shed like barracks. They were thrown together from planks, and odd bits of sheet metal forming crude shacks. Usually, buildings in this country were constructed with logs or brickwork, but that was not the case with these pitiful shelters, which would be unable to defend against the extreme cold.

“These homes look very cold.”

As soon as she expressed her thoughts, Itokawa stepped in; “They were constructed by the refugees from Slussen. Without a doubt, this winter must be difficult for them with walls like those, but the people who were able to build shelters in this area are still better off. The town has become even crueller than this.”

Their car soon made it into the town of Mikkeli proper.

Upon seeing the tents lined up along the main road, Tomoko was rendered speechless. They went on and on, uninterrupted and squashed together right into the heart of the town. Smoke could be seen rising up from here and there.

“There's smoke coming from some of the tents. Has a fire broken out?”

“Nope. There are open fires inside the tents for cooking upon; they say it's a nomadic design. But it's not a good substitute for a twentieth century town in

northern Europe.”

Tomoko hung her head. She couldn't bear to look at it a second longer.

If we had only done a little more for them in Slussen...

“So what kind of 'restaurant' would still be trading amid this catastrophe?” Tomoko enquired in such a manner.

Is it even possible for a restaurant to function in a town overflowing with refugees? And supposing they are open for business, there's no way I could bring myself to eat an extravagant meal in front of them.

“I'm fine without eating. It's the thought that counts, so let's return to base.”

“It's just round the corner.”

Itokawa parked the car as they came to the town square, and got out.

“Here?”

No matter how one looked at it, there was nothing that could be considered a restaurant of any kind. There was a water fountain, and a huge number of refugees sitting in the circles of light beneath the street lamps, staring up at Tomoko and Itokawa with weary eyes.

“And where would this so called 'restaurant' be?”

“It's right there.”

The place Itokawa was pointing at was a large cauldron, in front of which the refugees were lining up. It was an improvised distribution centre, from which they were handing out hard baked bread and some kind of stew.

“Restaurant 'League of Nations - Salvation Army', run by volunteers from the signatory nations. Well then, let's get in line.”

They took their place at the end of the queue.

Foreigners were very rare here, so the two of them were receiving many curious and unreserved stares. It was making Tomoko feel very awkward, she looked like she was trying to make herself as small as possible so they wouldn't notice her.

After about thirty minutes of standing in line, it was Tomoko and Itokawa's

turn. A wooden bowl filled with stew was handed to her by a young Liberion girl. She had an armband pinned to her sleeve with a design featuring the alphabetical letters 'L' and 'N' upon a world map.

“Now here's a new face. So where have you come from?”

“The Fuso Empire.”

Giving Tomoko a scrutinizing stare, the girl asked; “By any chance, are you a witch? From the airbase?”

Looking uneasy, Tomoko nodded.

“Oh!” and with that she started yelling in Suomi as loudly as she could.

The surrounding refugees swiftly surrounded Tomoko, demanding handshakes with smiles on their faces.

“Ah, what's going on?”

“Everyone's very excited to meet you. After all, the mechanised air infantry are idols the world over,” replied the young Liberion girl enthusiastically.

Overwhelmed, Tomoko bowed her head.

“I'm so sorry! We're nothing but failures! They were able to steal your home town from you... and we allowed such a terrible thing to happen...”

The refugees stared on with puzzled expressions as Tomoko reeled off one apology after another.

“What, are you apologising for?” Itokawa enquired.

“Wh, what for? Are they not angry with us?”

“Angry? Why would you assume that they're angry?”

“Bu, Because... if we mechanised air infantry had done a better job, this kind of situa...”

While they were speaking, the Liberion girl had begun translating the conversation for everyone, stirring up laughter from the refugees.

“What a strange girl,” she commented. “Indeed, everyone here has been driven from their homes, but you've come all the way here from a distant land to

help them. They wouldn't resent such people.”

An elderly refugee began speaking to the Liberion girl, but her message seemed to be intended for Tomoko. The girl proceeded to translate it into Britannian for her.

“She says; 'Everyone has times of failure in life. What's important is to not give up.' These people haven't given up, neither have I. That is why they are able to laugh, even given these harsh conditions. And that is why you mustn't give up on them. We expect nothing less from our witches!”

Hearing this filled Tomoko's heart with emotions she wasn't quite able to express, and could only shed tears into her bowl of stew.

During the winter months, night came early to the skies of Suomus. The town was already enveloped in darkness.

Due to the potential for enemy bombing raids, a blackout was in effect from nightfall, which often left the area pitch black.

Tonight however, with a natural florescence shining in the sky, the town overflowing with refugees had taken on the appearance of an image projected from a magic lantern.

Through that surreal looking town, Tomoko walked side by side with Itokawa.

They had both maintained silence, but eventually Itokawa decided to ask; “You're not thinking that it's your fault or something like that are you?”

“.....”

“That's known as 'being conceited'. Do you understand? You're not the only person fighting this war, everyone is; not just you and your comrades, but even the residents of Slussen, and myself too.”

Itokawa handed a package wrapped in brown paper to Tomoko.

“What's this?”

“It's my true objective. I wanted to give this to you.”

Tomoko opened the package with a suspicious expression.

What she took out was a beautiful evening dress made from black velvet. Tomoko stared at it with wide eyes.

“I bought it in Paris while on my way here, and blew off half a year's pay in the process. But I was coming to meet Tomoe Gozen of the Fuso Sea, so this much is natural don't you think?”

Tomoko's eyes couldn't get any wider upon hearing that remark.

Wouldn't that mean that Itokawa bought this for me before we had even met?

“It was truly love at first sight; which just happened to be while I was watching your film.”

This line affirmed Tomoko's unspoken question. Her face reddened at the realisation that the mood resembled some kind of destined meeting.

“Try it on.”

“But, bu, but, this kind of thing wouldn't suit me. I've only ever thought about the sky, and nothing else. I look like a child, and I've never worn anything like this before...”

“It's perfectly fine; you can change in the car. Don't worry; I'm looking the other way.”

She continued to mumble something, but still resigned herself to accepting Itokawa's coercive offer.

Inside the car, Tomoko wrapped her body in the dress Itokawa had given her.

Timidly coming back outside, she was met by Itokawa's smiling face.

“I, Like I said, it would never suit me!”

“You're wrong. It's far beyond my imagination.”



Tomoko's black hair and matching dress, illuminated by the light of the aurora, gave her silhouette an ethereal beauty, as if floating in front of the pitch dark town. The extremely low-cut dress wrapped snugly around Tomoko's immature figure in a truly bewitching fashion.

Itokawa reached out and grasped Tomoko's hand tightly.

“It suits you perfectly!”

“Nothing but lies,” Tomoko muttered, but her voice was no longer harbouring any anger. She repeated herself in a bashful voice, “This kind of look doesn't suit me.”

Itokawa's response was a kiss. He guided her lips with a hand under her chin.

Tomoko found herself completely unwilling to resist. Without knowing why, she placed her hand on Itokawa's back.

After a little while, Itokawa slowly pulled away.

“That dress, and the Striker Unit too, the only person who thinks they don't suit you, is yourself.”

Tomoko realised that she had just been completely entrapped by his words, but it was not an unpleasant feeling. Instead, her body was enveloped in a refreshing happiness that she had not felt before. Despite Mikkeli's biting cold air, it felt like something warm was welling up inside her.

“You're impossible,” was all Tomoko managed to force out.

While gently brushing aside her hair, Itokawa asked; “So you'll use the Ki-44 for me then?”

Tomoko remembered Beurling's parting advice; *“once in a while; try to be more honest with yourself! That which was unseen, may well become visible when you do!”*

I guess so...

Once in a while... For at least once in my life, I should try following the impulses of my heart.

Just because... for some reason... it feels good.

Just like the time she first flew through the skies.

While holding Itokawa close, Tomoko decided as such.

As usual, there was a shadowy figure carefully watching those two people from a street corner.

It was Haruka and F/L Ahonen.

Trembling uncontrollably, and looking absolutely mortified, Haruka managed to stutter out; “F, F, Fl, Flying Of, Officer To, T, To, Tomookooo~! That's not possible! That kind of cheek-reddening kiss wasn't real! What's so good about someone like that! Is there anything good about him!

F/L Ahonen swept back her curly golden hair with a thin smile on her face.

“Hey Haruka. Stalking her to this extent... it's a little bit weird.”

“I, I'm sorry...”

“But... I too have accompanied you thus far, so perhaps I'm a little weird too... uFuFu~. Watching my little sister's former crush put on such a performance, it's rather romantic isn't it.”

As usual, F/L Ahonen's hand swiftly found its way under Haruka's skirt. Her long porcelain fingers were placed upon Haruka's body with the accuracy of a professional musician, and without further ado the performance began.

“Aaahh... F, Flight lieutenant~! That, not like that! I, I'll become completely lost.”

“You lost yourself long ago. You know as well as I do, that your body can't go

on without my precise touch right? Just like this, and this! Like this~!"

Within Haruka, there were mixed feeling of profound joy, and sorrow.

"Flying Officer Tomoko... I, I've become such a hopeless girl... But, but but! Absolutely, unconditionally, I will rescue you from the evil influence of that engineer! At that time, you'll notice me for sure... Ah! You, who is the most important person to me!"

The mysterious light of the aurora affectionately illuminated those two strange girls; as Haruka laid bare such an unusual proclamation.

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Chapter 7 - Recapture Slussen!

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Chapter 7 - Recapture Slussen!

The next day...

At long last, plans for a major offensive upon the town of Slussen were announced. It would be carried out on the 5th of February, in three days time.

The Mikkeli Temporary Airbase was suddenly bustling with activity. Forces were being assembled from all over Suomus for this co-ordinated effort between the army and air-force. Units were arriving one after another.

The main force of the army were Witches, just like Tomoko and her comrades. These young girls also equipped Striker Units, but were part of the 'Mechanised Armoured Infantry'.

The army garrisons had been established right next to the Mikkeli Temporary Airbase, and each of the girls assembled there wore a type of Striker Unit that would not be very familiar to a member of the air-force.

“They seem like they'd be too heavy to fly don't they~” Katherine said in a mock serious tone while watching the scene from the window of their quarters.

Flying Officer Elma stepped in and corrected her just in case; “That's not what

they do Pilot Officer Katherine! Those aren't 'Aerial Strikers', they're 'Land Strikers'."

"So how are they different then?"

"We fly through the sky, they do not. You know what tanks are don't you?"

"Of course I know what tanks are~"

"Well, in a sense, Tank Witches take the role of mobile infantry don't they? Because naturally, a normal soldier wouldn't even be able to get close to the Neuroi."

While looking on at girls moving around the garrison shouldering large artillery weapons, Katherine let out a sigh.

"Even before those girls came here, we had such a large responsibility~"

"I know what you mean. Their safety, and the success of this mission falls on our shoulders!"

F/O Elma made a show of firmly clenching her fist in determination.

"Flying Officer Elma, what on earth are you doing?"

"I'm getting myself motivated! Fired up!"

"Hmmm? You really are an interesting girl aren't you~ You even had Tomoko appointed as the Squadron commander..."

"Flying Officer Tomoko is the most suitable for the position. I don't think my decision on that matter was mistaken."

"Tomoko is a capable girl for sure, I recognise that too..."

"Did you not also agree it was for the best back then?"

When F/O Elma had consulted the squadron at Tomoko's bedside, there had been no objections.

"But, if you stop and think about it, Tomoko really is a demon isn't she? Surely it'll be no laughing matter with her as squadron commander. It'll be a huge leap from the disorganised state we've maintained so far. And she gets this frightful look on her face whenever she starts yelling stuff like; '**Everyone shape up! We're training, now!**' I just know I'm gonna get whipped~ And if I were to disobey an

order, she'd slice me up with that scary samurai sword.”

F/O Elma began trembling when Katherine put it like that.

“Is, is it really going to be like that? Th, that's...”

Katherine squarely met F/O Elma's eyes, and nodded resolutely, “I'm afraid so, it really is.”

At this point, their exchange was cut off by the common rooms door slamming open.

“Ah! Tomoko!” F/O Elma flinched, and jumped up covering her head with trembling hands.

“What's wrong?” Tomoko asked in a blank voice.

“I, I, I'm sooooo~ Pleeease, don't slice me up with your katanaaaa~”

To which Tomoko gave a truly angelic smile. In every respect, her smile was as calm and pleasant as a spring breeze.

“Flying Officer Elma... What exactly is it, that I should not kill you for?” How very... suspicious!” Tomoko said in a manner that could even be described as cute, finishing with a smile.

Having been holed up in her room and wrapped in a futon just the other day, this seemed like a miraculous change.

F/O Elma and Katherine exchanged a glance with one another, their mouths hanging open in astonishment.

Tomoko was holding some flowers in her hand.

“...Tomoko, what're those? A new training method?”

“Of course not. How can flowers be used for training.”

Tomoko picked up a discarded wine bottle, placed it upon the table, and began to arrange the flowers using it as a vase.

“They're so pretty... I wonder what these flowers are called? Perhaps I could find a greenhouse and grow them there.”

“Tomoko... what's happened to you!” Katherine yelled as she rushed over.

Until this moment, Katherine could not have imagined that Tomoko would do anything like decorating the place with flowers.

“*Ooou*, you poor thing... It all finally became too much for you to bear didn't it...”

“Ahaha, what are you on about? Come on now, even a brutal battlefield needs a little something to liven the place up.”

Katherine folded her arms in contemplation; “...so a promotion to squadron commander can change a person to this extent~? I guess I've just been living in ignorance until now.”

In a surprisingly ladylike manner, Tomoko then moved in front of the table and called everyone to attention by knocking on the desk.

“I, Flying Officer Anabuki Tomoko, have now been appointed as squadron commander. So once again; let's do our best together.”

Tilting her head to one side, Tomoko smiled.

“Well then, as everyone already knows, a large counterstrike operation will be conducted in three days time. It is absolutely imperative that we give it everything we've got, and maintain air superiority in the skies of Slussen. The outcome of this operation depends on our efforts. So let's do our very best together.”

“Ah, Umm...” F/O Elma timidly raised her hand.

“Yes, Flying Officer Elma.”

“That good and everything, about the counter offensive but... which Striker will you be using? Has a replacement aircraft been delivered?”

Looking a little embarrassed, Tomoko averted her eyes. After placing a hand on her chest and taking a moment to calm herself with a deep breath; “...I shall be using the Ki-44,” she said, as she gazed out of the window with coloured cheeks.

With the exception of Beurling, everyone was stunned at this development.

“Even though you hated the thing?”

“And you were making all that noise about not being able to use it, right~”

“Well, there was a lot going on... and perhaps that new model wasn't completely at fault... upon realising my own foolish mistakes...”

“What on earth happened! tell us slowly and thoroughly 'k? Otherwise there's no way I'll be able to understand!” Katherine enquired excitedly, with eyes like she was seeing some kind of new species unknown to mankind.

Beurling stepped in to keep her in check, “Well, it's a good thing isn't it? Because she's saying herself that she's going to use it.”

Beurling placed a hand on Tomoko's back and smiled. “Well then, we'll be relying upon you, squadron commander.”

Flying Officer Anabuki Tomoko's first order as the new commander was training in preparation for the offensive in three days time.

“Well then everyone; today we will be conducting formation manoeuvres. I was thinking that I'd like to focus on boom-and-zoom tactics.”

With Tomoko's instructions, they each went to equip their respective Striker Units.

Tomoko lead the ascent with her powerful Ki-44.

The first thing Tomoko tried was repeating a roll. The Ki-44's capabilities in this regard were one of its strong points. She hadn't given it much consideration before, but this would make locking on to targets very easy when striking them down at high speed.

The Ki-44 forcefully propelled Tomoko through the skies.

It's reminiscent of how Itokawa forcibly holds me in his arms, Tomoko blushed at the thought of it.

It was a mystery.

If it was that hard to handle up until yesterday, if I think about it...

“If I'm honest with my feelings, and give it a fair chance... 'that which is unseen may well become visible' indeed.”

Tomoko looked behind.

“Well then; Ursula, Flying Officer Elma, you two are with me. Beurling and

Katherine, assemble into a Rotte. The practice will now commence!”

It happened just as she made that announcement over the radio...

The right leg of her Striker Unit erupted with smoke!

“Wh, what the heck?”

Tomoko eased off, but the smoke did not lessen. On the contrary, with an alarming **Pusun* sound; the left engine ground to a complete halt.

With just one side of the unit still functioning, the Ki-44's powerful engine forced Tomoko into an uncontrolled spin.

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaa!”

In exchange for its sensitive tail-plane, the Ki-44's balance was easily disrupted. Only an experienced ace could handle such a fastidious kind of aircraft to begin with. As such, the malfunctioning Ki-44 instantly collapsed into a tail spin.

While rotating violently... Tomoko was struck into the ground, and her consciousness was no more.

When Tomoko awoke, she was in a bed in the hospital wing.

Surrounding her were the worried faced of her lined up comrades.

“Thanks to her magic field and the accumulated snow her body is safe. But, I guess she should rest in bed for a while due to the shock right?” Katherine was saying.

“Is that so?.. Thank goodness.” Tomoko said with her hand placed in front of her chest.

Seeing that Tomoko had awoken, everyone let out a sigh of relief.

“What happened?”

“Umm well... I understand that you must be very angry after an accident like that but...”

Tomoko just looked around in confusion..

“Huh? Why aren't you angry~?” Katherine was ignored.

“The Ki-44, where is it?”

“It's here but...”

The Ki-44 that had recently been removed from Tomoko was placed nearby. One of the Striker Unit's engines was dripping oil all over the place.

Everyone braced themselves.

In a fit of rage Tomoko pounces...

“Just like I said; it's useless! This new model! Why is it leaking oil! I'm going to kill him!” She yells with reckless abandon...

Striking fear into everyone's hearts, brandishing her frightful samurai sword around wildly...

However, those kinds of expectations were not met.

Appearing reassured, she let out a sigh of relief, “Thank goodness... it wasn't completely destroyed like the Ki-27.” She just muttered something like that.

Everyone shivered in a cold sweat.

Flower's are good, speaking in a calm tone of voice is good, that somehow ladylike manner is good, and on top of that she's not flying into a rage...

Tomoko, what on earth has happened to you...

At that point, the door slammed open, and Itokawa rushed in.

“Are you alright!?”

The entire room froze, the tension could not even be compared with what it was just now. Itokawa was the engineer who developed this Ki-44 after all. If her wrath wasn't directed at the Ki-44, surely it would all come crashing down upon Itokawa instead. The explosion was imminent...

But her reaction completely transcended everyone's preconceptions.

“...Itokawa,” she began shyly with coloured cheeks.

With their mouths hanging open, everyone looked on tentatively as Tomoko's eyes clouded over like she was about to burst into tears.

“I'm sorry... the Ki-44, was damaged...”

“That's nothing to worry about, I'll repair it at once. The counterstrike operation is in three days time isn't it?”

“Yes...”

Itokawa continued his efforts to console Tomoko, who was shedding a few modest tears. The tension in the room had somehow dissipated, as everyone just looked on.

“She's actually a very easy woman to understand isn't she~” Katherine said with a sigh.

“So she changed so suddenly because of something like this. Before one even realises...”

“So even Tomoko, who thinks of nothing but the sky, and is not the type to go out with some guy, will score a home-run if she acts a little more kindly~ I'm just kidding... seriously, I understand.”

F/O Elma led everyone outside so they wouldn't disturb Tomoko and Itokawa, who were now holding hands.

Noticing that everyone had left, Itokawa leaned in to kiss Tomoko.

“N, Stop that.”

“Why?”

“This is a medical facility... it's not an appropriate place for stuff like that.”

“It's fine. Because it'll help cure your injuries...”

“What injuries!.. ah,”

Itokawa had placed his lips upon Tomoko's. After a moment they separated and Itokawa reached out his hand, gently slipping it into Tomoko's hospital gown.

Seizing the offending arm, Tomoko twisted her body in reflex.

“I, I said stop...”

“Why?”

“It's just, that...”

“Is it your first time?”

Without making eye contact, Tomoko nodded.

“I understand. It must be difficult to hold back like that. I too, should restrain myself.”

Itokawa gave a light-hearted laugh, and then left the room carrying the Ki-44. Tomoko was left alone holding her burning cheeks with both hands.

“Don't... What should I do... What he wants me to...”

Conflicting feelings spiralled around through Tomoko's mind.

All things considered, I couldn't begin to imagine myself going out with a man until recently.

I didn't need anything so long as I had the sky.

Flying freely through the sky, only having to shoot down the enemies, that was my youth.

But this too, is a part of one's youth I guess...

Indulging herself in those kind of reflective musings, ***Gatan!** the door flew open once more, and a white blur came flying in.

“What! What the heck!” Tomoko pulled the sheets towards her in panic.

The thing that had entered, was a trembling Haruka. Her body was wrapped in white clothing, and her eyes clouded by tears.

“Haruka?”

“Ex...”

“X?”

“Excuse me! ***I'm so very sorry!***”

Haruka suddenly collapsed, prostrating herself on her hands and knees with her head bowed.

“What's all this about?”

“It's my fault...” Haruka cried without delay.

“Huh?”

“Pilot Officer Tomoko... no, it's Flying Officer now isn't it, congratulations on your promotion, but what I mean to say is that it was me who sabotaged your Ki-44! I damaged the lubricant pipeline to the Ki-44's magic engine!

“Wh, what did you just say!” Tomoko's tone rose in surprise.

“I'm sorry... this, making you crash, and injuring you, it wasn't my intention! I just thought it might be good if your mood was ruined, just a little. But, but, something like this happened!”

“Why... Why did you...”

“I just couldn't bear it!” Haruka yelled with remarkable volume. “It was too much... seeing you get so close with that engineer Itokawa, I just couldn't bear it any longer. But seeing you two embracing each other just now, I, I realised what a heinous thing I had actually done. You love is real. My one-sided feelings... will never be returned; an unrequited love.”

“Haruka...”

“It was *disgusting* of me to put you at risk because of my own feelings! Not only am I not fit to be your wingman, I'm not even fit to be a human being...”

Kneeling upon the floor, Haruka took out a dagger from a hidden pocket.

“Wait, What are you d...”

“Therefore, I shall humbly apologise with my life...”

Grasping the dagger tightly in both hands, Haruka prepared to thrust it violently into her spinal cord.

“You idiot!”

Leaping up from the bed, Tomoko practically threw herself on Haruka, knocking away the dagger at the last moment. She was about to strike Haruka across the face, but her hand stopped.

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Flying Officer, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry...”

“Jeez, what the heck are you thinking! You're my wingman aren't you? What kind of wingman would choose such a simple death! That sort of wingman; I

don't need!”

In response, Haruka began to cry, very loudly. “Uu, Uue... Uuehhhhh...”

When she saw Haruka crying, Tomoko couldn't possibly admonish her further.

Come to think of it... shouldn't I be the one to blame for pushing Haruka this far?

“Come on... everything's alright. I forgive you, so don't cry.”

“But... but, but...”

“I too was at fault. No matter what, saying something like '*I don't need you*' to my wingman is not at all appropriate. I surely suffered a such a great loss due to my temper. And so, I would also like to apologise; I'm sorry Haruka.”

“Uu, Uuu, Fl, Flying Officerrr...”

Haruka buried her face in Tomoko's chest.

While affectionately stroking that head, Tomoko spoke as if to herself; “I... until now, I think I was a slave to my previous style. I even began to fail at dogfighting. 'Being honest with oneself', is surely a valuable thing.

Haruka's muffled sobs calmed down a little *kusun... gusun...*

“If one can't be honest with oneself, certain choices will be overlooked. Even regarding the enemies' methods of attack. Despite having possibilities scattered about before my eyes, I haven't tried any of them. And it's not just about aerial combat... What kind of people are the most important to me for example. Until one asks themselves honestly, the answer might not be visible.”

“Flying Officer Tomoko...” Haruka looked up at Tomoko with teary eyes.

“What is it?”

“I have a favour to ask of you, since you have become so honest with your feelings.”

“Sure, what is it?”

“Umm, one time, just once will do...” She requested, bringing her face closer to Tomoko's.

“Just one what?”

“Just that, and, I... I'll give up. Because that, the memory... it would be the most beautiful memory of my life...”

“What are you... that's, a bit too...”



“What are you...
that's, a bit too...”

Haruka reached around and slowly stroked the back of Tomoko's neck.

“Hn!” Tomoko flinched at the touch. Haruka's fingers began to assault all kinds of sensitive areas with unbelievable precision.

“Wai... n, no, that, ah, Haruka, st, wait... n!”

What is this girl doing!

“Wh, w why, hui, w, wh wh, why, are you so, s, skilled at this?”

“I can't say for sure. However, I... so that I can serve Flying Officer Tomoko, will pass on what my body received under the supervision of Flight Lieutenant Ahonen.”

As soon as she said this, Haruka slipped off Tomoko's gown and began running her lips across Tomoko's exposed chest.

Tomoko's mind went blank... becoming utterly incapable of thought. In that state she could offer no resistance when Haruka pushed her down onto her back.

Three hours later... Tomoko, who had been shot down by Haruka no less than five times, was staring up at the ceiling in a daze. Accompanied by the sound of Haruka's light breathing as she slept beside her.

“I... what have I..!”

Having gone with the flow, and given up her body, Tomoko's hear was awash with conflicting feelings.

“Wh, with a girl... Aah, I'm so ashamed of myself...”

Tomoko tried to justify her current circumstances somehow.

It can't be helped. I did promise to sleep with her a while back.

It was only to keep my promise to her...

Thinking about it, we've bathed together, and washed eac...

Tomoko's face turned bright red.

It's not possible. That's just... I'm just being foolish.

“Oh god, what kind of noises did I make~”

It's like my head has been split in two. Until now I haven't been thinking about this small girl.

“It's not like I confused about anything...”

But... but, if I try to be honest with myself about it, this might have been a good thing.

Haruka, who has achieved a long cherished desire, might consider fighting earnestly.

Even for me, that, in reality, felt good. So good I almost died.

“How can she induce such feelings in me with her fingers and tongue... no, she's been studying how. Well, not studying exactly...”

Nevertheless, nothing can be done about the main problem with all this...

“Have I not betrayed Itokawa?”

Aah~ doesn't this mean that I've given away my first time to Haruka?

Or, does it not count because Haruka's a girl?

But...

Being honest with myself, I should now be able to summon the courage I need thanks to Haruka.

“There's nothing scary about this is there? It's fine... it's only physical intimacy, an essential part of a relationship.”

If this strategy succeeds... at that time for sure, Itokawa will take my...

With her head writhing in chaos, Tomoko's mind descended into dreams.

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Chapter 8 - Showdown! Mobile Fortress!

The winds and dense clouds that had been burying the landscape in snow were clearing away, revealing the sun once more.

Along with that weather, the fated day of February 5th had arrived.

A visible tension hung in the air; conveyed by the expressions of the witches as they stood in their ranks. The army's forces had already departed, and were now deployed around Slussen so as to cut off the enemy's ground forces.

Whether or not they would be able to secure the town of Slussen depended entirely on the efforts of the Mechanized Air Infantry stationed in Mikkeli.

Squadron Leader Häkkinen arrived accompanied by an elderly gentlemen, and several armed guards.

Flying Officer Elma gasped. "It's General Mannerheim!"

"Hmm, who's that~?"

"He's the commander-in-chief of the entire country's armed forces!"

commander-in-chief!

Everyone snapped to attention giving a panicked salute. The general casually waved his hand signalling that they could stand at ease, and began to speak; “Ladies. Loyal and brave witches from around the world. First of all; as a representative of my homeland, I would like convey how grateful we all are for you assistance. For coming here from each of your respective countries, you have my most sincere thanks. Now then, under normal circumstances it would be impermissible for girls of such tender years to be allowed to face the brutality of war. However, we now find ourselves in a state of emergency. The entire population of Suomus must unite and stand as one to confront this approaching threat. As much as it pains me to do so, I must ask you to spearhead our resistance, and pulverise mankind's grotesque enemy; the Neuroi.

General Mannerheim cleared his throat, and resumed;

“But you ladies are not alone. Understand me, the entire population of this country are standing behind you as your comrades in arms, do not forget that.”

The General raised his right hand, and saluted the Mechanized Air Infantry with the utmost grace and authority. The salute was returned as one by the witches.

Following this, Sqn Ldr Häkkinen stepped forward and formally announced the mission with a rather loud voice that didn't suit her one bit; “Our mission objective; the destruction of every Neuroi ground unit currently occupying Slussen! This operation will conclude with the complete destruction of the enemy!”

Everyone was lost for words. Essentially, she was saying that there would be no return until the enemy forces had been destroyed, and the occupation of Slussen overturned.

The Neuroi multiply. There would be no meaning in this counter-strike unless a complete victory was secured. Nevertheless, this was a very difficult task.

In no time at all, Sqn Ldr Häkkinen gave the order.

“All squadrons! Move out!”

Once airborne, the three squadrons split up into their designated cruising

altitudes, and began the advance.

Taking the position of vanguard were the ace fighter pilots of 1st Squadron.

Next came the Independent Volunteer Air Squadron led by Tomoko.

Bringing up the rear at a lower altitude was Flight Lieutenant Rudel and her Stuka Squadron.

Seeing the armaments carried by the Stuka, Katherine exclaimed loudly; "Those aren't bombs! They're cannons!"

"37mm to be precise. Originally they were anti-tank guns, but have now been modified for aerial use." Beurling explained while flying alongside.

37mm anti-tank guns...

That was the new strategy that F/L Rudel had devised; a direct assault on the enemy ground units. It was a last ditch effort to preserve what remained of the town, while also allowing them to destroy their targets.

"Compared to a bombing run, it will be rather drawn out, right? And if they have to deal with enemy aircraft the entire time..."

"That's why we need to protect them with everything we've got!" Tomoko declared confidently.

"I guess the Neuroi probably wouldn't just leave us alone today would they~?" Katherine wondered out loud with a shake of her head.

Her hopes were quickly destroyed as the lead pilot of 1st Squadron began to bank to-and-fro.

It was the signal that an enemy aircraft had been sighted.

"They're not messing around with today's reception are they." Katherine said as she stared on at the looming enemy formation.

The number of aircraft was twice what they usually encountered; roughly fifty Neuroi were en-route to intercept. Watching 1st Squadrons response, Tomoko shouted out her first instruction; "Everyone! Follow my lead!"

Tomoko stroked the repaired Ki-44. Now that the damage caused by Haruka had been rectified, the Ki-44 was performing perfectly; powerfully pushing her up through the sky.

Even facing the overwhelming enemy numbers in front of her, Tomoko's heart did not waver.

The Ki-44 was not your typical aircraft.

It connects me to Itokawa, the thread that binds our destiny.

So even if we were separated... the two of us are still connected.

Tomoko looked back to see how the Stuka were responding; they were ascending in formation. In front, 1st Squadron were entering into a violent battle. Because the enemy had substantially superior numbers today, it looked like they were using a proactive approach.

The Laros-kai that hadn't engaged 1st Squadron were closing in from the front.

The count was approximately thirty enemy craft.

Tomoko licked her lips.

Looking up at the Independent Volunteer Air Squadron, F/L Rudel smiled.

Tomoko and her group vanished through the clouds streaming overhead.

Pilot Officer Adelheid spoke up in a worried voice; "That immediate-response fighter escort of foreigners is breaking off from us..."

"Huh? I'm sure that Anabuki Pilot Officer has something planned. Shouldn't we trust in her?"

The entire squadron was extremely uneasy considering the enemy bearing down upon them but; "Preserve the formation." F/L Rudel commanded.

"Bu, but Flight Lieutenant ma'am! There are thirty Laros-kai coming this way!"

"Do not worry about them. The fighter escort will protect us without a shadow of a doubt."

The enemy formation adopted a heading that would allow them to gently loop

around and take the Stukas' backs. It seemed that they were intending to bring down the entire Stuka Squadron in the most reliable fashion.

“Flight Lieutenant! They've circled us! We need to evade!”

“Don't change course! Fly straight ahead! Trust in our comrades!”

Even as she yelled her orders, beads of sweat were forming on Rudel's forehead. If they were attacked by thirty enemy fighters here... the unsteady Stuka with their huge anti-tank guns wouldn't stand a chance.

However, they did not have the time to take evasive action in the current situation.

If they did not promptly arrive in Slussen and commence the ground attack; the deployed ground forces would be overwhelmed by the Neuroi. With that, the entire operation would lose its value.

The enemy formation appeared to have recognised them as the most important 'target'.

They came straight for the Stuka like beasts following the scent of their prey...

In that moment, the Independent Volunteer Air Squadron appeared from above with startling momentum, and the sun to their backs.

After she had made sure that the enemy force targeting the Stuka were focused on their target, Tomoko began her dive. The Ki-44 quickly gained tremendous speed as she began to descend.

“It's amazing... this Striker. Even at these velocities the tail-plane is still functional.”

Being able to alter her heading so freely while diving down was not something that could be attempted with the Ki-27.

The rest of the Independent Volunteer Squadron followed in Tomoko's wake. In the blink of an eye, they were bearing down upon the enemy formation from behind.

The Laros-kai were so intent on their pursuit of the Stuka, that they didn't even notice Tomoko's group approaching.

It was a perfect ambush.

“Everyone! Don't try to shoot them down! As soon as you hit your mark, move on to the next target!”

A collective; “Roger,” resounded back over the radio.

Tomoko locked on to one of the Laros-kai, and squeezed the trigger with no hesitation.

Da-! Da-! Da-!

Those bold gunshots were different from the 7.7mm machine gun she had been using thus far.

It was a 12.7mm machine gun. That level of power could barely be compared with the 7.7mm gun.

The fuel tank on board the targeted Laros-kai caught fire, and burnt out the aircraft from the inside in one go. Tomoko immediately adjusted herself to target another aircraft. Releasing several bursts, the next enemy suddenly rolled over. Noticing this, Tomoko once more moved onto a new target.

After riddling three aircraft with bullets, Tomoko shot over the top of the enemy formation and entered a steep climb. Her comrades followed the climb as far as they could, having hit many more of the enemy fighters.

The Laros-kai that had received fire could be seen struggling or falling from the sky. Naturally, most of them had not sustained fatal damage.

However, the number of enemy fighters capable of chasing Stuka Squadron had decreased by roughly half. With a second run, Tomoko and her group would be able to neutralise the threat posed by the remaining Laros-kai.

“Alright! That was good! We'll make one more pass like that!”

Without pursuing the impaired enemy fighters, Tomoko instructed her squadron to regain their altitude once more.

That turned out to be a good choice.

To her right, Tomoko glimpsed a different Laros-kai formation ascending in the distance. If they had continued to pursue the previous targets... even if they

could have earned a large number of shoot-downs, they would not have been able to deal with the new threat.

She recalled Itokawa's hypothetical situation;

Because you can't pursue at close range, the same shoot down count will not be attained, but in doing so; you hold the same potential energy as you had before the battle. So even if a new enemy comes into view, it can be dealt with at once.

“You really knew what you you were talking about, Itokawa. This is the way to fight with the Ki-44... no, these are going to be the tactics used throughout the world from now on.”

Tomoko once again directed her squadron into the Laros-kai's blind spot with the sun to her back. The new enemy formation headed straight towards the Stuka seemingly oblivious to Tomoko's small squadron of witches.

Tomoko faithfully repeated the same manoeuvres she had used on the last wave of fighters.

“Those lot, they're using us as decoys aren't they.” P/O Adelheid said in a disinterested voice as she watched the independent Volunteer Air Squadron led by Tomoko.

Three times, they had repelled the enemy's attacks. That itself ought to be to be praised, but they were first using their comrades as bait. That was the real issue.

Rudel laughed.

“It's probably the only way. Our immediate-response fighter escort is comprised of a mere five aircraft. Nevertheless, for us; who must be guarded at all costs, to boldly act as their lure... it's an interesting situation to say the least.”

“If they make one wrong move we'll be wiped out.”

“In that case Pilot Officer, what would you suggest they do?”

Adelheid was completely silent.

“This is war after all; it's like picking chestnuts out of the fire bare-handed.

You're only able to buy safety with the courage to risk life and limb. Those who fear becoming a victim go unrecognised.”

“Hahhhh... That's the lot of 'em right~” Katherine sighed after they had repelled the fourth enemy formation. “I'm almost out of ammo~.”

“Same here.”

“Me too.”

“I'm also low.”

Tomoko checked her own remaining ammunition.

The 12.7mm had a lot of power, but a small capacity. So she too had exhausted her reserves.

The remaining Laros-kai however, were just loitering around at low altitude. Each time the damaged craft tried to unsteadily ascend, Tomoko's group would head them off. Now it seemed that they had completely lost their will to fight.

Out in front, 1st Squadron just looked like small dots.

While the independent Volunteer squadron had been handling the Neuroi that slipped past, the 1st squadron went on ahead to preserve air superiority in the skies directly over Slussen.

“Yeeah! I can see Slussen!” Katherine yelled.

Under their eyes, the foggy grey town was in sight.

Tomoko let out a sigh of relief. It had been her responsibility to deliver F/L Rudel's team to this point. That job had now been safely completed. From here on out, it was up to F/L Rudel and the Stuka.

If the fighter escorts managed to keep the skies clear until Stuka Squadron finished clearing up the enemy ground units, they would win.

F/L Rudel loaded the first round into her 37mm anti-tank gun. With a showy *GaShan! Sound, the powerful spring chambered one of the wine-bottle sized

shells.

Each time a shot was fired, the bolt had to be operated to chamber the next round. This was a little troublesome, but it had been justified. Originally, an automatic loading mechanism had been planned, but it was scrapped in exchange for a higher ammunition capacity.

That capacity was twenty-four shells. If each one of those shells were used to its fullest and hit their mark; twenty-four multi-legged tanks could theoretically be destroyed. Thus, F/L Rudel did not intend to miss a single target.

Once Stuka Squadron had pressed on and entered Slussen airspace, they began their approach descending one aircraft at a time.

“Listen up ladies; Fly low! As low as the rooftops, no; fly as low as the street lights! That way their anti-aircraft fire will be useless!”

The Stuka witches slipped into the streets like they were skimming across the earth. They were enclosed from above by the roaring anti-aircraft fire, but Rudel's team were underneath their effective range.

“Excellent, ladies! Act without reservation! Were surrounded by nothing but the Neuroi now!”

Up ahead, a multi-legged tank came into view occupying the middle of the street. The moment Rudel passed underneath, she spun round onto her back and squeezed the trigger from point blank range.

Boun-!

Together with that thick, dull sounding impact; a gaping hole erupted from the multi-legged tanks back.

The amour piercing incendiary round plunged through the tanks body, apparently detonating its own ammunition.

The tank exploded. Its gigantic gun turret was thrown into the sky by the blast from within.

“Strike from underneath or the side! Even a 37mm can tear through it from there!” F/L Rudel yelled to her Squadron.

Explosions resounded from each and every direction of Slussen, as smoke and fragments soared into the sky. It was the victory song of the 37mm equipped Stuka Squadron.

Each time a multi-legged tank or a humanoid Neuroi was blown away, Tomoko and everyone would raise a cheer.

“It looks like this strategy's a total success!” Flying Officer Elma shouted...

At that moment, a building in the heart of the town groaned and twisted.

“Eh?”

“Wh, what the heck is that!”

Tomoko was not able to believe what her eyes were telling her.

“Th, the building's moving!”

Having done everything possible to eliminate the multi-legged tanks, F/L Rudel was combing the area and cleaning up the remaining enemy units.

“This method is surprisingly effective. If we don't report back to Karlsland immediately... Wha!” P/O Adelheid suddenly yelled out in surprise.

Right in front of her eyes a building shuddered, and started to move upwards like a time-lapse film of plants stretching towards the sunlight.

From its foundations came an ominous cracking sound as some kind of structure extended from its base... they were legs. The six-storey building was being supported at the corners like some kind of four-legged octopus.

The windows all shattered as their frames distorted, and machine guns projected out of the holes.

Upon seeing *it*, Rudel gasped one word; “Ziggurat.”

F/L Rudel and her team were driven back by a volley of enemy fire. Someone let off a 37mm round, but the moving building; the 'Ziggurat', was completely unfazed.

Watching from the skies, the fighter squadrons collapsed into panic as the building began to move and attack Stuka Squadron.

“Wh, What the f*** is that!”

F/L Rudel reply came through on the radio;

“It's a mobile fortification, a Ziggurat. The Neuroi can make use of buildings and other structures once they progress to that state. This is serious. That thing doesn't just have machine guns...”

A moment later, the building's rooftop split open as a huge number of gun barrels punched through it.

They were large calibre anti aircraft guns.

Don! Don!

Don! Don!

Don! Don! Don!Don!

With overbearing volume, the fighter squadrons were forced downwards as the skies were filled with soaring metal.

Hidden in a nearby ruin, the witches could do nothing but stare the writhing fortress.

From somewhere deep inside the Ziggurat, two gigantic cannons burst through the walls.

“Those are..!”

They were 20cm class cannons. With a grinding noise, the angle of elevation was adjusted...

BoFhun!

Smoke filled the sky as the tremendous shells were spat out. With a sound like distant thunder, they were sent flying towards somewhere outside of town.

A distant hill appeared to erupt as the huge charges impacted.

“It's aiming at the ailed ground forces!”

The gigantic cannons were targeting the ground units preparing to move into

Slussen.

“This plan will fail without the army!”

F/L Rudel valiantly led the Stuka in an attack against the Ziggurat, but with the hedgehog-like array of machine guns and intermittent launching of ground-to-air rockets, they weren't even able to get close enough to attack. On top of that, as powerful as the 37mm anti-tank guns may be, they were nothing but pea-shooters against the colossal brick walls of the mobile fortress...

“Aah, if this keeps up, the operation will utterly fail... Is there anything we can do...”

“No matter what we do, we can't stop that thing, it's impossible~”

Katherine and Elma were completely shaken.

Tomoko on the other hand was hovering in the shadows and fixedly examining the enemy fortress.

The Neuroi, are fearsome things... utilizing the town, stealthily fabricating something like that! Transforming a six-storey building into a mobile fortress...

Covering itself in machine guns like a hedgehog, successively firing off those gigantic cannons. A Ziggurat... that's the name of those ancient constructions built in order to approach the gods of old, physical manifestations of human desire.

Tomoko motionlessly stared at the Ziggurat.

“It's possible.” She whispered to herself.

“Tomoko, did you just say something?”

Tomoko then gave a single, confident nod.

“We can bring it down. With this Ki-44, it's possible!”

“Huh? What's possible! For us Mechanized Air Infantry, fighting that building-monster would be like tryin' to hold back the tides! It's impossible 'right!”

“Impossibilities and stuff like that, don't exist in this world.”

With that, Tomoko shot off into the sky.

“Tomoko!”

As if chasing Tomoko, the Ziggurat concentrated its fire on her. Every anti-air weapon at its disposal was trained on her.

Machine guns, anti-aircraft guns, rockets... Tomoko rolled and twisted around them all.

It was a magnificent display of evasive aerial manoeuvres.

Spinning and dancing like a leaf in the wind, she avoided being struck down.

After reaching an altitude of three-thousand meters Tomoko flipped over and looked towards the ground.

The two 20cm cannons repeatedly fired at some distant place outside of the town.

If that's its only weak point...

“It has to be those cannons.”

Tomoko turned her head.

Looking back at her was F/L Rudel carrying her 37mm anti-tank gun.

Tomoko nodded. It seemed that F/L Rudel was thinking along the same lines as herself.

“I agree. We have to drive an attack down one of those barrels from a high speed dive.”

“It would be more than just difficult though. Even for us Stuka, whether we could pull off a risky feat like that involves some degree of chance.”

“Nevertheless, we only have this one chance.”

“I guess so. With what they're capable of, there will be no second chances.”

Rudel stared into Tomoko's eyes. “Can you do it?”

“I have to do it, right? Flight Lieutenant.”

During their conversation, each Squadrons' witches arrived having fought their way through the anti-air fire.

“Tomoko!”

“Flight Lieutenant Rudel!”

F/L Rudel called for order and explained the plan to everyone.

“Myself and Flying Officer Anabuki will perform an attack on that monster while diving down from here. I want you ladies to cover our approach with everything you've got.”

Everyone nodded with meek expressions.

“This is our one shot.”

Rudel took out a 37mm shell and loaded her gun. “My last round.”

Tomoko unsheathed the Hizen Osafune.

“Tomoko! Using that samurai sword here would be nothing short of suicide!”

“I'm out of bullets.” She said plainly.

In response, Haruka timidly approached.

“Haruka?”

“This... Please use this! It still has one burst remaining!”

It was her 20mm Type 99-2 auto cannon. A long barrelled machine gun developed by the navy...

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. You would be able to make so much better use of it that someone like myself!”

Tomoko nodded, and accepted the machine gun from Haruka. Its weight was enormous. Tomoko sensed that her comrades were waiting for her to prepare herself.

“Well then, shall we get going?” Rudel asked with a tone of voice that suggested they were doing nothing more strenuous than departing for a picnic.

With no further ado, Tomoko and Rudel began their charge side by side.

The air shook as the Ziggurat viciously concentrated its fire upon the approaching witches. The anti-aircraft guns tore through the sky, forcing them to stagger their dive.

"Sh**!"

One of the ground-to-air rockets came flying directly at Tomoko. She bit her lip.

I can't evade at this velocity! I'm going to be hit!

Tomoko flinched. Just when she was about to shut her eyes, F/O Elma shot across in front of her.

DON!

With that jarring blast, Tomoko saw F/O Elma spiralling down towards the earth.

She shielded me!

"Elma!"

Even though she was out of control, F/O Elma did her best to give Tomoko a thumbs up in response to that yell.

Right after that Ursula appeared from nowhere, receiving a barrage of bullets before unsteadily losing altitude.

They're using themselves as shields because they're out of ammunition!

"Everyone! Listen!"

"Don't get worked up now." Beurling's voice reached her ears. "We're using our magical shields with all our strength. A couple of hits are nothing to worry about."

"But..."

"I promised Flight Lieutenant Rudel. I promised that even if I had to strike down the enemy with my own body, I'd make this mission a success."

At one-thousand-five-hundred meters, the intensity of the enemy fire increased.

Uncountable shots sunk into Beurling's body. With a direct hit to her side from an anti-aircraft gun, even she was taken down.

Katherine was the next to take up her position. Just like before, Katherine's sturdy figure endured a wave of bullets before reaching her limit.

“Tomoko! After this, it's all down to you!”

Lastly, Tomoko and F/L Rudel were being protected by all the witches of 1st Squadron and the remaining members of Stuka Squadron.

They spread out in front, bearing the brunt of the downpour of bullets.

Flight Lieutenant Ahonen muttered; “it's in your hands,” as she seemed to lose consciousness and unsteadily drop towards the ground.

Haruka even sounded happy as she gave her parting words. “It was an honour... to act as your shield.”

“Do you understand? You're not the only person fighting this war,”

Those words enveloped Tomoko like never before.

Not only the witches of the Mechanized Air Infantry. But Itokawa too. By flying this Ki-44, I'm fighting together with him.

Her heart was filed with courage, and this gave her the composure to do what she must.

Tomoko rolled to avoid the stream of bullets.

The Ki-44's diving ability is magnificent. Even at these velocities, the control surfaces react perfectly.

Using that nimble rolling manoeuvre, Tomoko flipped her entire body into an upright position, and easily fixed her aim to the target.

Altitude; 200 meters.

To her side, F/L Rudel's eyes shone keenly. In an instant, her shot was taken.

Tomoko too had the centre of the the huge enemy muzzle in her sights. She squeezed the trigger.

Leaving a heavy recoil behind, the 20mm machine gun bullets flew towards her

target.

“Hit it!”

The interior of the enemy's cannon shone white as it too, fired a shell.

As if time had slowed to a crawl, Tomoko acknowledged this just before her 20mm bullets plunged into the muzzle.

The shell and her 20mm bullets clashed.

A white flash expanded outwards, enveloping the Ziggurat along with a mighty explosion from within.

Tomoko was swallowed up a fraction of a second later... despite the terrific noise, she heard nothing at all.

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Epilogue

Epilogue Misfits Volume 2

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Epilogue

Flight Lieutenant Rudel awoke amidst mountains of rubble. She groaned and stood up, dismounting her tattered Striker Unit and letting them fall to the ground. *GaShan!

Assessing her surroundings; the damage was enormous.

However... the operation to recapture Slussen seemed to have finished in success.

Witches equipped with ground model Striker Units could be seen throughout the town. With the destruction of the Ziggurat, the ground units had safely entered the battlefield. Feeling a little proud, Rudel slowly set off.

Before long, she was discovered by the witches of Stuka Squadron; who had been searching for her without pause.

“Flight Lieutenant! Flight Lieutenant Rudel survived!”

On the verge of tears, they came rushing over. Not one of them had a Striker equipped. Almost all of them had been completely destroyed in that battle.

“So what's happening, Adelheid?”

Rather than giving the impression of a frozen rose, Adelheid's beautiful face was now covered in mud and soot. Apparently at a loss for what to say, the adjutant replied; “We were searching for you.”

“After you were swallowed up by that explosion, we didn't know where you were... we were worried!” With the exception of Adelheid, everyone else seemed likely to break down crying.

“Wipe those shameful expressions off your faces. So far, I've been shot down fifteen times, and each time I pulled through. Is dying such an easy thing I wonder? So, what are our losses?”

The ever capable adjutant reeled of the current situation to her superior officer; “Yourself included, we Stuka have lost five aircraft, four wounded. 1st Squadron have lost six Messerscharf, eight wounded. All injured are currently receiving medical treatment. The independent Volunteer Air Squadron have lost all of their Striker Units. However, there are no confirmed injuries.”

“Hmm, those lot sure have good luck,” Rudel commented in a cheerful voice.

“However... Oberleutnant Anabuki's whereabouts are still unknown. Everyone available is currently searching for her. We too should search for her immediately...”

“I guess we should. But before that, someone get me a hot coffee.”

Tomoko opened her eyes to a shaft of light shining down through a crevice in the rubble.

It was the pale light of the moon.

After being enveloped in the blast, it seemed that she had become pinned under the debris. For one thing, her Ki-44 was trapped. Consequently she couldn't move her lower body in the slightest.

Naturally, Tomoko tried calling out via her radio, but the throat microphone was completely non-functional.

Checking herself over, Tomoko had a thought; if it weren't for the Ki-44... her

own legs might have been crushed under the rubble.

Tomoko thanked Itokawa from the bottom of her heart.

Even when we're apart, he's protecting me...

But even if she slid herself out of the Ki-44, her upper body was still being held firmly in place by the wreckage. So it seemed that freeing herself was not going to be possible. However, even in that situation Tomoko did not lose hope. She truly felt as if the Ki-44 connected Itokawa to herself.

Tomoko sent a little of her magic through the Ki-44. **Buuuuuun...*

Faintly, one of the engines came to life.

Still, after all this, the Ki-44 lives on!

The right leg had been utterly destroyed... but the left leg's engine was still somewhat functional. Tomoko's heart overflowed with relief.

Amidst the bitter cold, Tomoko kept the Ki-44 idling.

Shrouding herself in a magic shield offered protection from the cold.

It wasn't clear to Tomoko how long she waited like that, but eventually...

"It's this way. Over here." From beyond the rubble, the sounds of someone yelling could be heard.

The moment she heard that voice, Tomoko's eyes overflowed with tears.

"Is it really this way? Truthfully, are you sure?" Haruka sounded like she was holding back her tears.

"If you're wrong, we won't forgive you 'k~"

"Don't worry. I can hear it."

"Hear what?"

"The sound of the Ki-44's engine."

"But I can't hear a thing~"

"It's obvious to me... because I developed that Striker Unit. And if the engines running, that means Tomoko is also safe."

Tomoko could hear rubble being shifted.

Before long Itokawa's face came into view, against the moonlight and the aurora.

“See, here she is.”

“Itokawa,”

Seeing that smiling face, something warm flared up in Tomoko's heart. Even amidst the bitter cold, she felt as if that warmth would continue to protect her forever.

Three days later...

The citizens of Slussen had been filtering back into their home town, and it had turned into a rowdy festival of sorts.

With the sheer number of buildings that had been destroyed, rubble and debris littered the town... but everyone was simply glad that their homes had been liberated from the enemy.

Due to the success of the operation to push back the Neuroi's advance, reporters from all over the world were converging upon the area, enthusiastically collecting statements to be published.

Of course, at the centre of all this were the key figures in the liberation of Slussen; the Mechanized Air infantry. Tomoko was perpetually getting caught up in storms of reporters, and had very little time to rest.

That day too, upon entering the hotel lobby she was enveloped in a vicious offensive. After responding to however-many enquiries, the impromptu press conference came to a close. With a sigh Tomoko collapsed into a chair. At that point, Haruka turned up to inform everyone of their schedules from now on.

“Every~one~, listen u~p. This is a notification from Squadron Leader Häkkinen...”

“A party? It'll be with the governments big brass I guess~” Katherine presumed in a worn out voice.

“Don't be like that, this is part of our job too.”

“Haruka, you, recently you've really changed, haven't you.”

“Eh? Is, is, that so?”

“Yep. I'd say; it's like you've become more assertive...”

Haruka gazed up towards the ceiling, and gave a small nod.

“How do I put it... I, think I've become more adult. Mmm, in various ways.”

“More adult is it~”

While listening to Haruka and Katherine's conversation, Tomoko's face was turning a light pink.

“Tomoko, Let's go then~”

“Ah, sure...”

“With Haruka behaving like an adult, and you becoming so ladylike, everyday seems so hectic~”

Beurling suddenly pulled Tomoko back as she was about to leave.

“Huh? What's wrong?”

“Your party is that way isn't it?”

“Eh?”

Beurling pointed back inside, where Itokawa was standing waving at her.

Itokawa and Tomoko stood at the window on the topmost floor of the hotel, overlooking the people going about their business in the freshly illuminated town below. Tomoko was wearing the black dress that Itokawa had given her.

Holding a glass of wine in one hand, Tomoko said; “I feel, a little bad about this.”

“What do you mean?”

“It's just, I have this comfortable room and... despite there being so many people who have lost their homes.”

“Isn't it just for tonight? It's unreasonable to say such things about having a room prepared. I think you of all people have the right to spend a night like this. You have absolutely nothing to be sorry about.”

Itokawa stood wrapped his arms around Tomoko's body from behind.

“At last.”

“M, mm.” Tomoko nodded, her face bright red.

Itokawa brought his lips to her neck.

“Aa...”

Making her body twist, Itokawa put a bit more of his strength into the embrace, and suddenly lifted her up off the floor.

Like that, he carried Tomoko to the bed, and turned off the lights.

In the pitch dark room, Itokawa removed Tomoko's dress.

“You're stunning, Tomoko.”

Tomoko covered her face with both hands. She had reached the summit of embarrassment, and her head was swimming. Itokawa slowly began to ease Tomoko's body with his touch, and his tongue.

How much time passed like that? It felt like an unfolding dream, so she couldn't properly comprehend. It felt like a few hours, while also half an hour. It might even have been less time than that.

Hearing the sound of rustling clothes, Tomoko realised that Itokawa was removing his clothes.

Gently, he enveloped her body with his own...

“Tomoko,”

“Itokawa,”

“Tomoko,”

“Itokawa? ...eh?”

In that moment, Tomoko's hand reached Itokawa's chest.

His chest?

Tomoko noticed how overemphasised his pectorals were.

“Ito, Itokawa. Your chest, it's quite large isn't it?”

“Hm? I think they're rather small, aren't they?”

Tomoko hastily ran her hand down Itokawa's body.

...It's...not there...

The things she expected to find, weren't there. Even with Tomoko's meagre sex experience, she knew it wasn't possible for such things to be missing...

It felt like all the blood had drained from her head.

“Itokawa, umm...”

“What is it?”

“Umm, well, you don't have a...”

“A..? Oh! Well why would I?”

What did he just say?

“Um, So, that means...”

“I'm a woman, isn't that obvious?”

“A woman? I thought...”

“Aah. Certainly, I do speak in a masculine fashion. Well, that can't be helped; engineering is an industry dominated by men. I'm not completely comfortable with it, but I really do resemble a guy sometimes. In any case I've always liked women so... I guess it has it's advantages.”

“That's, *that's...*” Tomoko was trembling.

“Oi oi, What's wrong? You knew I was a woman since we first met right? ”

“I... didn't know.”

“Wh? But you were with that Haruka girl to begin with; *'Because Pilot Officer Tomoko is my lover, please don't hit on her'* she said. But, I fell in love with you at first sight, so I didn't hold back.”

Tomoko's entire body was shaking now.

“What's wrong? Are you scared? Well, seems we should continue then.”

Tomoko reached up and firmly grasped Itokawa's face with both hands.

“Hey, Tomoko...”

With a voice like that of a demon, and an expression like she were shooting down consecutive Laros-kai Tomoko said; “We will *not*, continue.”

Meanwhile at the party, the Independent Volunteer Squadron's witches were trying to deal with their excess of free time.

While gazing at the bubbles floating in her champagne, Katherine said; “Jeez, the higher-ups sure are boring~. Rather than a medal, I'd prefer a cash reward. Then I could open a plantation next to my fathers ranch over in Texas. Then you could work for me, Beurling.”

“I'll pass.” Beurling replied while stuffing her mouth with food they had been served.

“I guess Flying Officer Tomoko is having a fun time right now...” Elma muttered with an absent-minded expression.

“What's that? Flying Officer Elma wants a lover too~”

“Th, that's not what I meant, but...”

Katherine turned to Ursula and viciously messed her hair as she silently ate her food.

“What about you? Do you want a lover too?”

“Don't need one,” she replied bluntly.

Well, finding a lover or something in this kind of environment is difficult, even if you're a lucky gal like Tomoko.

As she said that, Haruka's glass slipped out of her hand.



When this war is over, I'll become a nun.

Beurling prodded Katherine with her elbow.

“Ahh, Sorry... But, you'll find a fantastic person yourself before long.”

“...It's fine. When this war is over, I'll become a nun.”

“Don't be like that, it's depressing~”

BaTan!

At that point, the conversation was suddenly punctuated by the main entrance of the hall slamming open.

“Oi, speak of the devil, it's Tomoko.”

Clad in her black evening dress, Tomoko came storming in with large strides and headed straight for the Independent Volunteer Squadron's table.

With nothing more than a deeply furrowed brow, she shakily grabbed a bottle of wine from the tabletop, and downed it in one.

“Puhaa~”



Everyone stared on at the spectacle, utterly dumbfounded.

“Wh, what happened! Tomoko?”

Tomoko slammed the bottle down onto the table.

“***Listen up!***” she yelled.

Reflexively, everyone snapped to attention.

“Training! Right now! All members, equip your Striker Units and head for the airfield!”

“B, but... Our Strikers are totally destroyed.” *Hugh-!

Katherine was flattened against the floor by the full force of Tomoko's wrath.

“Wh, what are you doing~!”

“Are you disobeying a superior officer? Well?”

“*I, I'm Sorry OK!*”

“Come on, we'll use 1st Squadron's Messersharf or something.”

“The airfield's an insane distance from here so...”

When Flying Officer Elma timidly said that, she was struck hard in the solar plexus.

“HiKu! S, sorrrry...”

“Run then. You have two good legs don't you; use them!”

Smoothly unsheathing her service-sword, Tomoko stabbed it into the floor with both hands **Don!*

“Get going. Hurry up with the preparations for training.”

In utter confusion, the witches of the Independent Volunteer Squadron immediately broke into a run.

Then Tomoko noticed Haruka staring up at her with an awestruck expression.

“Aaah, the old Tomoko is back... aaaah...”

Tomoko's eyes narrowed.

“You, prepare yourself. Because I'm going to work you so hard you'll wish you hadn't been born.”

“Y, yes! That's...”

“Get going. Wingman.”

Haruka's face shone brilliantly, and tears of happiness welled up in her eyes.

Military Officers of various countries, The town's most influential people, and the highest members of the Suomi government all stared on mutely as Tomoko stormed out with almost palpable rage.

“To me, it's the sky! And nothing but the sky! That's right! Takeko!”

“Ah... Flying Officer Tomoko, I'm coming with you!”

Overwhelmed with excitement, Haruka ran after Tomoko's receding back.

While sprinting down the stairway two steps at a time, Tomoko felt some kind of hot sensation welling up inside her. The cause was simply that she would be flying soon. With nothing more than that, her heart had been set.

What the heck, I...When I was in love my heart was pounding wasn't it... Like I thought; it's still too soon for me.

If I continue to fly... continue until I've had enough...at that time, I'll try love.

Surely, even that long won't be too late.

To one side was Beurling's profile.

“I don't know what the hell we're doing, but it seems fun,” she yelled.

“If I try to be honest about my feelings...”

“yes...”

“The sky is best for me.”

Beurling Laughed.

“Me too.”

And so, the witches of the Independent Volunteer Air Squadron ran through the streets of Slussen by the light of the Aurora.

Their eyes set in the direction of the airfield.

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