The dark, underground storehouse was lit by candlelight. The air was heavy with dampness, and the ice-cold stone walls sapped body heat. Light and sound were kept outside by thick and sturdy walls. Down here there was only the hellish darkness. In this place, the only thing that might look familiar was —

—a half-rotted chair.

After long years of use, the entire chair creaked. In addition, it had been left where it was for a long time, so there was a thick layer of dust on it.

House Formal’s old butler was seated on this chair that was about to fall apart. Sweat dripped off his forehead and he panted heavily. He seemed to be looking into the darkness.

“I, I don’t know anything!”, he panted.

Several people appeared from the darkness, and one of them dealt the old butler a tight slap.

“Ow!”

The slap echoed off the wall, followed by the butler’s cry. The side of his lip split, leaking bright red blood.

“Bartholomew. We already know you sent a fake letter in Lady Myui’s name.”

The cat-eared glasses-wearing maid Persia grabbed the silent butler by his lapels and lifted him up. Behind her, the head maid watched the pained expression on the old butler’s face impassively, before asking another question.

“I, I don’t know. It wasn’t me. It definitely wasn’t me. Please, believe me!”

“Please tell the truth. It isn’t too late yet.”

After that, the butler was beaten several times, but still, he refused to talk.

“It really wasn’t me, I know nothing! Besides, why are you suspecting me? I’ve worked here longer than everyone else. There should be a lot more people who’re more suspicious than me. Anyone could have gotten into the study!”

“But you were the one in charge of the house seal. Am I wrong?”

Seeing the look in the old head maid’s eyes, Persia began beating the butler again. She did not strike to kill, just to make him suffer.

However, the old butler stubbornly refused to talk.

“Just let me read his mind!”

Aurea stepped forward. As a Medusa, her hair could absorb the energy of her victims, and at the same time she could probe their thoughts and memories. The problem was that absorbing that much energy from someone would kill them.

However, the old maid stopped her.

“Your mind-reading can’t serve as evidence. We need to make him talk.”

The old maid looked to the corner of the underground storehouse, at the shadowy figure who seemed to be supervising the questioning.

The objective of this interrogation was to show that House Formal and their guarantor Piña were innocent. At the very least, they had to convince everyone present. Although Aurea insisted, “If I read his mind, we’ll know the truth!” they would not be able to convince anyone without evidence.

Mamina, who was standing at the other corner of the room, was trembling with rage. Then, she spoke in a wrathful voice.

“Persia, let’s switch! I’ll do it!”

Mamina the Warrior Bunny stepped in and punched the butler. Delilah was from her tribe, and she was her close friend. She blamed Delilah’s violent actions on the butler and there was no way she could suppress the anger boiling in her.

“Please stop! He is just a suspect. What would happen if you killed him out of anger? People might think we were trying to silence a witness!”

The head maid’s words halted Mamina’s fists.

The old butler and the chair were lying on the floor, and he was moaning in pain.

Mamina clicked her tongue in frustration, then stepped back, her shoulders and ears swaying before she leaned back against the wall.

What Delilah did shook the whole of Arnus Town. Although it was a developing town, everyone knew all about it once the MPs began investigating Delilah’s room in the worker hostel.

After that, everyone began speculating, “Looks like Delilah did something”, and then the Dwarf apprentice in the hospital said, “A Warrior Bunny and Yanagida came into the hospital, covered in blood!” and “Delilah stabbed Yanagida!”. Once they put this information together, it began to spread like wildfire.

Kikuchi, from the MPs came to interview the head chef after the latter contacted him, and the chef said, “Mm, from the start, she was always eager about poking her nose around.”

“Then… will we be chased out of town?”

The chef and the PX girls lowered their heads. They were afraid that what their companion did would affect them as well. However, Kikuchi the MP tilted his head and asked, “Why would we do that? This matter has nothing to do with you. Unless you’re saying you’re involved?”

Those words let the people of Arnus breathe a sigh of relief. It was as though a great weight had been lifted off their shoulders.

However, House Formal could not do that. The MPs found a letter ordering Delilah’s room which ordered her to carry out an assassination. The letter was written in House Formal’s exclusive stationery and stamped with the House’s seal, ordering her to kill a girl named Noriko.

It was utterly ridiculous, but nobody was laughing.

Currently, House Formal was neutral ground between the Empire and Japan. This neutrality allowed it to remain peaceful and prosperous. Therefore, any attempt to sabotage their relationship with Japan would be like dropping a rock on their own feet.

In addition, in the remote possibility that an order like that had to be given, they would never allow anyone to know it, but carry it out directly. In the Special Region, leaving behind written proof of an assassination order was the height of stupidity. However, when she heard the truth, the head maid could not help but think that House Formal was doomed.

There were countless examples of such incidents in the history of both Earth and the Special Region. For example, people leaving behind swords with family crests on them at the scene of an assassination, or letters cursing a country’s king, and even suspects with no memory of the crime were used as evidence. In addition, it was also a fact that Delilah was a spy for House Formal. However, they would never have ordered her to kill a Japanese girl. House Formal was adamant on that. After all, they did not even know that there was a girl named Noriko. However, with that in mind, they could not figure out who gave Delilah her false orders.

Ltc. Youga, leader of the 4th Combat Group’s 401st Squadron, approached the head maid with a letter in hand. That letter was the same one found in Delilah’s room, now a piece of evidence. He asked, “Did you send this letter?” and asked her to “Please uncover the truth.” After that, the head maid began investigating everyone in the House.

In the end, the sole suspect was the Count’s butler, Bartholomew.

The reason was because he was in charge of the house seal.

Of course, the butler would never admit that he had sent that letter. He was a member of the Count’s household, and if disaster struck House Formal, he would be caught in it as well. However, surely he would be the only one with the chance to use the house seal and House Formal’s stationery, right?

Just as Persia was looking for an untouched place on the butler’s body to bruise, the men supervising the interrogation made their move.

“Enough.”

Ltc. Youga was accompanied by a sergeant from 1st Recon, who would be their interpreter.

The two men had impassive expressions on their faces. Persia, Mamina and the head maid were uneasy at the cold attitude Japan was showing to House Formal.

“No, we can’t stop now, we haven’t uncovered the truth yet.”

The head maid was getting desperate. She had to hand the truth and the true culprit over to Youga, no matter the cost. As long as they could find the true culprit, they could clear up the misunderstanding. In other words, it was their sole ray of hope.

“But this man refuses to talk.”

“No, I’m sure we can make him talk.”

“Head maid, you’re wasting time.”

Wasting time. Those words sounded like a death sentence for House Formal.

“How could that—”

Just as Youga was about to speak, a knocking came from the warehouse door.

“Lieutenant Colonel, you rang?”

“Oh, we’ve kept you waiting. Come in.”

“Where’s this place? It’s so dark…”

The man whose excitement was out of place in this grim, dark dungeon was a medical officer (1st Lieutenant) in the JGSDF. However, his words seemed to lighten the oppressive atmosphere here. The head maid and the other maids wondered what Youga was going to do.

“Sorry, could you lend us a hand?”

The medical officer nodded with a “Hmph, I got it” and then withdrew a syringe from his bag. Then he took out an ampoule, snapped off the head, and filled the syringe with a drug.

“And now…”

Youga asked Persia and the maids to step back, and then he looked into the old butler’s face.

“We will not hit you.”

That made the butler groan, “Is, is that so. Then, please listen to me. I, I don’t know anything.”

While the interpreter was translating for Youga, he withdrew a piece of paper from his satchel. This was not the paper sent to Delilah, but a photocopy. In addition, it also showed the fingerprints of the people who had touched it.

“Then, you said you do not recognize the letter that was sent to Delilah, right?”

“Of course. I’ve never seen it before.”

“Is that so? If you remember, you should tell us now. Here, look closer.”

Youga indicated the fingerprints on the letter.

“These prints should be familiar to you as, hm, how shall I put it… ah, claw marks. These are imprints of fingertips. Their presence on an object indicates that the owner of these fingerprints has touched that object before.”

As the butler heard the translated words, he turned pale and his body started trembling.

“The fingerprints in red belong to Delilah. Then, there are two other fingerprints which do not belong to her. Now, if these fingerprints don’t belong to you, then all will be well.”

As he said this, Youga tightly grasped the butler’s hand. The interpreter brought a fingerprint pad and a sheet of paper along.

The old butler’s body went stiff, and he struggled madly to resist.

“What’s this? Why are you resisting us? It’ll be over in a moment if you just cooperate. All you need to do is prove these fingerprints are not yours, and you will be absolved of guilt.”

The old butler grit his teeth, desperately trying to keep his hands shut.

“Everyone, can you help me out?”

Mamina and Persia were only too glad to help Youga. They held the old butler’s hand, pried his fingers open, and obtained prints from all ten of his fingers.

“It wasn’t me. It wasn’t me. It wasn’t me, it really wasn’t me,” the butler muttered as she shook uncontrollably.

In front of him, Youga compared the butler’s fingerprints to the ones on the photocopied letter. Well, he did that, but in the darkness of the dungeon, there was no way to make a proper comparison. So this was basically going through the motions to frighten the butler.

However, even before the comparison, one could already figure out the truth from his reaction while they were taking his fingerprints.

“Hmm~ well, that’s a shame. It seems you told a lie. Could you tell us why?”

The trembling butler was still surprisingly stubborn. He shook his head frantically like he had a seizure, wordlessly denying Youga.

“Perhaps he has some reason why he can’t speak.”

After hearing those words from the interpreter, Youga turned to the medical officer. The man stepped forward and tied a rubber tourniquet around his arm, and then disinfected the butler’s arms with alcohol.

The butler did not know what the medical officer was going to do, and stared in surprise at his arms.

At this stage, Persia and Mamina were willing to help with any task. They pinned down the butler’s arms so they could not move. The head maid watched in silence. She had the feeling that Youga could get the truth out of the butler.

After the tourniquet made the butler’s veins appear, the medical officer pressed the tip of a surgical needle into it. Then, he screwed the syringe onto the other end. This way, even if the butler twitched, he would not have to worry about the needle tip coming out. This was a common technique used in mental hospitals, in order to administer tranquilizers to confused patients that were flailing around.

The medical officer spoke to him in a mischievous tone.

“This is a drug called amobarbital. Once it is injected into your body, you will lose the ability to think, and you’ll answer any questions asked of you regardless of your will. Not bad, right? It doesn’t matter what you want to do, this drug will make you talk. So you won’t be breaking your agreement with whoever employed you.”

Of course, this drug was not a truth serum. However, after being shown the evidence, and being told that “It doesn’t matter what you want to do, this drug will make you talk”, the butler finally ceased his resistance.

The medical officer slowly depressed the plunger of the syringe and injected the drug into the butler’s veins. Then he released the rubber tourniquet, and let the drug circulate through the butler’s body. The butler’s consciousness blurred, and in the end his mind was clouded.

The medical officer continued depressing the plunger, until it bottomed out in the syringe. Amobarbital was a tranquilizer, and injecting a large quantity of it at once would put the butler to sleep. It was a very difficult task to keep the butler on just this side of consciousness, but the medical officer skilfully accomplished that task.

“Go ahead.”

Together with the medical officer, Youga began his questioning.

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Colonel Imazu, of the JGSDF Special Region Expeditionary Force Headquarters — Operation Staff Unit’s 2nd Branch, read Youga’s report and clicked his tongue.

The report read: *There is an underground organization which seeks to damage the peace talks between Japan and the Empire. This incident was instigated by someone who sent a false order to one of House Formal’s spies*.

After questioning the old butler, they were certain that he was the one who had leaked House Formal’s stationery. However, his contact in Italica had fled. There were some traces, but that line of investigation terminated in a dead end.

Maintaining one’s composure in a state of confusion.

No amateur could do that. Imazu keenly felt the importance of human intelligence in addition to other forms of intelligence gathering.

In order to stop incidents before they happened, they had to be faster than the enemy. The fact that they had prevented Delilah’s assassination of Noriko was because Yanagida had been there by pure coincidence. Still, now that they knew there was an enemy, they could begin to formulate responses to them.

“The question is, who is our enemy?”

He had worked hard to gather suitable people for this, such as Defense Ministry suits, diplomats, Cabinet officers, as well as men from the Public Security Bureau. Imazu had assembled them here today to ask their opinions.

“We also need to plan our counterstrike against the enemy, once we learn who they are.”

“Well, like I said before, the enemy knows of and can describe Noriko.”

“Right. She’s not an actress or a celebrity. She’s someone that almost nobody in the Special Region would know, so that narrows down the suspect list greatly. In addition, the enemy knows her face well enough for a description, so it can’t be a matter of a quick glance.’

“Crown Prince Zorzal. He’s the most likely suspect.”

“Indeed. However, we also need to consider that this is what the opposition wants us to think. We need to consider him and everyone else around him. We’ll ask Mochizuki Noriko about any relationships he might have with others, and then we’ll thoroughly investigate them.”

Imazu nodded, and one of his subordinates began preparations.

“There must be people who’re unhappy with the peace talks between the Empire and Japan.”

“I still think it’s Zorzal.”

“True, that fellow’s pretty suspicious.”

They had read Sugawara’s reports on the patricians, and as such they knew Zorzal was part of the pro-war faction and did not want peace with Japan.

As they ventured guesses at their enemy’s identity, they laughed maliciously.

“Oh, another thing. Our enemy also knows House Formal sent spies to Arnus.”

“Wasn’t that the butler Bartholomew?’

“Bartholomew was just a sacrificial pawn in this. A quick look would have dug up a lot of suspicious things. In fact, the most suspicious thing is that he did not flee.”

“In other words, there’s another enemy agent in House Formal.”

According to Youga’s report, Bartholomew’s weakness was his debts and women. Traveling merchants could purchase blank paper with House Formal’s crest at a high price, and then after the enemy honey-trapped him, they could manipulate him at will. Therefore, the enemy was also one who could grasp and take advantage of his debts and his lust for women.

“If we investigate House Formal, we should be able to root out anyone connected to the enemy. Who knows, we might be able to pick the trail up again from where it went cold.”

“It’s not just in House Formal. We might have enemy agents in Arnus too.”

“Speaking of which, how long does information take to travel from Italica to the Capital?”

“Ahh, it’s annoying when we don’t have intel. By the distance, I’d say, 10 to 13 days?”

“This doesn’t include them moving at night, but it should be about that much.”

“The enemy agent knew Delilah would take action today. However, he does not know how it ended. Therefore, the enemy should be trying to gather as much information as possible.”

“Ahh…”

“As long as the enemy does not have some special way of transmitting information, reports of this incident should reach the Capital in 10 to 13 days.”

After listening to all of this, Imazu had a pretty good idea of their overall direction. However, he could not make this decision alone. Therefore, he asked the whole of 2nd Branch, “What should we do?”

The suits replied after some discussion.

“Though there are probably spies in House Formal, their number should be limited. That being the case, we should feed the count false information. After that, we’ll follow the clues and find where the enemy is hiding. It’s an old one, but a good one.”

“You might not need to deceive them. First, we release the information that the assassination failed. Then, we tell them that the delegates for the negotiation will be arriving in the Special Region soon. Then you leak information that the first round of talks and the first batch of captive repatriation will take place in Italica. The fact that Shirayuri Reiko, the PM’s aide, is coming with the first batch of captives should not be public knowledge, so we can use that against them too.”

“That ought to scare them. Who knows, they might even take direct action against the talks.”

“Suggestion. While we were investigating the people around Crown Prince Zorzal, we followed the trails to a dead-end. However if we release false information, we should be able to see who our man is by watching who takes the bait. However, if we do that we’ll need to pick one of our people to be our man on the inside.”

As he said that, he produced a name list of the personnel dispatched to the Imperial Capital.

“Right. This guy should be usable.”

One of the staff members pulled out a report from the mountain of documents on a nearby desk.

“This is the information collected from the ladies engaged in “Special Vocations” in Akusho. It includes various bits of gossip on patrician sons and daughters, as well as scandals on the Senators, provided by their own maids. Because these were largely hearsay, there was no real use for it before today. However, now we might have a chance to turn these people into collaborators.”

The men looked at each other, like kids about to play a prank.

Imazu rose to make his summation.

“Delilah was a good girl. She was the flower of our canteen.”

Everyone nodded in unison. They had all spoken to her before in the canteen.

“Gentlemen, we must find the ones who deceived her and spilled the blood of our countrymen. The enemy has the home ground advantage, but we have the advantage of speed. At the very least, we will be ten days faster than them. We must not lose here. Do you understand?”

And so, the counter-terrorist operation led by the 2nd Branch quietly began.

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“This drink they call “brandy” is really something else. It’s definitely top-shelf stuff. It seems someone gave it away as a gift, and of late, all the patricians are begging for more. I tried it, of course, since everyone wanted some, and it’s good. It’s no wonder why those people who gorge themselves on gourmet cuisine keep wanting more of this.”

ALC - Imperial Capital Branch.

This was where the traders of the Imperial Capital brought in their goods.

Kurata busied himself with helping the cat and dog-eared girls in the shop. He spoke warmly to the traders, and then he tried turning the topic to Crown Prince Zorzal.

“However, information about the people in court is more profitable than information about the regular patricians. For example, the people around the Crown Prince have been buying up stuff. If it’s for his personal consumption, it might inflate the price.”

“The Crown Prince-dono, is it? Well, it’s difficult. The people who do business on his behalf are all very stubborn, they hardly leave any openings.”

“So it’s impossible, huh.”

Kurata sighed. So far, he had been unable to get past the obstacle of the Imperial traders. Even getting close to them was difficult. He was out of ideas.”

Suddenly, a trader spoke to him.

“Oi, oi, don’t give up so soon. I’m just about to get started.”

“You mean…?”

“Actually, his Highness has been organizing banquets at various patricians’ homes. Since they’re unofficial, even a minor merchant like me has a chance to do business. You should know the rest, right?”

“I see, I see. So, a little discount, then?”

“Ahh, yes. That’ll do.”

The two men shook hands.”

“I’ll give priority to the stuff you ordered. So when do you want me to send it over? And the location? Your guys will be handing it to the chef, right?

“What do you mean? That’s a strange way to make a transaction…”

“Look. Since we’re sending over drinks and ingredients, why don’t we hand it to the experts? That way it’ll show off our wares’ value. You give this stuff to a skilled chef, he makes good food and hooks his customers on it, and then we’ll make more money, right?”

“Oho, my salesman spirit is burning! I’m counting on you. If this keeps up, I’ll be involved even if it’s just a bunch of leftovers. Deal!”

The two of them shook hands again.

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“Furuta-san, your Ma Nuga meat is really popular! Could you teach me how to make it later?”

Furuta was turning and twisting a frying pan in front of the kitchen fires.

He had infiltrated this kitchen as a substitute chef. The maids he was talking to were busy running back and forth between the kitchen and the guest tables. Furuta replied:

“Alright. In exchange, why don’t you introduce a few of the guests to me? Most connoisseurs have their own preferred tastes. Ladies, for example, would prefer sweeter stuff. And if possible, I hope you can go into detail as well as telling me where they’re from.”

“Yay~ well, today’s guests are mostly military. Is that enough?”

“More details would be better. Young officers generally prefer saltier flavors, while you need to cut down the oil and salt for older soldiers and flavor with spices instead. If possible, I’d like to know their names as well.”

“Mm. Got it. Then, I’ll keep my ears open.”

After the maid finished, she picked up the tray of meat Furuta had just finished roasting, and took it back to the banquet.

After that, a very rude Zorzal barged into the kitchen.

“Who made this Ma Nuga meat?!”

The great shout startled Furuta for a moment. After all, he was an infiltrator, so he had to be wary of being found out. The fear of being exposed clutched at his heart.

And then, Zorzal noticed the other chefs were looking at Furuta. He stalked towards him with surprising speed.

‘No good. Does he suspect me? Is my cover blown?’

The more he thought about it, the closer his hand strayed to the 9mm pistol stowed under his apron.

However, it would seem his worries were misplaced. Zorzal patted Furuta on the shoulder.

“Was it you, then?”

“Y-yes. Yes, I made it!”

“I’ve been looking for you for a while. I think you cooked at Piña’s party, right? No, I know it. I can’t forget that flavor.”

“Eh, ah, yes, I have cooked for Princess Piña before.”

Furuta drew himself up and stood still.

“I knew it. This taste is fantastic. Actually, I have a job for you. Come to the palace tomorrow. You can do that, right?”

This was as good as saying, “I won’t take no for an answer”. For some time now, Zorzal’s attitude was a prideful one that brooked no refusal. Then Zorzal grabbed the freshly-made Ma Nuga meat nearby and walked away.

Furuta was stiff with tension. Just watching Zorzal leave was all he could do.

After that, the Warrior Bunny Zorzal was pulling behind him gave Furuta a look that seemed more like an appraisal.

“Ah, who’s that?”

The maid who had just returned to the kitchen shrugged.

“You mean that Warrior Bunny? I have no idea. She’s probably a pleasure slave his Highness took a liking to. Normally, he drags her everywhere. But her eyes are pretty arrogant. I don’t know what his Highness did to her, but she’s just a Warrior Bunny.”

Judging by what the maid said, Furuta was not the only one whom she looked at that way.

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Two Phantom jets soared through the sky of the Special Region, like silver swords.

Above the clouds.

The sun shone down on them, against the backdrop of an azure sky. With nothing to block the sunlight, the Phantom jets’ metal skins heated up under the scorching rays of the sun.

“Currently at angels 10.”

The two-plane flight maintained their high altitude.

Several lines appeared on the copilot’s HUD. Kurihama, the copilot, adjusted his course in response to his fuel consumption.

The pilot Kamikoda maintained his situational awareness with mechanical efficiency. Behind and to the side, their fellow aircraft was in charge of determining their heading.

“Kamikoda, 10 minutes until the border. Our speed is 280 knots, bearing 190. Turn Heading Now.”

“Oh...”

“Roger.”

His partner craft followed the turn beautifully.

“Complete.”

Kurihama adjusted the flight systems with computer-like efficiency, to the point where normal people might be frustrated by having to put in the sheer effort that Kurihama was making.

However, this way, they would not have to worry about going off course because they had lost their bearings. In addition, this decision brought out the greatest ability of the plane, which relieved Kamikoda.

They soared through the virgin sky.

Since there was no GPS navigation network here, they had to rely on maps and landmarks, as well as their position as calculated by their instruments. After that, they would determine their heading, and finally, they would plot their course based on the weather reports and their fuel consumption. Kurihama handled all of these, except for combat operations.

Because of this, they could show off the Phantoms’ full power.

Because of this, Kamikoda and the others could be here.

“It’s been three days already. We should be able to see it by now, right?”

“Well, if you see it, don’t launch an attack. We’re just going to evaluate its fighting ability.”

“Got it.”

“Well, we say that, but if the unexpected happens, we’ll be counting on you, Kamikoda-san.”

The voice of Mizuhara from the partner craft came over his earphones.

“Oi, that’s enough, jii-san, you’re too old for words like that. Mind yourself a little, okay?”

Just as Nishimoto made his joke, there was a ping on the sensors.

“Radar contact, bearing 127. Altitude 3250. Combat Maneuvering, go!”

“Oh.”

Kamikoda made as if to flip a switch, and tilted the flaps of his craft, lowering its nose. The engines made a great noise as he pushed the throttle to the maximum.

The horizon loomed ahead of him like a wall. That was correct. It was just like a wall. The powerful G-forces crushed their bodies as they plunged toward the ground through a hole in the clouds.

“Huh. Target’s at 180, altitude unchanged. It’s close, and it’s definitely alive. Radar returns are way too weak. Its RCS is small enough that it could count as a stealth aircraft.”

“Huh, in other words, we have to close in on it. All right, we’ll do this by the book and hit it from behind.”

He breathed with his diaphragm to withstand the Gs, and at the same time, he finished his preparations, along with his copilot.

The other plane would be orbiting high above to observe the battle. In addition, they would provide support in the event it was needed. Apart from that, it would not move much while completing its mission.

The Phantom tore through the air and its engine roared.

The Dragon’s red-scaled body appeared in the center of the HUD (heads-up display). The way it glided on air currents was oddly beautiful.

“That’s the one.”

“Target sighted. Identified as Special Region Type A Dangerous Beast, AKA Dragon. Target confirmed.”

In this world, the strong would devour the weak.

In a sense, the dragon was just feeding itself. Assigning it the label of “Dangerous Beast” for its activities was merely human arrogance. In this world, the Dragon was simply an apex predator.

However, humanity disregarded that fact and hunted it. They would not permit it to roam around and kill people. That too was a purely human reason.

“If we want to, we should be able to hit it.”

“Even if we hit it, we won’t be able to bring it down. The 20mm will be as effective against it as a water pistol. Don’t make pointless attacks. We don’t want to show all our cards to the enemy.

“Roger.”

As planned, Kamijoda opened the plane’s throttle to the max and approached the Dragon from the rear before buzzing past it at close range. In other words, he was taunting it.

Caught in the jet’s powerful slipstream, the startled Dragon briefly lost control of its limbs.

Kamikoda did a barrel roll and ended up in the Dragon’s vicinity, while maintaining the same speed and heading as the Dragon. It was like hitting a dog on the head — it would snap at you. The disruption of its flight seemed to have wounded the Dragon’s pride, and it immediately gave chase to the Phantom.

“Hey, I think we made it mad.”

15,000 feet above the ground, Nishimoto watched as the Dragon chased after Kamikoda before speaking to Mizuhara.

“It’s got a tight turn radius.”

“That’s because it can flex its body. Looks like we can’t dogfight it.”

“Next, we’ll see how well it can climb.”

Kamikoda opened the throttle and began to gain altitude.

The Dragon continued its pursuit. Kamikoda teased the Dragon by letting it almost catch up, and then he applied more power to pull ahead. All the while, he was observing the Dragon’s limits.

“Still climbing at 3600, 3700, 3800 with wings. Its forward thrust is a lot higher than expected.”

“Next, sudden descent.”

The climbing jet suddenly angled its nose down into a steep dive.

Drawn by gravity, the plane began to free-fall. The Dragon also stopped beating its wings, tucking them close to its body as it plummeted after the Phantom.

“Crap! Kamikoda, more thrust!”

This was the advantage of the Dragon’s ability to freely control airflow with its wings.

It closed the distance in moments.

“Altitude, 1000, 700, 500”

Although the lock-on alarm did not sound in the cockpit, the two of them felt a surge of tension that was pretty close. In an attempt to shake the Dragon, Kamikoda skimmed across the ground and pulled up after that.

As expected, the Dragon gave chase, but it seemed to understand that it could not climb fast enough, so it gave up the chase and hovered in mid-air.

“It can hover…”

“It’s on par with a VSTOL aircraft, that’s for sure.”

“From its mobility, it looks to be about the same as an attack helicopter. Pretty smart, too.”

Kamikoda levelled out his plane, and maintained his altitude at 2000 feet.

“Kurihama, done with your assessments?

“Ah, basically.”

“Hm, then it should be our turn, then.”

“At least, I want to say that.”

Kurihama’s chin was trembling as he said that. After all, Kamikoda had pushed the airframe to its limits several times.

“Battles are not won with airframe performance. You need spirit as well. We need to see what this fellow can do. Plus we can’t chicken out and leave the job half-finished. Right?”

As Kamikoda said this, he steered his plane until he was facing the Dragon.

The Phantom fighter was rapidly closing in on the Dragon.

He could see the Dragon’s face in the HUD.

“Looks like it’s only got one eye. Put us on a collision course.”

The Dragon’s body grew swiftly in their field of vision.

“This is good intel,” Kurihama said. That said, he did not know how useful that blind spot of the Dragon’s would be when they closed in.

Full throttle, and then afterburners.

The sound barrier shattered, creating an explosion and a shock wave

This was a game of chicken.

The Dragon lazily spread its wings while keeping its body still, and then it flapped forward while keeping its body straight. It moved regally, as befitting of a king of the sky.

“Then, how about this?”

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The aircrew chief glared at Kamikoda and Kurihama.

“We don’t have many spares, and a lot of the parts are nearing the end of their service life.”

“Yeah, we know that.”

Kamikoda and Kurihama’s planes were well scorched. The canopy glass had turned cloudy under the effects of high temperatures.

Although one could not tell from the outside, the radar and other electronics were damaged from the heat.

The aircrew chief did his inspection and confirmed the grave damage both planes had sustained. The fuel systems showed signs of heat damage as well.

It was sheer luck that they had avoided its razor-sharp claws.

Kamikoda clenched his fists.

“That cheating bastard, it used its fire breath in a no-weapons duel! How unmanly is that?!”

“You moron, do you think a giant lizard cares about that? Besides, that fellow might be female.”