

— *March 21, 1905. Aigis & Frieda's room, 9:23 A.M.* —

Aigis sat at the foot of Frieda's bed. Sitting criss-crossed, her nose was deep in a book titled, "Psychokinetik und gesunde Körper: Wie Gesundheit und Wohlbefinden helfen, Kräfte aufblühen zu lassen. (Psychokinetics and Healthy Bodies: How Health and Wellness Help Powers Flourish)." Aigis got up before the sun even had a chance to rear its head over the horizon to tip-toe run over to the study so as to not wake Johanna and Vergil. She desired to read everything she possibly could about her Psychokinetic heritage. Most five-year-olds were never awake this early. Aigis and Frieda both didn't attend public school because Vergil forbade Aigis from attending, although it isn't sure why Frieda was never enrolled. Aigis couldn't contain her excitement. She wanted to learn more about this Ancient race of magic users, and how to go to this "Promised Land" so that she could live among them in eternal peace. At least, that's what her mother told her.

"Hey, Frieda," Aigis called. "Did you know Psychokin-kin-ethics aren't sick as long as normal people because the Aurae in their bodies makes their immune systems super-duper strong?"

Frieda didn't answer. Aigis placed the book on her lap.

"Erm, Frieda?" Aigis asked, scooting closer to her bed. Still, no response. A few seconds passed and a small, plagued whimper crawled its way into Aigis' ears. She stood up and peered over Frieda's bed. From the bedsheets, she could feel that they were wet, most likely from sweat. Her breathing was labored, and her face was bright red. Aigis hesitantly put her hand over Frieda's small forehead. It was uncomfortably warm, like a gas stove beginning to heat up.

"Oh no." Aigis panicked, already feeling her breathing quicken itself. She ran out of the room to go find the nearest adult. In the hallway, she saw Irma wiping off a vase with a

flower-decorated rag. Aigis ran up to her and forcefully yanked on her apron with so much force, it nearly came undone. Irma shrieked, nearly dropping the vase, before composing herself.

“F-Fraulein Aigis! What has gotten into you, young lady?”

“Fraulein Irma, it’s Frieda! I think she’s sick!”

Irma gently pushed Aigis’ arm off of her apron. She then patted around her back blindly until she could feel the cloth of her apron tie tickling her fingertips. She pulled it behind her back and tied the bow in the front.

“Sick?”

“Yeah, a fever!”

“Have you told your mama or papa yet?” The young maid asked. Aigis shook her head.

“I just needed someone to tell and you were closest. Just, please come quick!”

Irma grabbed Aigis’ miniature hand. Aigis towed Irma behind her and brought her over to Frieda’s bed. Irma let go of Aigis’ hand and began inspecting the sweat-stained sheets and Frieda’s body.

“She’s in a lot of pain,” Aigis said solemnly. “It’s like I can hear it in my head.”

Irma was confused. Sure, Frieda did whimper or moan occasionally from how the fever plagued her, but from the way Aigis panicked and described her condition, it made her seem like a deathbed patient. Irma placed Frieda’s sheets back over her.

“Okay, I’ll go make her some tea. Aigis, why don’t you do me a favor and wet a cloth from the bathroom and put it on her forehead? You can be my little nurse today.”

Aigis eagerly nodded and ran off to the upstairs bathroom to wet a towel. Irma went downstairs to head over to the kitchen. The image of seeing Frieda sick replayed in her mind. The way she was drowning in a pool of sweat, so sick that even opening her eyes had as much

labor to it as pushing a boulder, the way her breathing was labored and pained. She wanted to ease the four-year-old. Put her mind at ease. See her happy, smiling and running around the house again. Some elderflower tea with honey would surely fix her right up.

Irma sprinted inside of the kitchen and immediately looked inside of the icebox. Johanna was in the kitchen reading the newspaper. She placed it on the table and looked over at Irma.

“What are you doing?” She asked with a steady dignity. Irma stayed her head and turned around towards her female employer.

“It appears that the little Fraulein has taken ill, so I was making her some tea and—”

Johanna cut her off with a sharp hand up. “Aigis?”

“No, Frieda. We think she has a fever, possibly from falling in that freezing cold river yesterday. I wanted to make her some tea—”

“No need.” Johanna sharply interrupted, not raising her voice.

“Pardon?”

“That will not be necessary. Leave her be.”

Irma turned around at her boss. She was at war with her facial muscles, trying her damndest not to show her eyebrow raising.

“But... She has a fever.”

“I am aware of that fact, yes.”

Irma lost the battle with her facial muscles, as her emotional mask crumbled and revealed her pure confusion. Possibly due to her age and upbringing, Irma never had much of a filter when it came to emotions. She had just enough to make sure she didn't get herself fired for something foolish. But she was always honest with the Schumacher family.

“With all due respect, gnädige Frau, a fever is serious, and could possibly kill her if we ignore her.”

“Just trust me.” Johanna said with a gentle smile. It was an uncharacteristic smile for her. Johanna wore the same statue-like stoic expression around the house. Her voice only conveyed one emotion: Objectivity.

“Alright.” Irma squeaked out, albeit a bit unnerved. Johanna could sense the discord in her voice, so she patted the empty seat across from her at the dinner table. Irma slowly got into the chair, the wood creaking a bit. Johanna returned to her newspaper.

“How long have you been working here now?” The matriarch began, keeping her eyes on the grayscale print.

“In a few months, 7 years.” Irma replied, her voice still wavering. Johanna chuckled.

“How do you enjoy working here?” She asked as she flipped the page. Irma felt her lips drying up a bit. Her pupils darted from the icebox to the gas-powered stove.

“It’s a dream. This house is big and elegant, Aigis and Frieda are two of the most angelic children I’ve ever met, you and Herr Schumacher are both generous employers, and the pay is more than satisfactory. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

“That’s nice,” Johanna began. She folded her newspaper and set it down, now giving her undivided attention to her employee. She looked deeply into her eyes, and the gaze caused the maid to become nervous. “Where are you from, again? I always seem to forget.”

“Hanover.” Irma dutifully responded.

“That’s quite far. How did a young girl like you end up in the countryside?”

Irma bashfully moved her bangs. Johanna had looked like she'd been in a sour mood for years, and the only words she gave to Irma were orders. She had never asked about Irma's personal life... Well, ever. "I'm sure you wouldn't want to hear about it."

Johanna waved her off. Her expression was one of curiosity and intrigue, like a child wanting a story read to her. "If I didn't care, I wouldn't have asked."

Irma readjusted herself in her seat. "Well, my family in Hanover wasn't exactly the wealthiest. We got by fine enough, but we always cut it close. My father worked in a factory and his boss had a son my age looking for a wife. He and his coworkers brought their daughters to his boss for his choosing, and his eyes fell on me."

"That's good, is it not? You could've had a rich husband instead of doing menial house chores." Johanna argued as she took a bite out of a danish on the table. Irma lowered her head.

"I'll admit, he was pretty handsome. But I wasn't too interested."

"So what happened? How come you aren't married to him?"

Irma hesitated. "One night before I went to bed, I overheard my father and his boss talking from downstairs. Apparently, he had multiple wives before me. They... all committed suicide. Every single one of them. His father complained about him being too authoritarian and driving them mad. After that, I told my father that I wasn't going to marry him. He got angry with me. Yelled at me, slapped me. He told me if I still refused to marry him by my 16th birthday, I would be disowned for betraying the family and thrown onto the streets like the traitor I am."

"And exactly that happened?"

Irma nodded, her eyes getting cloudy. Her throat started to ache a bit. She swallowed a knot in her throat. "I never want to go back on the streets. It was cold, dark, and it rained a lot. Every day, I was lucky if I ate a loaf of bread. And it was always moldy."

Johanna rubbed her fingernail through the groove of the table. "Ruheplatz is a very small and remote town. I doubt you found out about this place by happenstance."

Irma placed a hand on her cheek. "It was thanks to Herr Schumacher. I happened to run into him as he left a local pub. He told me about how he and his wife were trying for a baby, and so he asked me if I could do housekeeping work. He promised that I would have a warm place to sleep, a hot meal every day, and enough money for clothes and necessities. He paid for my train ticket here, and now here we are."

"Hold a moment, Irma. When did you run into my husband?"

Irma tapped a finger on her chin, looking up. "I want to say that was the summer of 1898. Pretty soon after I was kicked out. Why?"

"He told me he had business in Anhalt." Johanna cursed conspiratorially to herself, quiet enough so Irma couldn't overhear.

"Frau Schumacher?" Irma called out, her face now showing a hint of fear. Johanna regained her composure.

"Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?" She inquired, regaining her smile. A tiny bead of sweat appeared on Irma's forehead. Her stomach churned a bit.

"Nothing particularly, except how much I enjoy working for you."

Johanna nodded gracefully. "You're a great help around here, Irma. I trust you."

"Thank you."

“I don’t know what I’d do if that trust were ever broken.” She cackled cryptically. Irma got the feeling this wasn’t just a normal chat. Something in Johanna was different, and she didn’t like it. In fact, this had probably been a change going on for years. She remembered the autumn she came to Ruheplatz and began working for Vergil and Johanna as a 16-year-old, nervous but eager to begin her new job. Johanna was a lot more cheery and had a glowing look about her. Irma doesn’t know exactly when that began to fade, but it was obvious that something had changed. The two sat in silence with only the sounds of the grandfather clock ticking from the living area. Eventually, Johanna got up and left the dining room, leaving Irma by herself.

— *One hour later* —

Irma, despite Johanna insisting otherwise, still decided to make tea for Frieda. She was going to try to sneak a few pieces of bread and jam with it. Irma had a burning desire to check on and take care of the sick child, even if Johanna was right and she’d be fine without it. She placed the cup of elderflower tea on a saucer and held it with one hand. In the other, the place with the bread and jam. As she walked up the stairs and made it to the second floor hallway, Johanna stood at the top of the stairs with her arms crossed.

“What are you doing?” Johanna sternly demanded, her face contorting. Irma nearly dropped her food. She nervously laughed. Her eyes darted from Johanna, back to the tea. Her grip on the teacup became tighter and her knees were shaking. She didn’t want to break the Schumachers’ 21 goldmark tea set.

“I thought Fraulein Frieda would want some tea to drink.” Irma replied, not looking Johanna in the eyes. She was sweating. Johanna sighed and signaled Irma to follow her. They walk over to Aigis and Frieda’s room. Johanna reached for the door and it cracked open. Inside,

Aigis and Frieda sat on the floor, singing Backe, backe Kuchen, clapping rhythmically and hi-fiving.

Ima couldn't believe what she saw. Frieda, the sick, feverish, delirious girl who looked like she could hardly sit up, was playing like nothing was wrong. Not a trace of sweat, and she was breathing normally. She was the very picture of health.

“I-I don’t understand. It’s only been one hour, NOBODY could naturally recover that quickly!”

“Yeah. Weird, huh?” Johanna snorted. It was clear she at least suspected something. Irma turned to her boss, smiling with relief.

“I should’ve never doubted you,” Irma cheerfully commented, slightly adjusting her apron. “I bet it feels great to be right about this kind of thing as a mother.”

“Not this time.” Johanna bit back, not changing her facial expression or her tone. She sharply turned around and walked away before Irma could stop her. Irma placed the tea on a small table in their room, whenever Frieda would be ready to drink it. Silently, she went down to the study to dust off some old books, giving her time to mull over what happened this morning.