

— *December 23rd, 1917. Schumacher House, 2:14 P.M.* —

Irma had just finished tossing firewood into the place. A bit of fire flashed in her face. One thing the 35-year-old never understood about Vergil was his hatred for technology. Even in her old home in Hanover, she had a gas stove. A fireplace just felt like primitive technology to her. It took forever for the flames to warm a house, and they weren't as convenient as a gas burner. A log fell and hit the grate. Sparks flew and a few landed on her skirt. She swatted them out, cursing at the red spots they left behind.

The booming clang of the door knocker outside caught her attention. She pranced over to the door and opened it. Standing outside in the snow was Aigis. She held her pickelhaube helmet in her arm. She had a sheepish look on her face, cheeks and nose red from the cold. Oswald stood next to her with a giant warm smile. Both of them wore a long gray coat over their imperial soldier uniforms.

“Hey,” Aigis said, clearing her throat before continuing. “Irma.”

It took a second for Irma to register who was standing in front of her. She stepped out into the biting cold and extended a gentle hand up to her cheek. Irma caressed it softly, making Aigis' eyes widen. Her body stiffened.

“Aigis?” She wondered aloud. Aigis didn't move, letting her take it all in. Irma moved her hands down and embraced her in a tight hug. Tears welled in her eyes, and she buried her face into her chest.

“Thank God! You're safe!”

Aigis uncomfortably patted Irma's back. “I missed you too.”

Irma pulled away from her stepdaughter. She took one good look at Aigis. “You weren't fighting in those awful trenches, were you?”

“No, no. My job is more like national security.” The 17-year-old made up on the spot, without giving away too many details.

“You look different.”

“I had to cut my hair so it’d fit under the helmet. The imperial army didn’t want anyone knowing I was a woman, so...”

“I see,” Irma nodded. She glanced over at Oswald. “Who’s he?”

“Hi! Oswald Volkmann, her friend.” Oswald greeted warmly, shaking Irma’s hand with both of his. “I’m in the same unit as her.”

“Irma Altergott.”

“Nice to meet you, Frau Aigis’ mom.”

“Stepmom.” Aigis coughed, correcting him.

“Frau Aigis’ stepmom.” He quickly corrected, letting go of her hand.

Aigis swayed back and forth. “So, the Battalion let us have some time off until the new year. Would it be okay if perhaps Oswald and I stayed here?”

“Absolutely. Your room upstairs is just as it was before you left.” Irma stepped back inside of the warm home, letting Aigis and Oswald in.

“Wait, where will he sleep?” Aigis spoke up, pointing to Oswald. He modestly chuckled, waving her off.

“I’m fine with the couch.”

Irma wagged her finger furiously. “No way. No guest of ours is being sent to the couch,” She approached Oswald and patted his shoulder. “This young man’s sleeping in the bed with me.”

Oswald blinked, trying to register her statement. His mouth hung open, but no words came out. All he could utter was a very confused,

“Huh?”

“You heard me. As head of the house, I need to make sure all my guests are nice and comfortable.”

“O-Okay.” Oswald cracked a nervous smile. He wasn’t eager to experience this, but also wouldn’t say no to the offer.

Aigis went upstairs to her old room. The room she and Frieda shared as kids. Irma said it had been exactly the same since the day she left. And upon opening the door, she was right. The same old window, the same old bookshelf on the left wall, the same old dresser. In the same bed on the right wall, Frieda laid on her bed. She stared up at the blue canopy above her, lost in her thoughts. When she heard the door close, she sat up. Her eyes before seeing Aigis were so listless. Judging by the state of her raven-black hair and clothes, she spent most of her time in that bed. This was likely the first time in months her eyes had any semblance of life.

“Aigis?” Frieda cautiously sat up in the bed, trying to determine if she was just seeing things. Aigis gave a half-hearted sheepish wave, a tiny smile on her face. Frieda scrambled off her bed and dashed toward her sister. Aigis slowly opened her arms, expecting a hug. She shut her eyes, bracing for the warmth of a younger sister’s embrace. What she didn’t expect was a powerful kick to the shin. For a 17-year-old girl, Frieda had the kick of a karate master. Aigis stumbled backwards before falling over sideways. The thud that shook the house when she landed on the floor was accentuated by the Gewehr rifle on her back and the Luger on her thigh, both clattering loudly as she made impact with the hardwood floor. Oswald and Irma paused their conversation as the rattle shook the chandelier above them.

“I’ve been worried SICK about you!” Frieda hollered at her.

“I wasn’t—” Aigis groaned between winces “Gone that long.”

“It’s been eight MONTHS! I thought you died!” Frieda shouted, her voice quivering. Her hands balled up into fists as she stood over Aigis. Her lip trembled and tears threatened to come out. Aigis picked herself up and brushed the dust off her uniform. She didn’t even try to defend herself, knowing her little sister was right.

“And what the hell are you doing wearing a Golden Battalion uniform?” Frieda interrogated. She was not letting Aigis off the hook. Aigis didn’t want to tell her about her failed ambush, the betrayal of their own people, finding Vergil and shooting him in the middle of Berlin, and her new position.

“I’m... undercover.”

Frieda raised an eyebrow.

“Undercover?”

“Yeah. I wanted to, um, destroy the Battalion from the inside. Gain their trust, find when their guard is down, you know.”

Frieda nodded slowly. Aigis looked a little too guilty when she said that. Sweating a little and her lips being a tad too dry. She decided not to dwell on it, at least not for now. She hugged Aigis, burying the side of her face in her uniform tunic.

“Just promise me you won’t just leave again without saying anything.”

Aigis patted Frieda’s back. “I’ll be home until new year’s. I’ll never leave without letting you know again. I promise.”