

— *July 14th, 1925. Etta's House, 10:30 P.M.* —

Aigis and Etta sat on the bottom steps of the house, both holding a glass of juice. They watched as Hilda ran around the house, flinging her toys around the house with her Psychokinesis. The two of them watched as she did, sipping on their drinks.

“Look at her,” Etta laughed, her frail, elderly frame jiggling as she shook her head. She had long ago given up trying to tell Hilda to behave. “It felt like yesterday I felt her in my arms. Now look at her, like an energetic dog.”

“Pretty advanced magic for someone her age. Not even I was that advanced.” Aigis commented, bringing the glass closer to her mouth.

“Despite her social anxiety and lively nature, she's quite the precocious little girl. Her brain grows more than her eyebrows.” Etta remarked, watching as Hilda flung a toy into the air and caught it again with her magic. The 8-year-old still carried that angry expression due to her large eyebrows, but Aigis can tell she was still having fun.

The young woman looked at Etta. “I've been meaning to ask. Are you and Hilda related in any way?”

Etta's expression became more serious. “By blood, no.”

Aigis raised an eyebrow. “Adopted?”

The older woman nodded, a wistful smile appearing on her face. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “Her parents were good friends with my son. I often babysitted Hilda, so you could say we became close as well.”

“If you don't mind me asking, what happened to her parents? You keep talking about them in the past tense...” Aigis asked, her curiosity rising. Etta sighed, a solemn expression on her face. Aigis can tell this was a very sore subject, and regretted bringing it up.

“I’m sorry, you don’t have to answer that if you don’t want to.” Aigis said quickly, trying to salvage the situation. Etta shook her head, looking up at her.

“No, it’s alright,” The old woman comforted Aigis. “It was about a year before the Great War ended. Hilda was a few months old at the time. Her parents and a friend of theirs went on a trip. A simple vacation. However, they never came back. Only their friend did.”

“What did the friend say?”

Etta paused. “A bunch of soldiers in golden spiked helmets came by. One of them pointed, and all the others began shooting at them. It was only luck that their friend managed to escape. And since I was already babysitting her at the time, Hilda was left in my care. Since then, she has lived here.”

Aigis stared blankly ahead. The story Etta told sounded awfully familiar. Golden spiked helmets. She remembered sensing a couple by this mountain trail and pointing at them. She shook her head. Surely it was just a coincidence.

She quickly changed the subject. “Your son. Was he the boy in the photos in the room I slept in?”

“Yes. It’s my fault he’s gone,” Etta muttered, a guilty expression on her face. Aigis blinked. “He was a sweet little boy too.”

“I’m sure it’s not.” Aigis tried to reassure.

“It is. I have to live with that fact,” She looked into Aigis, the irises in her eyes resembling teal discs like bioluminescent lilly pads. “You know the struggles of us Psychokinetics nowadays? Why we’re so isolated?”

“Yes, I am aware.”

“When my son was born, I knew he’d have to face hardships in life. My husband and I were really hard on him. Made him train all day, every day. Forbade him from having too many friends or getting too attached to them. Filled his head with doom and gloom about how hellish the real world was,” She listed off the items, shaking her head. Aigis can see the regret and guilt written all over the old woman. She tried to smile, but it wasn’t doing a good job of convincing Aigis she wasn’t sad. “He was just a young boy, we should’ve let him be a kid. But we were scared. Scared of what the outside world would do to him, if he couldn’t defend himself.”

The older woman paused. Aigis waited, letting Etta gather her thoughts. The older woman looked away, a melancholy expression on her face.

“What happened to him?” Aigis asked softly.

“He just ran off one day. Said he had a solution to everything. With a deranged look in his eye as well,” Etta shook her head. She then looked over at Hilda, who was still playing happily. “I guess that’s part of why I took in Hilda. Gave me a chance to start over. The right way. That’s also why I started that library. Fear is not a teacher or a motivator. It simply creates hostages. People choose how they want to learn. I simply wish to provide an avenue for said path.”

Aigis swished her glass of juice slowly. Etta smiled, a wistful look on her face.

“Your son’s name was Vivi?”

“No. It was a nickname for him I came up with and it stuck.”

“What was his name?”

Etta fiddled with her locket necklace. “Vergil.”

Aigis nearly choked on her juice. She looked up, coughing. The older woman stared back at her with wide eyes.

“Did you say Vergil?” Aigis gasped.

“Yes,” Etta nodded. “Last time I saw him, he ran off with this cute blonde girl. I forgot what her name was, it started with a J. Wherever they are, I hope they’re happy together.”

Aigis fell silent, the revelation washing over her. She could feel herself becoming cold even under the warm night and the SA uniform. Her armband became itchy as well. She could hear the blood rushing through her veins.

“I’m sorry, but I’m really tired, so can I...?”

Etta was taken aback, but she didn’t fight Aigis. “Oh, sure. Thank you for listening to this old bat rant.”

“Not a problem.” Aigis choked out, trying her damndest not to throw up. She immediately went to the old pictures of Vergil. She looked for one where the boy was smiling. She found one of him holding an ice cream cone. And sure enough, the boy had a gap between his two front teeth. It disturbed her. She barely recognized him because he was smiling. It actually made him appear as if he were a completely different person. She trudged over to the bed and jumped on it, staring at the ceiling. So this is where that rat was born.