

— *December 25th, 1917. Dining room, 5:30 P.M.* —

“Show me the trick again, Oswald!” Frieda leaned forward, looking the young man in the eye.

“Are you sure? I’ve already done it five times.” Oswald chuckled.

“It’s so fun!” She insisted. “Please?”

Oswald chuckled. “Alright, but only because you’re Aigis’ sister. And since she’s cool, that automatically makes you cool too.”

“No, Oswald. *You’re* cool!” Frieda then slammed on the dinner table, making the 18-year-old soldier jump a bit. “Now show me the trick!”

“Frieda,” Irma gestured, lowering one hand to tell Frieda to calm down. “Give our guest some breathing room.”

“Me? You’re the one sleeping in the same bed as him, mom!” Frieda puffed her cheeks out. Aigis reached over and patted down her shoulder.

“Forgive us, Oswald. She was kind of a shut-in.” Aigis tried to rationalize.

“‘*She*’?” Frieda asked, offended. Aigis rolled her eyes, scoffing.

“*We* were kind of shut-ins.”

Irma shook her head and sighed. “I hope they’re not giving you too much trouble, Oswald. This is the most hyper I’ve seen Frieda in a while.”

“It’s okay,” Oswald patted his own chest. “I was an only child, so I actually like this. It makes me feel like part of the family.”

Oswald reached into his satchel and pulled out a silver one mark coin. He held it by its edges in his right hand, while showing his bare left hand. He clenched his right hand and put it in his left. Frieda gazed at Oswald’s sleight of hand while Aigis took a sip of some juice in a glass.

Oswald moved both hands, his right hand moving up while his left went down. He moved his hands together, before showing his right hand first. The coin had vanished. Then, he opened his left hand. Nothing. Frieda gasped, while Aigis looked away and smiled, not wanting to reveal that she saw how Oswald did the trick.

“And the coin is,” Oswald riffed, gesturing towards the stove. “Drumroll, please.”

Irma used her ladle and knife and tapped it on the kitchen counter rapidly to simulate a dramatic drum roll. Oswald leaned forward and shot a hand near Aigis’ left ear. She flinched, not expecting him to get that close. The young soldier pulled back and revealed a silver coin in between his fingers. He gave the coin to Frieda.

“I didn’t agree to being your magician’s assistant.” Aigis half-jokingly chastised Oswald.

“Decided to do something fresh for my sixth time.” He chuckled.

“Can you please teach me the trick, Oswald?” Frieda pleaded.

“A magician never reveals his secrets,” He wagged a finger at the teen girl. Frieda slouched in her wooden chair, pouting. Oswald smirked, patting her on the head. “But, I’m not a magician, so I would be glad to show you, little sis.”

““Little sis’?”

“Um, is it alright if I call you that, Frieda? I just think it would be fun if I had a little sister.”

“What about Aigis? You’re a few months older than her.”

Oswald scratched the back of his head. “Well, she treats me more like I’m the little brother.”

Frieda beamed at him. “I would love to call you my brother, Oswald.”

Oswald gestured toward himself, signaling her to come closer. Frieda scooted her chair closer to Oswald's at lightning speed, making an ear-splitting screeching noise. She then leaned in, eyes fixated on the silver coin.

"Okay, so this trick is called 'The French Drop', and what you want to do is..."

Aigis decided to tune out the duo and focused on her bitter juice that she was drinking. She's had apple juice many times throughout her life. She used to look forward to the sweet, creamy flavor of the drink. But it seemed ever since the Golden Battalion fiasco, the flavor was beginning to sour in her mouth. She wasn't even sure if her taste buds had changed or she was just becoming less fond of the drink. She jerked her head around to shake off the sour feeling. She felt a gentle nudge on her shoulder. Irma hovered over her from behind the chair.

"Are you sure you don't want to take off your military uniform? It looks uncomfortable."

Aigis waved her off. "I've gotten used to it, Irma. Thanks."

Irma moved from behind Aigis and stood next to her. "Frieda's been so much happier ever since you came back. She's just been moping around the house not saying anything to me. I would always try and coax her, but she would just brush me off and hide herself in her room. I would even have to bring food up to her."

Aigis looked at the cheery duo.

"How do you know all of these coin tricks?" Frieda rested both hands on her cheeks.

"Every year, we went to see my aunt and uncle in Mainz. My older cousin Emil used to teach me a different coin trick every time. Little Oswald's mind was blown every time."

Aigis tuned them out again and looked back to Irma. "Glad to see she and Oswald are getting along. They have so much in common."

Irma looked at the floor. Her brow furrowed as she seemed to be lost in thought. Looking up again, she blurted out, “Aigis, have you been sleeping well?”

“I’ve been sleeping fine.”

“*Just* fine?” Irma raised an eyebrow. Aigis sighed.

“Why are you asking?”

“It might just be my imagination, but you’ve looked more tired than you did before you left.”

Aigis looked into the reflection of her golden pickelhaube. The circles around her eyes looked like mud pits, and her skin was slightly more pallid than usual. Not by much, but just enough for there to be a noticeable difference.

“I’m sure it’s nothing.” The young blonde tried to brush off. Irma was still not convinced. She knelt down to look Aigis in the eye.

“Aigis, you know you can come to me for anything.”

“I know. And I appreciate it, Irma.”

Irma nodded and smiled. Aigis smiled back, but a very weak and fragile one. She just wanted to enjoy this moment with her family. It would’ve at least made up for Frieda’s 17th birthday. Irma pulled Aigis in close for a kiss on the forehead.

“Merry Christmas.” She said, before walking away to set up dinner. Aigis took another sip of the juice, now realizing how sickly sweet the flavor had become.

“Hey, Irma?” Aigis called out. She didn’t turn around. She simply stared forward, to nowhere in particular. Irma turned her head a bit. The room was silent, save for Oswald and Frieda still chatting it up.

“Merry Christmas to you too.” She finished, forcing her monotone voice to have any sort of emotion to it.