

— *August 25th, 1912. Ruheplatz Schoolyard, 3:30 P.M.* —

Aigis had given everyone in the hide and seek game a ten-minute head start. The moment she began the game, she had found Gisela. The apathetic 12-year-old bothered to not even hide, instead electing to lie on the grass. She never agreed to play the game. Aigis tapped her on the shoulder once, Gisela got up, threw her hands in the air, and walked back to the schoolhouse without a care in the world. Scratching her head, Aigis continued on with her search for the other children who had not come to school that day.

Karl-Heinz and Franz-Josef were not much harder for Aigis to come across. She had gone over near the Weser and found a log lying on the ground. As she was about to leave the area, she heard Karl-Heinz shout in pain. She turned back around to look at the log.

“Be quiet, you’re going to get us caught!” Franz-Josef scream-whispered at him.

“You hit me in my bad eye!” Karl-Heinz whined.

“What bad eye?!”

“The one you threw a rock at!”

“You’ll be fine, you big baby.” Were the last words of Franz-Josef before Aigis’ head peered into the hole at the top of the log, exposing the two boys and their hiding spot. Aigis cackled at the poor duo as they retreated back to the schoolhouse.

Otto and Frieda were the only two Aigis had yet to find. It wasn’t because she had that much trouble finding them or they went pretty far. She didn’t want to go and look for them. She knew Frieda would hate it if she went and found them while she and Otto were alone. Aigis thought of how Otto and Frieda could just stay there and enjoy themselves. It would make her happy if they were happy.

And then Frau Schlaeger came to Aigis and complained about Otto and Frieda being missing for two hours and that class had already ended. Aigis tried to cheekily buy more time, but Frau Schlaeger threatened the whole class with a clean smack on the wrist from her meterstick if she didn't find the two before four o'clock. Aigis responded with a shrug and pranced off into the wild.

Otto had his back to the wall of the hiding hole while Frieda lay on the ground out of boredom. Otto had to fight off the urge to nod off in the cave.

"You weren't kidding about this being the best hiding spot." Frieda sarcastically yawned.

"Why don't you get out then, you big baby?" Otto snarked.

Frieda sat up and looked at him, her eyes wide. Otto looked back, equally surprised. Neither of them expected the other to be so rude. They looked away, not knowing what to do next.

"I'm sorry, I—"

"No, it's my fault," Frieda sighed. "I'm just very hungry."

"No, blame me," Otto insisted. "I get snappy when I'm sleepy."

Frieda chuckled, crawling back to sit next to Otto. She looked up at the top of the hole to the hiding place.

"I'm glad you showed me this place."

Otto nodded, looking up with her. "It's nothing special. Just a place to keep my army stuff."

Frieda took one of her twin tails and began stroking it with both hands. "I went with you because I wanted to beat Aigis at hide and seek."

Otto leaned over and grabbed the Imperial German army helmet and put it on himself. The helmet was big on his head and half obscured his eyes. "Do you guys play often?"

"Sometimes. I hate it because she's too good at being a seeker. Somehow, she always knows where I am, and it's not fair."

"That's crazy." Otto adjusted his helmet so that his eyes were visible.

"It's true! And the worst part is somehow I can always tell when she's about to find me."

"How?"

"I dunno. It's like, I get a feeling that gets stronger the closer she is." Frieda gestured, trying to get a grasp on this phantom feeling. Otto took off the helmet and placed it on top of Frieda's head.

"Try this," He offered. "I call it the Anti-Aegis helmet."

Frieda smiled. She pushed the helmet forward and let it cover her eyes. She could barely see through the visor. Otto leaned over and pushed it up so she could see.

"It's heavy." She commented.

"Of course it is! It has to be impenetrable from the enemy."

"You should get another one. That way, we'll be matching!"

Otto chuckled, ruffling up his own hair. "When my dad comes back, he might have one for me."

Frieda took off the helmet with both hands and dropped it in front of her feet. Otto began scratching his arm.

"You know, being with you makes me feel great."

Frieda blushed, her ears growing hot. "What do you mean?"

“My dad is in the Imperial German army. He’s only home during holidays. He gives me some of the stuff from the military he doesn’t need, and I keep it here in the cave. You don’t seem to think it’s weird at all, and you’re just so cool.”

Frieda felt her face heat up as she looked away. “You think I’m cool?”

“Sure do.” Otto nodded fervently. The two fell into a silence again. After a bit of fiddling with the Mauser trigger, Otto spoke up again.

“My dad’s the reason I wanna be a soldier. I wanna be like him. He tells me stories about his friends, the battles he fought in, and all the medals he earned. One day, I want to join the army and be a soldier, too. I hope I get to be in the same regiment as him. Maybe even win an Iron Cross.”

“I think it’s noble,” Frieda admired. “Going out to protect your friends and family. That’s so awesome.”

Otto turned to Frieda. “So, if I’m protecting you from Aigis right now, does that mean I can consider this early army training.”

Frieda scooted closer to him. She hesitantly put her hand over his one on the ground. “If you want to.”

“Then I’m going for that Iron Cross.”

They giggled together. In that moment, even within the suffocating chamber of a hole in the ground with no clock or reference to sunlight, time stood still. It was a feeling neither of them had ever experienced before. In one way, they wanted to get away from each other as far as possible. At the same time, neither of them were in much of a hurry to move.

“I think I want to see the world.” Frieda said suddenly.

“Any place particularly?”

Frieda played with her fingers. “I remember Aigis wanting to see the world with her mom a few years ago.”

“What happened to her mom?”

“Ran away. We don’t know why,” She sighed. “I know Aigis wants to see the world outside of Germany. I want to go with her. Trying new food, seeing new sights, I want to do it all with her by my side.”

Otto’s eyes skirted to the side. “Soldiers move around all the time. So if I…”

“You what?”

Otto shook his head, chuckling nervously. “Nevermind. Forget I said anything.”

The two inched closer with her hands now locking. Two hours in this hole went from an excruciatingly long time waiting for Aigis to find them to not enough time to talk. Frieda at this moment regretted every time she said Otto’s hair was so bright, it burned her eyes. Otto wanted to apologize every time a ball, a piece of paper, or some small object hit Frieda. They never said it out loud, their throats were shut tight. Nothing could interrupt this moment.

“FOUND YOU!” A shrill voice bellowed into their hole. Frieda jumped, smacking Otto right in his nose. Otto jumped to his feet and readied the Mauser, using it to scope out the mysterious voice. They looked up at the hole. Aigis was hanging by her legs, upside-down, and was smiling wide.

“Am I interrupting anything?” She snarkily remarked. Otto sighed and dropped his Mauser.

“Aigis!” Frieda shouted, embarrassed.

“We’ve been looking for you guys for two hours. But you were just so hard to find.”

Otto adjusted his sleeves. “It’s been two hours already?”

“Yep. Parents are getting worried too.”

Otto and Frieda looked at each other and shrugged before leaving the hole. The three barely exchanged any words as they made the five-minute trek back to the schoolyard where the other kids were waiting. Aigis saw what was happening in that hole. She chose to not comment. Then she saw the look on Frieda’s face. Despite being intruded on, Frieda’s been smirking ever since Aigis had said they were hard to find. She chose not to say anything on that account as well. If it meant her little sister could revel in her hide-and-seek “victory”, then she would let her have it. The younger Frieda being completely unaware Aigis had originally planned to let them win.