

— *August 25th, 1912. Ackmann House, 5:45 P.M.* —

Otto, feeling bad about making the others wait in the stuffy schoolhouse while he and Frieda were hiding out in his secret hole, invited his classmates to have dinner with him and his mother Pauline. Pauline had red hair and freckles just like her son. The first thing Pauline did upon learning that her son expected her to cook dinner for six hungry 11 or 12-year-olds by herself, she slapped him upside the head and asked if he had lost his mind. He then surrendered to his furious mother and helped her cook dinner, which was Schweinebraten mit Knödeln (Pork chops with bread dumplings).

Otto sat at the head of the table, knife and fork in hand. Frieda sat to his right, and Gisela sat next to Frieda on the other side. Franz-Josef and Karl-Heinz, now wearing an eye patch, sat across from the two girls. The only vacant seat was to Otto's left. Aigis volunteered to help Pauline wash the dishes of those who had already finished.

"You know, I'm really impressed with Otto," Pauline looked back at the table of kids, loud enough for her voice to drown out the running water. "Back when Frieda started attending school, he couldn't go a day without peeing himself. I had to meet him outside the house for fresh underwear."

"Mama!" Otto screamed, slamming the table. "We're trying to eat!"

"No, no, wait," Gisela laughed. "I want to hear more, Frau Ackmann." She took a sip of her milk.

"Some days, it was so bad, I had to spend almost an hour just scrubbing. Sometimes, I did it too hard and ripped a hole."

This made Gisela snort all of the milk out of her nose. She coughed, but could not stop laughing. Otto slammed his forehead against the table to hide his beet red face. Frieda reached

over, trying not to let her ribbon or sleeves dip into the gravy on the plate, and rubbed his back, hoping to alleviate his shame.

Karl-Heinz had his arms crossed as Franz-Josef kept poking him in the arm.

“I’m not talking to you.” Karl-Heinz broke the silence.

“C’mon! I said I was sorry!” Franz-Josef

“You threw a rock at my eye, you jerk!” Karl-Heinz yelled, bits of dumpling crumbs flying from his mouth. Franz-Josef groaned. He took one bread dumpling from his plate and lazily plopped it in the gravy of Karl-Heinz’s eaten pork chop.

“There. Have my knödel. Now do you forgive me?” He spat out half-assedly.

Karl-Heinz angrily swiped the knödel from the plate and angrily took a bite out of it without saying a word to the boy. Franz-Josef pouted and slouched back in his seat.

“Your bowl cut’s ugly anyway.” He defensively remarked.

“I know.” Karl-Heinz sadly responded, mouth still full of bread.

Aigis and Pauline were laughing at the kids and their banter as their hands rhythmically let the clear water and bubbly soap cover the porcelain plates.

“Thank you so much for helping again with this, Aigis.” Pauline thanked again.

“No problem, Frau Ackmann. You have enough on your plate.”

Pauline laughed at her comment. “You’re funny.”

“I didn’t mean to make that pun.” Aigis responded, unamused. Pauline’s smile faded, bummed out by Aigis’ one-note response.

“Otto really enjoys being around you and Frieda. I try my best to keep him entertained, but I can tell he’s lonely. His father being home helps, but it’s so little time in the year, and it feels like it comes and goes so fast.”

“I can relate,” Aigis said suddenly. “Our father rarely spends time with Frieda, so I try to make time for her between practice.”

“What do you practice?”

Aigis’ eyes darted, not immediately answering. “...Fencing.”

“An unusual hobby for a young lady,” Pauline commented. “Is that where your black eye came from?”

“My what?”

“Your left eye. It looks a little swollen.”

Aigis gently felt her eye. She remembered where she got it from. Vergil tried to teach her how to use magic to counter various attacks. When time came for her to deflect melee attacks, Vergil found an opening in her defenses and ended up punching her in the eye really hard. That was about two days ago, and her eye hadn’t had a chance to fully heal yet.

“It was an accident.” She lied again. Pauline simply nodded.

“At least you have a means to defend yourself.”

Aigis stopped washing the dishes. She looked over at her younger sister, still rubbing the mortified Otto’s back. Otto and Pauline looked like they had such a good relationship. Otto could tell his mom anything. And while she wasn’t afraid to make fun of his faults, it was obviously good fun. Aigis then thought about her home life. Sure, Irma still treated Aigis as if she were her own blood daughter. Meanwhile, Vergil had just recently taught Aigis the power of nuclear magic. She was still getting used to how volatile and powerful it was, which made Vergil salty about her “slightly substandard progress” But their relationship was just defined by training, with the occasional injury Aigis sustained. In a way, Aigis wished she had a father like Otto’s. A

father who never sees his son for most of the year, but still goes above and beyond to make time for him. If only they had a father like him.