

— *January 1st, 1918. Schumacher House, 8:55 A.M.* —

The morning sun shone through the giant window of Aigis and Frieda's room. The sun was never one to wake Frieda, as she had always been a heavy sleeper. She continued to sprawl on her bed, mouth agape with drool leaking from her lips. An awful smell crept its way over her nose, which caused her eyes to crack open. The smell was familiar. It reminded her of a blackened forest with gray trees and dead grass. As she sat up in her bed, the smell only intensified. Her eyes must've been still waking up because for some reason, it was much harder to see. She took another whiff to try to identify the smell. At that moment, it wasn't her eyes that were bad. It was what she was smelling.

Smoke.

It was only after leaping out of the bed when Frieda could hear the crackling of flames. They were still relatively quiet, so the fire was most likely downstairs. It was at that moment Frieda realized the danger she was in, and she needed to get Aigis out as well. She ran over to her sister's bed and shook the bed.

“Aigis! Aigis! Get—”

Frieda ripped the covers off of the bed. Aigis wasn't there. Where had she gone? That didn't matter right now, she had to get out of here. But before she could leave the house, there was one more thing she had to do beforehand. She left the room and ran across the hallway into Irma's room. Irma was fast asleep, still oblivious to the raging fire.

“Mom!” Frieda yelled as she shook the bed. Irma awoke and sat up.

Irma groaned, “Frieda, what is the matter?”

“The house is on fire! We need to get out now!”

The smoke had now infiltrated the room, and Irma now could smell and see the billowing smoke. Her heart sank as she leapt out of the bed.

“Has Aigis left the house yet?” Irma asked.

“She wasn’t in her bed.” Frieda solemnly said. Irma grabbed her hand and led her down the stairs and through the living room that was set ablaze, painted in shades of red, orange and black. Their lungs filled with the thick black smoke that made them choke, and their eyes began to sting. Irma held onto Frieda tightly and made sure she didn’t let go. The biting cold greeted them as they leapt into the snow, making it out safely. When they looked back at their house, a wave of fear washed over them. The fire was spreading quickly, and the fire was too great to extinguish. There was no chance of saving their house. Irma had worked in that house for twenty years. Both Aigis and Frieda grew up in that house, and most memories of Johanna were probably caught in the flames. The two women were freezing cold, as they only had on nightgowns in the snowy morning. They didn't even have any shoes.

Frieda scanned the neighborhood. “Wait, where’s Oswald?”

“I don’t know actually.” Irma shivered.

“Wasn’t he in the bed with you?” Frieda chattered, trying to stay articulate while shivering. They were too caught up in the panic to check up on him. If he wasn’t in the neighborhood anywhere, then the only other place he could’ve been was...

“Oswald’s fine.” A familiar voice declared, cutting through the cold. Frieda and Irma turned around. Aigis was fully dressed in her army uniform again, this time donning the winter coat. It fluttered around a bit in the winter wind.

“Where have you been?” Irma interrogated, fearing that the young girl had gotten trapped in the burning building.

Aigis shrugged, a faint smirk forming on her lips. “I wish we could stay longer, but Sergeant Kollner and Shultz are going to meet us here at nine,” She explained. She pointed behind herself. “Oswald’s in the general store getting some ice cream.”

“What happened to the house?” Frieda questioned. Aigis laughed, shoving her bare, pinkish hands in her uniform coat.

“Fires are pretty common these days.” She coyly remarked.

“Houses don’t just burn to the ground randomly!” Frieda yelled. Aigis shook her head, still wearing that smirk.

“Maybe I broke that lantern in the basement before I left,” Aigis suggested. Frieda could tell by her expression and tone of voice that Aigis didn’t just drop the candle in a sleep-deprived mistake. “The room with all of the Psychokinetic books in it. A real shame, isn’t it?”

“Aigis, how could you?!” Irma shrieked.

“None of your business, whore.” Aigis hissed. The townspeople of Ruheplatz, who had already been standing outside to look at the fire, heard the familial spat and decided to crowd around the three women, wanting to get a closer look.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. I won’t forget how you helped Vergil drive my mother into an early grave. All because you couldn’t keep your filthy, lustful hands off of him.”

“I loved Johanna! She was a close friend—”

“You knew she was married with a child, and you still pursued him. Well, you both got what you deserved.”

Frieda gently put her hands on Irma, consoling her. “Where is papa?”

“Dead.”

Frieda's eyebrows twitched. "And how do you know that?"

"'Cuz I was the one who killed him. Shot him in the middle of the street like the rabid dog he was," Aigis grinned. "You help a man kill his wife to be with him, and he ends up in Berlin, trying to flee the country and start a new family. Was it worth it, Irma?"

"I didn't know Johanna died! Vergil never told me!" The poor 35-year-old pleaded to Aigis. Aigis slowly approached Irma, her army boots crunching in the thin snow. She stood still, not moving an inch. Suddenly, she swung at Irma, landing a hard punch square on her jaw. The force was enough to knock her to the ground.

Aigis was about to strike again, but Frieda grabbed her by the wrist, preventing her from delivering another blow.

"Aigis, stop it!"

"Let me go, Frieda." Aigis didn't even bother raising her voice, sounding like an annoyed older sister trying to keep their sibling from doing something dumb.

"Mama wasn't the one who killed her! You said so yourself!"

"The person who sells an assassin a weapon is just as culpable. You expect me to believe Vergil's *pet* didn't have a hand in leading my mother to her death?"

"She's not a pet, she loves you a lot."

Aigis shook Frieda off her body and used a telekinetic push to push Frieda into the snow. Frieda fell face-first, the cold burning her face and hands. She struggled to get back up. Aigis straightened her military uniform. Weaving through the crowd, Kollner and Schultz approached Aigis.

"There you are, Schumacher," Kollner greeted Aigis. Schultz gave her the same look of disdain as always. "Are you ready to go?"

“Never been readier.” Aigis smiled, rubbing her wrist. Frieda managed to sit up out of the snow. Bits of snow and frozen crystals were in her eyes, up her nose and in her mouth. As Aigis prepared to leave, one of the townspeople trained a musket on Aigis. It was Wessels. Wessels always kept an old rifle underneath the counter in his inn in the event a wild animal or thief ever got into his establishment.

“I can’t let you go, Aigis.” Wessels said calmly, keeping his aim on the musket steady.

Aigis crossed her arms, unimpressed. “On whose authority?”

“Aigis. You clearly ain’t well. I heard ‘bout you killing your father just now, but also burning down that there house? The people in this here town love an’ care ‘bout you. We don’t want you to hurt nobody else. So if you agree to stay here, we can give you the help you need.”

“And if I chose to go anyway?”

“I won’t hesitate to shoot you where you stand, missy.”

Aigis folded her hands behind her back and stood up straight. “Herr Wessels. I wouldn’t advise you do that.”

Aigis took a defiant step forward. Wessels aimed his musket and pulled the trigger. With lightning-quick reaction, Aigis cranked her neck to the side, avoiding the musket ball by a hair.

“He shot at Schumacher!” Kollner shouted. “Schultz!”

Schultz nodded. He approached Wessels and patted the middle-aged man on the shoulder.

“Herr Wessels, I really do appreciate you letting the Gibor unit stay every time we come here. Let me show you a token of my appreciation.”

Wessels eyes darted, not knowing what to expect next. He lowered his rifle just in case. Schultz grabbed his side and pulled out his Luger pistol. Wessels tried his best to ready the rifle as Schultz cocked his pistol. Not fast enough to stop Schultz from firing a round into his heart.

Wessels was dead before he hit the ground. A small spurt of blood came from his mouth as he hit the ground, staining the pure white snow red. The townsfolk didn't dare utter a word. They collectively watched the man who ran the inn, who they passed by every day with a wave and a smile, watched him flop to the ground. Aigis leaned over Wessels' body.

"I'm a member of the Imperial German army now. Any attack on me is an attack on the Empire."

"Let's go pick up Volkmann at the store. We're meeting the others in Bremen." Kollner declared, gesturing for Schultz and Aigis to follow him. Aigis readied her pickelhaube and fastened it over her head. She turned around to look at the downed Frieda in the snow one last time.

"You may not understand it now, but my mission is for the best of our people. And the Golden Battalion is giving me an opportunity to complete that mission."

Frieda and Irma watched helplessly as Aigis walked away with the other soldiers. Before she disappeared into the snowy mist, she turned around to shout at Frieda once more.

"I'll be back once my job is done. Until then, have a wonderful year!" She cheerfully waved.