

— *February 20th, 1932. Cave, Likely fifteen or so minutes later* —

Aigis found herself landing in a muddy pool of water, a few inches deep. A few spots on her SA uniform turned an even darker brown. She had just gotten her uniform cleaned before the cave expedition. She brushed off the water and mud from her clothing, but that only smeared it more.

“Damn it.” She stood up. Despite being at the bottom of a cave, the entire cave glowed with a light green luminescence. Wherever she was, this was an *Aurae*-rich cave. The potent amount of life energy was almost dizzying to her. Even in her rural, non-industrialized home, she had never felt this much concentrated life energy in one place. The air was humid, and smelled slightly like mud. A faint, earthy, and pungent odor also lingered in the air. The cave was beautiful. One of the few places on earth left untouched.

The moment was interrupted by the distant roaring of an unfamiliar animal. She immediately looked back and forth. Aigis had no idea what to expect down here. She tried to locate the increasingly louder animal noises, but the echoes off the cave walls made that impossible. Then she looked behind her and saw something that seemed like a cross between a rhino, a wolf, and a bear. For such a large creature, it had a monstrous amount of speed, and was bearing down on her. The most notable thing about the beast was that it was translucent, a hue of green. It was like a being made purely from *Aurae*.

Aigis quickly whipped out her Luger pistol and fired it. The shots echoed through the chamber, and the beast roared. The bullets simply phased through it. It continued its charge, and she was forced to roll out of the way. The beast ran straight into the wall, which shook with a tremor. The beast let out a roar, then turned around. Aigis fired more shots. They simply phased

through, and the beast charged again. Instead of dodging once more, she manifested an Aurae shield, which absorbed the blow.

It was clear to her that this thing wouldn't be harmed by guns or other physical weapons. But, since it was an Aurae-based creature, maybe the opposite would be true. She fired a nuclear blast at the creature. The creature was hit and sent flying back. It let out a loud roar, and began running towards her again. This time, however, she was ready. She fired another nuclear blast, and the creature was hit again, and was sent back a few meters.

The fight didn't get much easier, however. Aegis and the beast traded blows. For every one or two successful hits of magic, she would take several more hits. She got lacerations in her arms, legs, torso, and face. The wounds stung and burned, and she could feel the blood ooze out. But then she noticed something else. Every time she hit the beast with magic, it became slightly more opaque. That gave her an idea. She continued to fire nuclear blasts at the creature, and it continued its relentless assault on her. She was getting tired. She didn't have a whole lot of stamina for casting. As her chest stung and legs wobbled, she fired one more shot at the creature's forehead. The bullet pierced its skull and left a glowing white spot in its wake.

The creature simply got angrier and charged at her one more time. It rammed her square in the diaphragm, her gun flying out of her hand. She felt the air forced out of her lungs, flopping to the ground. She could only crawl as the beast loomed over her. It snarled, the stench of its fangs and breath burning her eyes and nose. She had no more Aurae left in her, and she didn't even have enough energy to try to replenish the infinite wellspring surrounding her. She simply looked up. She was about to die at 32 years old, being mauled to death by an Aurae beast in a cave. Not the most glorious way to go out. She shut her eyes, bracing for her imminent, violent death.

Then an echoing scream from above. A familiar scream. Aegis opened her eyes. Even the beast paused and looked upwards. Oswald flew down, gripping a broken-off stalactite in his hands. He rocketed down towards the beast's head and pierced the rock formation right in the glowing wound. A loud SHING ricocheted off the walls of the cave. The beast didn't shriek. It didn't even whimper. It simply stood in place as its body began to disappear into glowing particles of green. Oswald's usually neat brown hair had undone itself, and strands stuck to his forehead and face. Aegis slowly stood up and absorbed the escaping Aurae into herself, feeling it soothe her wounds and replenish her stamina.

"Oswald? Where did you come from?"

Oswald caught his breath, his chest heaving. His face was red and his breathing was labored. "I got lost in the cave. I just followed the sound of gunshots, you screaming, and an angry beast roaring."

"You saved me."

He took another deep breath, then gave her a weak smile. His cheeks and lips were tinged with a rosy shade. "Of course I did. You're my best friend."

"But you have a wife and kid now. What if you died and they had no clue where—"

"Aegis. Be grateful we're both still alive." He chuckled lightheartedly. The two friends gave each other a high-five. Then they both noticed something. The beast's torso was the only thing refusing to disintegrate. A long, wooden pole seemed to have been poking out of it.

"Is that...?" Oswald asked, inching closer to it.

"The Spear of Longinus. We've found it."