

— *April 15, 1900. Paris Exposition, 12:00 P.M.* —

Millions of people all across Europe and even as far away as the United States were gathering at the great Exposition Universelle to marvel at the many technological revolutions that occurred over the course of the 19th century. The new underground Paris Metro, the Eiffel Tower, various new technological advancements such as the phonograph, the lightbulb, the camera, the typewriter, and so on. Art Nouveau was also coming into vogue in this period, and it was the perfect way to display the new and modern inventions of the era.

Vergil, Johanna, and Irma came all the way from Germany by train, and when they arrived, they had just enough time to freshen up at the hotel before the big day. Vergil wore a beige hat with a brown suit and white gloves. He carried a cane as well, even though Vergil was only 38 years old. He didn't really need the cane, but it helped him look a bit more mature. Johanna fashioned a sun-yellow dress, with her blonde hair done up, topped off with a white bonnet. She wore a pearl necklace around her neck, and her white gloves were much finer than her husband's. In her arms, she carried a 6-month-old Aegis donning a tiny white dress. She was a quiet baby, which helped the situation as she slept peacefully through the train ride. Irma had just turned 18 not too long. She had on an evergreen dress with a black jacket over it, along with a matching hat and a purse in her hands.

One issue. The three Germans did not speak a lick of French. However, Vergil and Johanna were both fortunate. They both mastered a mind-reading psychokinetic technique. Any person could copy and absorb information from their brains and insert it into themselves. Historically, this was one of the many aspects of Psychokinetics that made them revered during their peak in ancient civilizations. To most, learning a language was years of rigorous study. But to a Psychokinetic, it was as easy as waving a hand in front of another person's face. While

Irma's bloodline had diluted and she had zero magic potential, she could just rely on Vergil or Johanna

The family spent most of their time at the Exposition keeping their hands to themselves and merely looking at all the exhibits. Out of all of them, Irma was the most excited to see everything. The Schumachers treated the young maid like she was a part of the family. They paid for her train ticket, her food, and any souvenirs she wanted. Vergil and Johanna watched her prance to and fro everywhere in the exposition. Which was surprising because before they left Germany, Irma had been complaining about her swelling belly. It would randomly cause her sharp pain, and she would have to hold her stomach and lean against a wall or a tree or building until it subsided. The reason she chose a mint green dress was because it was flowy enough to hide the small lump. Johanna would occasionally ask her if anything was wrong, but Irma would say no and continue running about like an excited child.

One thing Johanna kept thinking about was the actual plan to come out and see the Paris Exposition. She had often requested Vergil to go on vacation to various areas. Places like Spain, France, England, Denmark, and so on. But Vergil had always put it off for one reason or another. There were financial troubles, his foot was swelling up too much to travel, the weather was not good, or whatever excuse he gave her. Yet, Irma was the one who suggested they come to the Exposition, and he was uncharacteristically eager to take hers. Especially the Exposition. She's heard Vergil rant and complain about how modern technology is inferior to the psychokinetic people and how he and Johanna were above such "trite garbage". What happened to all that? Why did the case change just because Irma was the one who said something about it?

It was around lunchtime at this point. The couple and Irma split off at one point because she wanted to see something. They agreed to regroup at the Eiffel Tower at noon. The time had

come, but Irma was nowhere to be seen. Vergil sat on a bench and compulsively checked his pocket watch. Johanna sat beside him, bouncing Aigis on her arm. The infant was looking around at every possible minute movement, and then her eyes settled on the tower. Aigis had a wide grin on her face and cooed as she reached her hand out for the monument meters away.

“That’s queer. She’s usually never late.” Vergil said to his wife.

“Do you think it could be those sweets?” Johanna asked with concern. Aigis turned around and shoved her chubby hand into her mouth.

“What about them?”

“I mean, even back home, she’s been devouring all of our desserts for the past few months. Almost a year, I think. Perhaps it’s the excess sugar making her ill.”

“Could be.” Vergil sighed. He closed the cover on his pocket watch and looked up. The sun was shining bright in the sky, and the tower loomed tall overhead. Johanna felt a tug on her hair and looked down to see Aigis had her mother's blonde hair gripped in her chubby little fist. The infant giggled and waved her hand, pulling her mother's hair. Johanna grimaced and gently pried her hair from her daughter's iron grip.

Vergil stood up from the bench and brushed off his pants. “I’ll take a look around for her.”

“Hurry back, will you? Aigis might bald me if you take too long.” Johanna warned. Aigis sneakily got a hold of her pearl necklace and yanked on it from behind, choking her mother for a split second. She clapped and giggled as Johanna reeled from her daughter’s assault. Vergil tipped his hat before walking around the Exposition.

He spent at least 30 minutes trying to search for Irma, but to no avail. He went to every stand and questioned every vendor about her, but all didn’t have an answer for him. He then

looked specifically in places where he'd believe Irma would be interested in, like the photography booth or the lightbulb display, but the people running the stands also said they didn't see her. Vergil's coat began to get sweaty from the sheer amount of walking around he did, and he felt like his blood pressure was rising. They couldn't just leave Irma all alone in Paris. To abandon a young German girl when she didn't know a lick of French. That was just an incident waiting to happen.

Vergil found another bench on the other side of the Exposition to perch on. His dress shoes grinded against his feet. He removed his hat and placed it on his lap. He pulled out his handkerchief and dabbed at the sweat dripping down his face. As he closed his eyes and slumped on a bench, a familiar French voice called to him.

“Ah, hello again, my German friend!”

Vergil opened his eyes and sat up. The same vendor that nearly killed Vergil with his failed science experiment earlier. He had his calloused hands clasped. Vergil rolled his eyes.

“It is funny how fate brings us together again, oui?”

“Mein Gott, you again?” Vergil spat with disdain. The man threw his hands up in surrender.

“You seem cross, my friend.”

“Damn right I'm cross, your ‘Perpetual Matter Creator’ nearly ended me!”

The man rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, in hindsight, that experiment was a failure. I am no scientist, but I am beginning to think that matter cannot be created.”

Vergil stared at the man with dead, soulless eyes. “Another Frenchman beat you to that discovery.”

“It has already been discovered?! When?!”

Vergil sarcastically opened up his pocket watch. “Over a century ago.”

“You are one intelligent individual, Monsieur Schumacher.”

“I actively avoid science, yet even I knew that,” Vergil quipped with venom. He shook his head and waved. “Nevermind. Have you seen a girl pass by here?”

The scientist looked around at every woman passing by the two men. He looked back at Vergil. “You’re going to have to be a little more specific.”

“German girl, dark brown hair in a single braid, she was wearing a green dress today, was limping everywhere—”

“Wait, I know her!” The vendor exclaimed. Vergil perked up. “She came here with you and your wife!”

Vergil thought to himself then and there that this may possibly be the stupidest man he has ever met, and while in Paris of all places, that was a significant achievement.

“Yes, I am aware of that fact, considering I was the one who brought her here. But let me clarify. Have you seen her ANYWHERE, recently? Nearby, preferably somewhere within the past 30 minutes maybe?”

The vendor stroked his bearded chin. “Perhaps I did see a young German girl — Or as your people would say, ‘Fraulein’ — pass by me shortly. She was rather pale looking, yes? Had a glazed look on her face, a fever perhaps. She also had a labored walk to her.”

“Yes!” Vergil inched closer to him. “Her! Where’d she go?”

The vendor smirked and raised an eyebrow. “Who said this information would be free?”

“...What?”

The vendor waggled his finger in front of the German's face. It took Vergil everything in his being not to bite off his finger.

“In our brief exchange, you screamed in my face and mocked my experiments. Despite what I say, you don’t exactly feel like much of a ‘German friend’ to me at the moment.”

Vergil in his mind wanted to murder this man slowly and painfully. But it was clear to him this idiot wasn’t going to listen to words or reason. Only one option was on the table to deal with this French jackass. While the Frenchman was rambling on about his terms, a ball of clustered Aurae manifested itself in front of his yapping mouth. The Aurae ball launched itself down his throat. The Frenchman began clutching his throat, choking on the air that was in his mouth. His face was crimson red, and his eyes were about ready to pop out of his skull. The Aurae had dispersed and latched onto his airways, keeping his lungs from being able to expand. Vergil got closer to the man. So close, the two men were face to face.

“I’ll only ask one more time,” Vergil growled. His eyes were burning with a powerful rage unlike any other. His voice dropped down an octave. “Where. Is. Irma?”

“Okay, okay!” The desperate vendor croaked out. “I’ll talk, I’ll talk!”

Vergil opened up his hand and the vendor collapsed to the floor. He took deep, primal breaths while on his hands and knees. Vergil picked up his cane and aimed the tip between the Frenchman’s eyes.

“You said you’d talk, right? Then talk.”

The vendor gulped, hoping to rehydrate his mouth a bit to talk. “That girl... she came by my stand again.”

“How long ago?”

“About an hour ago, maybe? I wasn’t keeping track of time. Poor girl was clearly in a lot of pain, but did not speak any French whatsoever. Luckily, I was able to communicate through

the very little German I know. She kept asking for help. For a doctor, medical staff, anyone who could help her. Then she just... fell.”

“She *fell*?” Vergil questioned. “By herself?”

“That’s right. A bunch of us ran over to her, myself included. She was sweating bullets and her breathing became erratic. She was trying to get up, but her stomach was taking up her ability to move or breathe properly. Fortunately, someone managed to hail her a carriage and send her to a clinic.”

“Is she in the medical section?”

“I am afraid not, Monsieur Schumacher. The medical grounds of the exhibit are only for showcasing new equipment and providing basic services. She likely was sent to a real hospital in the city.”

Vergil shoved his hand in his coat pocket. “Where’s the nearest hospital?”

The vendor climbed up to his feet, gingerly, however. He used his stand to steady himself. “Outside of the Exposition grounds. The *closest* hospital is to the northwest of here. Just follow the left exit, then you just follow the road for a couple kilometers.”

Vergil began to sprint for the hospital before the vendor’s hand clasped around his ankle, preventing him from leaving.

“I would not recommend going down here at this time. Because of the Exposition, it is much too busy, and you’d have better luck creating matter than finding a carriage quickly. I’d advise waiting for a few hours, maybe more. By then, the crowds may have thinned and you can reach it with ease.”

“Got it.” Vergil responded quickly before returning to Johanna and Aigis, who were still waiting by the Eiffel Tower. The Frenchman got on both of his knees.

“That’ll be 2000 Francs!” He shouted. He magically got picked up by the wind and flung off of the bridge his stand was on and into the Seine.