

— *September 10, 1898. Ruheplatz, Lower Saxony, Germany* —

Irma finally reached Ruheplatz after what seemed like ages of watching the German countryside fly by from the view of a steam train's passenger car dusty window. She had come a long way from Hanover, traveling 62 miles and having to cross the Weser River in the process, but she knew the effort would be worth it. The 16-year-old was kicked from her home in Hanover for refusing to marry the rich son of her father's boss. Her family was struggling, so her parents tried their best to arrange a marriage with the boss' son, as a way of making ends meet. However, after overhearing a conversation between her father and his boss, she heard stories of several ex-wives of the heir all committing suicide because of his abusive ways. Not long after being disowned, she received a new opportunity out here for a new job. One that would save her from a life on the streets, or worse, marrying the spoiled rich man.

Irma strolled through the dirt-paved streets of Ruheplatz, watching the villagers go about their day. One thing that shocked her about the small village life was how open and free everything seemed. No one was rushing about their lives, trying to make ends meet or worrying about what tomorrow will bring. They all seemed at ease, with smiles on their faces, as if they had no troubles. No worries of violent crime or even vandalism, no need to lock doors at night or hide money away from thieves. It was a beautiful feeling, knowing that this was what peace truly looked like. Everyone could approach each other without any lingering fears of being mugged or killed. The fact strangers came up to her with an almost suffocating hospitality was a shock to the girl. She was used to the cold and callous treatment back home. She knew back in Hanover, she'd be lucky if someone bothered to make eye contact with her, let alone speak to her.

Irma eventually made it to a large mansion quite a ways away from the rest of the village. She checked her beige paper with dark beige stains that seeped themselves into the note during a

rainshower. This was the place. Her new workplace. Her new home. She latched onto one of the giant, golden ring-shaped door knockers, the freezing cold of the metal tingling her palms. She pulled back and rapped on the door three times. A moment passed, and nothing happened. A creak from the door. A couple stood at the doorway. The husband seemed to be in his mid-to-late 30s while the wife was younger in her 20s.

“Herr and Frau Schumacher?” Irma asked expectantly. She had an unnaturally straight posture.

“There you are, Irma!” The husband Vergil greeted with a big smile and open arms. He had been the one that invited Irma to come work for him. He hugged her in a fatherly embrace, which caught Irma off-guard. He then turned to his wife.

“This was the maid I was telling you about.”

“Ohh!” The wife nodded. Vergil had been saying things about her. Good things, she’d hope. She extended a hand to Irma, who hesitantly accepted the handshake. “I’m his wife, Johanna. Pleased to meet you, fraulein.”

“Irma Altergott, at your service!” Irma responded in a tone more professional than expected. She had never thought herself a servant, but that is what she was hired to do, right?

Johanna giggled a little at the young girl's formality. “Such energy at a young age! We need more of that these days.”

“Come in.” Vergil motioned, allowing Irma to come inside. Irma bowed once more before entering the manor. She surveyed the foyer. These were the types of homes not even the richest in Germany’s biggest cities could afford. Vergil was very successful, indeed. In whatever he did.

“We have an empty room upstairs for you to use. You can sleep there if you’d like.”

Johanna stated. Irma gave the two an inquisitive glance. They seemed very nice and accommodating. She wasn't sure why they would go out of their way to help her.

“We’re actually really glad you agreed to do this for us,” Vergil began, tugging Johanna in a side embrace. “Truth be told, we’re actually trying for a child.”

“Hoping to have a new son or daughter before the new century starts.” Johanna added. Vergil gently grabbed Johanna’s chin and moved her face towards his. He scrunched up her cheeks and lips so she’d look like a pufferfish, and then leaned in for a quick kiss.

“And I don’t want THIS beautiful goddess to lift a finger when she starts carrying our little angel.”

Johanna blushed, swatting Vergil in the face. Vergil cheesed, exposing the gap in his front teeth. “Oh stop.”

“I mean it. You’re a queen and deserve to be treated like one around here.”

Irma daintily put a hand over her mouth to hide her giggling. Their flirting was just too adorable. She didn't mind watching them. In fact, it brought a warmth to her heart. The way Vergil would talk to Johanna, and how much he obviously cared for her. She wondered if she could find a love like that one day.

Her first few weeks on the job were a little rough. Back home, Irma barely did household chores. The only reason she even agreed to the maid job was because Vergil offered to pay her 30 goldmarks a month for her services. A good deal, especially for a girl with nowhere else to go. That said, she admittedly underestimated how much work she’d have to do. The dress she wore as a uniform was much heavier than she anticipated. That and things like vases were actually very easy to drop and shatter, so she had to be extra careful not to do that. But the biggest issue

was the lack of knowledge she had in regard to what to do and when to do it. While it was a little annoying for her at first, she was grateful for her employers being understanding. Both Vergil and Johanna were more than understanding and patient, helping the young girl with the basics. It took a few weeks, but soon, Irma was an expert in housework, and could even help the couple out with some financial tips.

One thing that struck Irma was how Vergil and Johanna acted around each other. It was like they were newlyweds. The way Vergil would talk to Johanna, his soft-spoken compliments and the occasional kiss he'd steal. She'd giggle and push him away. Vergil would always ask if she needed anything, even something as simple as a glass of water, which she would politely refuse. Then there was how they would sit next to each other and talk. Vergil would lean over, his head on Johanna's shoulder. He'd say something and she'd respond with a light hearted laugh. And whenever the young couple were together, it was like they were alone, as if Irma wasn't even there.

In late November that year, Irma was cleaning out the dishes from that night's dinner, which had been a simple roast pork with baked potatoes and sauerkraut. She got used to the mindless circular motion of the soap-coated sponge against the plate. She didn't really think about it, just did it. It was almost meditative, how the white ceramic would turn white again. While deep in thought, the sound of glass clanging rang from the dining room table. Irma shut off the running water and dried her hands with a towel. She turned around to see Vergil slumped at the table, a half-empty beer float resting in his hand. His head was swaying and his cheeks were flushed red, a clear indication of intoxication. Johanna had already gone off to bed about an hour ago, so he was down here by himself.

“Herr Schumacher? Shouldn’t you be off to bed?” Irma suggested. Vergil took another sip of the beer float. The foam bubbled at his mouth, and he sloppily licked it up with his brownish, crusted tongue.

“I’m not tired.” He insisted, the words coming out as slurred syllables. Irma sighed, placing her hands on her hips.

“Does your wife know you’re down here?”

“She’s asleep.” He muttered. Irma shrugged and snatched the almost empty beer float for her to wash. She poured water into the mug as the yellow liquid gushed out and the water gradually turned into a crystal clear.

“How do you do that?” Vergil suddenly spoke up.

“Do what, mein herr?” Irma asked, setting the now clean beer float on the drying rack.

“Prance around this job like you’re always having the time of your life? You’re stuck cleaning our house for us and doing menial tasks, yet you seem so... content with it all.”

Irma shrugged. Vergil wasn't wrong. She was stuck here doing this. It wasn't exactly a glamorous lifestyle. But still, she had it better than most. She had a roof over her head, and a warm meal every night. Considering she could've been stuck with a tyrant she didn't even love, she would take this reality a thousand times over.

She chuckled. “Well, Herr Schumacher. I do like my job. You and Frau Schumacher have given me a place to live and a decent wage, and you both treat me like I’m part of the family. I really have nothing to complain about.”

“That sounds nice,” Vergil wistfully smiles. His eyes drifted off into the distance. There was a brief pause between them. Irma was just about to say goodnight, when Vergil blurted out, “Why not me?”

“What, mein Herr?” Irma questioned. She walked over to the table Vergil was sitting at. He was at the head of the table, so Irma sat in an adjacent seat to his left. Vergil was hunched over, his right elbow resting on the wooden surface, and his hand propping his cheek up. He was looking off into the distance, his mind lost in a trance. Irma noticed that his normally clean-shaven face had the beginnings of a stubble, and his black hair was in disarray.

“I can’t stand being with her, Irma.” Vergil slurred, his eyes glazing over. Irma looked at him, puzzled.

“I don’t understand.” Irma stammered. Was it the alcohol making him think like this? Vergil began rubbing the wooden slits of the table with his dusty index finger.

“Everything about her annoys me. From her voice to her scent. How she walks. How she talks. How she dresses. Her very presence just... it disgusts me. She's an ugly bitch.”

“I’m sure you don’t mean that! I’ve seen the way you two are around each other. I know you love her. And I know she loves you back.”

“I was ACTING, Irma. She does love me. I can’t stand her, but I have to put on this stupid mask all day, every day to keep up this appearance of a perfect, loving husband. Every time I say ‘I love you’ to her, it makes me want to throw up.”

Irma shook her head. This can’t be the same Vergil Schumacher that was happily married to Johanna a few weeks ago. This was the same man that kissed his wife every chance he got, and told her how beautiful she was. The man that loved her and treated her like a queen. The man bending over backwards so much, his spine would’ve twisted into a pretzel. Yet, the venom spewing from his mouth sounded... genuine.

Vergil continued his rant. “My whole life has just been doing things for the best of others. My parents trained me into the ground, kept me from having relations, made me marry another

woman to keep our bloodline alive. Nobody cared for what I wanted, only what was best for them.”

“B-But think of the bright side!” Irma lightly tapped his arm, trying to get him out of his depressed stupor. “You’re going to have a new son or daughter very soon!”

“That IS something I’m looking forward to. I have plans for them. Plans I cannot divulge.”

Irma nodded. Maybe this was his way of saying that he loved his kid already. Whatever he was planning, it had to be something nice for the new member of the family.

“Well, what do YOU want, mein herr? What would make you happy?”

Vergil chuckled and looked down at the ground. His face was a mix of sadness and longing, his eyebrows raised. He lifted his head and stared into Irma's eyes. The light from the chandelier illuminated his face and made his green eyes twinkle. He had a sly smirk, and the corners of his lips curved upwards. He took his calloused hand on top of Irma’s skin and caressed it.

“You.”

“E-Excuse me?” Irma gasped, taken aback. She tried to move her hand away, but he gripped on tightly. His nails were digging into her wrist. Vergil leaned closer to Irma, the stench of his alcohol-stained breath making her want to gag.

“I envy you. You’re not chained down by familial burdens or any obligations you have no control over. You live life freely, prancing everywhere with a smile on your face. I love that about you.”

“I don’t think—”

“Your skin. It’s like silk. I could lie on it for hours and never tire of it.”

Irma began to get uncomfortable. She tried to pry her hand out of his grip, but his hands were clamped on her. He took his hand and grabbed her chin gently, the same gesture he used on Johanna. But this time, it felt different.

“What if your wife saw us?”

“She doesn’t have to know. It’ll be our little secret, lieblich.” He whispered, winking. Irma didn’t want to betray Johanna’s trust. She had too much respect for the matriarch.

“Please, mein herr...” Irma pleaded, although her resistance began to fade a little. Being this close to Vergil, face to face. Her heart began racing. Something about him and his image drew her to him. Irma never truly had a father figure. She had no aunts or uncles, and her grandfather had died of cholera a few years prior. Her father, her real father, was a nobody, and a cruel one at that. A man without honor. A man who tossed out his own daughter because she refused to marry a tyrant to benefit him. Vergil had been a tall, attractive, good looking male figure in her life. Not to mention he’s the reason she’s even eating good, sleeping warmly, getting paid was because of Vergil. He’d been the one to pick her up off of the damp, rainy streets of Hanover. In a way, between his generosity and being the closest thing to a strong, male figure in her life, it almost felt immoral to refuse him. She felt compelled to follow his every whim.

“I’ve regretted everything I’ve ever done because I was listening to other people. Let me make a decision for myself. And with you, I can tell it’s the right choice.”

The two locked lips, nothing else mattering at that moment. Just Irma and her employer.