

— *April 16, 1900. Avenue Louis Hospital, 8:30 A.M.* —

Vergil made sure to wake up extra early that morning. When he left the hotel room, Johanna still was asleep, snoring quietly on the bed. Baby Aigis laid sprawled out on her mother's chest like a baby koala. He didn't want either of them to know where he was going. Putting on a suit and trench coat, he escaped from the hotel and immediately hailed a carriage to the nearest hospital. The cabbie, a middle-aged man in a bowler hat, pulled on the reins as the horse began to trot. Vergil was silent the entire trip. The sun was still barely rising, casting a red-gold tint over the sky. Eventually, the cab came to a stop. The cabbie outstretched his palm.

"That'll be 2 francs, please."

Vergil grabbed two franc coins with his index finger and thumb and dropped them into the cabbie's hand. He took his arm and leaped off the carriage. The cabbie turned back forward and pulled on the reins again to signal his horses to trot forward. Vergil entered the hospital lobby. The receptionist looked up at him.

"Good morning, monsieur. Your name?"

"Vergil Schumacher," He spat out. "Is there an Irma Altergott in this hospital?"

The receptionist flipped through her list. She ran her index finger across the page, mouthing the names. She tapped twice on a certain area of her list. "She's in ward 316. If you need directions, I can—"

Vergil was already gone before she could finish. He pranced up the wooden stairs of the hospital until he reached the third floor. Scanning both hallways left and right, he finally landed upon the sign above a doorway. Ward 316. He took a deep breath and entered the room. The first thing he saw was the open blinds of the hospital window. The sun half-shone above a building, creating a beautiful crimson. Even though he was in a ward, Irma was the only one currently

residing in the room. Her bed was right next to the window. She was awake, but just staring up at the ceiling. Irma didn't have her hair in her signature single braid, but rather, it was flowing down her shoulders like a frazzled waterfall. Her skin was flushed a ghoulish white and there were dark bags underneath her eyes. Vergil nearly forgot she was only 18. He stepped closer to her. She slowly turned to look at him.

“Are you alright?” Vergil asked.

“Mhm.” Irma nodded, not wanting to talk too much. Vergil noticed her arms were folded across her stomach, like she was holding something. At first, he thought they were separate bed sheets.

“So... What happened?”

“I think I finally found out what was causing my stomach pains.” Irma smiled weakly. She took one arm and lifted one of the sheets to reveal a tiny face. A newborn baby girl was in her arms. The baby had her eyes closed and her heavy head was sinking in her mother's elbow. The baby girl was so tiny and pink that she blended right in with the sheets. Irma gently poked the cheek of the baby, the infant not reacting at all to the stimuli.

Vergil smiled, but not because he was happy. He should be. Irma was their maid, and he and his wife treated her like a daughter. He should've been happy. He should feel a wave of relief. But Vergil couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of dread. His mind was swirling with thoughts. None of them were palatable to him.

“Do you have any idea who the father is?” Vergil gulped, but somehow got the notion he was asking a question he already knew the answer to.

“I only ever hang around you and Frau Schumacher.” Irma replied, her voice weak and frail.

“Oh God...” He muttered to himself. His stomach rumbled in discomfort. Irma looked him in the eye.

“Herr Schumacher... Remember that night in July when I was sick? And I needed a few days off for work and you—”

“Don’t remind me. Please.” Vergil interrupted. Irma was quiet for a few moments. She lowered her voice to a very low hum.

“What do we do? If we take the child back home to Germany, then your wife will surely find out.”

Vergil began bouncing his left leg up and down, his loafer heel tapping against the wooden floorboard. He needed to figure out a plan of attack. His eyes darted back and forth, trying to formulate some semblance of a thought. It was hard enough keeping secrets from Johanna as it is. Keeping a secret about a child would be almost impossible. He could inexplicably fire Irma and kick her back to the streets. But to do that when she now had a baby in her arms was just too cruel. Irma’s parents in Hanover also disowned her, so it wasn’t like he could send the child to live with her grandparents. He even briefly considered leaving the baby here in Paris and then returning to Germany, never mentioning the incident. But at the same time, he knew Irma would never agree to it. Whether or not he liked it, she was a mother now. And if Irma took motherhood as seriously as she took her housemaid duties, then that meant she was going to keep this child no matter what. Vergil had no choice but to accept the situation. He was stuck.

Vergil licked his lips, briefly showing the gap in his teeth. The 38-year-old looked his young maid in the eye with an unstable confidence. He spoke quietly, yet efficiently.

“Here’s what I have,” He started. “If Johanna asks about the child, what we’ll tell her is she’s an orphan you adopted. I will pay for everything. That way, you can keep your job and you can have the child live with us. And she’ll be none the wiser.”

Irma looked down at her baby. She finally opened her eyes. They were hazel. Just like Irma’s. She kissed her newborn’s forehead. “I feel bad for lying to Frau Schumacher about all this.”

“We lost that luxury a long time ago, Irma. This is for everyone’s sake.”

Irma looked at the morning sky once again through the window, cradling her baby. “You’re right. I’ll start rehearsing my story.”

“Good girl.” Vergil patted her shoulder and smiled. He took a quick glance at her new daughter. She looked just like Irma. He was hoping that Johanna would never look too deeply at the child to notice her resemblance to her mother. This plan could work.

As Vergil began to leave the hospital, he stopped in his tracks. He turned around to look at Irma, now from a distance. “Did you decide on a name?”

Irma took a finger and waved it in front of the baby for her to reach out and grab. The baby yawned silently.. Irma turned her gaze towards Vergil.

“A peaceful little angel,” She remarked. “Frieda.”

Vergil nodded half-heartedly, a mix of peace and shame flowing through him. “Nice name.”