

Tabula Rasa

Von Kroko

Kapitel 4: Lace And Ribbons

Back home, Daniel did not even take off the coat before he sunk into an armchair in the drawing room and ran his hands over his face. He did not know what to do with himself. This burden was crushing him and he felt like curling up in himself until there was nothing left. He bent over, as if in unbearable pain. Like these dirty creatures in Brennenburg writhing on the floor before him, rightfully battered and encaged, their insides torn apart. Now he knew how it felt.

His fingers were tearing at his hair, but the stinging did not ease his misery. Daniel wanted to scream, yet there was no one to lash out at, no relief from the guilt knotting his intestines. Nothing but a dry sob left his lips as he drew a shallow breath.

He had left Hazel to die.

As he was so lost in his silent lament, he barely noticed the bedroom door opening.

"Oh, Mr Mayfair, you are back already!" It was the nursemaid's voice that caught his attention, too chipper for his taste. He was in no state to handle company and knew he should send her away, but he could not will himself to speak.

Then he heard a small, agitated noise and he did not even need to look up. He knew it was Alexander, no doubt wriggling on her arm to be let down. Daniel pressed his eyes shut, stung by a distinct feeling of regret. All he had done was neglect the boy in these last days, and he did not know how to remedy his mistakes. Or if he was in any way fit to even attempt to do so, for that matter.

"If you have a moment? I would like to show the result of our efforts today", the nursemaid announced. "I am very certain it would delight you."

Daniel lifted his head, half of the mind to tell her he was not in the mood.

Yet she had already carefully put Alexander on his feet and held him up by his tiny hands, and did not pay Daniel too much attention. "Now go to Mr Mayfair", she said to Alexander, but the boy did hardly listen to her.

He was looking at Daniel, his eyes, as so often, serious and unusually aware for his age. As Alexander tugged at her grip, she let go, and the boy took a step forward.

Clumsy but determined he placed his feet one after the other, and when was swaying slightly, he did not let that discourage him this time. Daniel could not take his eyes off the boy toddling towards him, dreading him falling over and bursting in tears. To Daniel, it was a catastrophe waiting to happen, one that he could not bear right now.

But Alexander did not fall.

At least not until the boy had almost reached Daniel's chair. Then he became impatient and stumbled over his own feet, and Daniel, who had been watching the boy's small steps so intently, immediately held out his hands to catch him.

Alexander tumbled into his arms and looked up at him, the bright eyes wide and uncertain.

"Alexander", Daniel said, and the name felt rusty on his lips. "That was—good. I am—..." His voice broke and he could not continue.

As words would not come, he sunk on his knees to pull the boy closer, and wrapped the small body in his arms. It was then, when he held him again and Alexander's small fingers curled around his hair, that all came falling apart. Daniel could not let go, he did not dare to, but held the boy close while he shuddered, trying desperately to keep himself together. He went to pieces right then and there, his body convulsed as he was shaken by violent sobs.

For the first time since he had learned the horrible truth, he cried. He knew the spectacle he was making of himself was pitiful and undignified, but he could not stop. The tears kept streaming down his face and his cheek was wet against Alexander's thin wisps of hair.

Alexander was warm in his arms, patiently, quietly clinging to him, and his presence alone was soothing. The recent days Daniel had been straying through foggy swampland, without direction, without cause. But now that the mist lifted itself, it became clear that all had led up to this. It was his focal point where everything came together. Here, his dispersed soul found its centre again, as he cried and cried, every single tear not a token of his weakness, but alleviation.

Long after the nursemaid had politely left the room, Daniel finally calmed enough to wipe his tears, and he cautiously released Alexander from his embrace. He needed more than a few shaky breaths to recover from this sudden breakdown that left him drained, but also a little lighter than before.

"I'm sorry", he mumbled and brushed over Alexander's pale, flimsy hair in a rather awkward gesture of affection. To his relief, the boy was not upset, yet he stared at Daniel as if still unsure and confused. "I do not know—", Daniel's voice wavered and broke, and all he could get out was a hoarse whisper. "I am so sorry."

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This evening, Daniel kept Alexander with him and allowed him to play on his bed. The

boy babbled excitedly as he grabbed and pulled at the sheets, and he was so content to have Daniel's attention back that Daniel felt the lump in his throat again. He could not deny Alexander his company anymore.

And it was for Daniel's own sake, too. The child distracted him enough from his own heavy thoughts to keep him from spiraling down into this pit of guilt and regret again that still filled his stomach with lead.

Somehow, he could not feel as helpless in his misery when Alexander was with him.

As he sat on his bed, the boy in his arms, he felt almost at peace, even though his mind was in such disarray. Just as Alexander fell asleep, his head resting gently on Daniel's chest, Daniel had the distinct feeling of being safe and secure, and even a bit sleepy.

Still, Daniel did not quite know how to find his way back to how his life was before... Before what, he was not sure. Before Hazel's death? Before Brennenburg? Maybe even before Algeria? When had things started to go this awry?

Mrs Dinges would inform him that he had been out of sorts for weeks, but it meant as much to Daniel as if she had said days or months. It seemed even fitting that he had forgotten about his twenty-sixth birthday. He did not care about celebrating getting one year older, while Hazel was not granted the same.

Another thing he had failed to remember, however, could not simply be overlooked without consequences. Alexander still had to be christened and Daniel had yet to arrange this. He had assured Mrs Dinges that he would quite a while ago. And he had angered her enough with his behaviour lately.

Yet it was not out of obligation to keep this promise to her that he eventually felt he could no longer tarry. He had put Alexander's needs aside long enough and it was an attempt to make amends.

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Entering the church was like stepping into a different realm of calmness. Even though it was not much warmer, the light, cool breeze wafting through the halls was so much more peaceful than the icy November wind outside. For a moment, Daniel stood still to take in the image of the chapel. A short pang of guilt reminded him that it had been far too long since his last visit. However, he silenced his conscience, thinking that if he had come here before his journey to Prussia, he would have endangered every single person present.

He took a seat in one of the benches, leaned back, and folded his hands in his lap. His gaze fixed to the ceiling, he let his mind wander. He recalled those days as a boy, when he had sat in the much smaller chapel of Canterbury, how hard it had been to motivate Hazel for service. Tears were streaming down his cheeks again before he knew it. Quickly, he wiped them away, looking around to make sure nobody had seen his outburst. But the church was pretty empty, which was probably due to the fact

that most people were either at work or having lunch. Only an elderly woman sat a few rows before him, a cleric was sweeping the aisle, and a couple was standing near the altar, conversing in a hushed tone.

Their whispering echoed through the great, bright hall, still unintelligible. As Daniel let his eyes wander over the many colourful windows, it almost seemed as if the whispering was coming from them, from the walls, from the statues whose hands admonitorily pointed into empty air. The autumn sun must have come through outside, as bright, multicoloured speckles adorned the grey paths and pillars, and let the mote in the air seem like tiny particles of pyrite.

Daniel couldn't have said whether it had been minutes or hours that he had sat there, as somebody approached him.

"Young man, did you come here to confess?", the cleric asked with a friendly smile, broom still in hand.

Daniel, who had not noticed that he had started slumping in the bench, got up on his feet. "I... No, actually", he answered truthfully. "My name is Daniel Mayfair. I came here because I wanted to ask for a christening of my... child. Nothing pompous, just a modest ceremony in my home."

The clergyman nodded. "Surely we can arrange that." Then, with a quick glance around, he said "Where is the mother, I would love to congratulate her."

Daniel frowned a bit, knowing very well that the man had seen him come in alone. He did not like being played like that. "The boy has no mother. I adopted him on one of my travels", he explained curtly.

The clergyman raised his eyebrows. "Adopted, you say. On a journey no less, dear me."

"That won't be a problem, will it?", Daniel followed up, displeased.

"Oh no, of course not. The Lord accepts all." The clergyman smiled, and Daniel couldn't suppress a little sigh of relief. Knowing that, he was already starting to plan his next steps, when the clergyman interrupted his thoughts a second time. "A christening is reason for joy. Yet you look awfully troubled."

Daniel looked up at him, and despite the fact that the man had seemed unlikable to him at first, the concern in the cleric's face was sincere.

"Forgive me if I seem forward, but I have the impression you are completely lost." The man put the broom aside, seated himself and gestured for Daniel to do the same. Daniel complied, if reluctantly. "I am of the opinion that talking alone will already help you find your way back."

"Talking?", Daniel asked warily.

"Yes, indeed. What is it that makes you sigh so heavily, my son?"

With an appraising look, Daniel sucked his lower lip that had started trembling again between his teeth. All the questions about God and His involvement in the death of Hazel came up again, and that searing feeling of guilt ever since his father had accused him of leaving her. He chewed around on his lip, hoping the pain would distract him from the aching in his guts.

He did want to express these feelings, he wanted to get them out and for someone to listen to them. But there was nobody there he could have entrusted with all this anguish, let alone the agonizing anger he felt against his own father. But it had been far too long since he had entrusted himself to God. Maybe he really did owe Him that much honesty.

"My sister... my little sister has passed away a few weeks ago, but I haven't heard of it until recently", Daniel started. He expected for the cleric to interrupt him, but the man only gave a nod and a compassionate noise. "She was my everything." Daniel's voice failed him, but now that he had begun, as if a dam had been broken, he could not stop. "My whole memory starts with her. I don't know how I have spent the first ten years of my life without her! And now... now she is gone and I have no means to bring her back!" He swallowed back the sobs, but they made their way into his words nonetheless. "She has always been very ill. But I, I thought if I could just give her all my strength, the strength of a healthy young man, of her brother... maybe she would make it. I have been away... as I mentioned", he added with a wave of his hand, "and as I came back..." Daniel had to cover his mouth to suffocate the wailing noises escaping him.

But similar to when he had held Alexander in his arms before, he did not feel ashamed. It was again that he felt like every tear was a relief.

"But you see", he continued, "this is not fair! She did not deserve to die! God cannot be this heartless, I thought, so I..." He lowered his voice even further. "So I blamed my father. But now I feel... it is rather me who is at fault. Now I don't know how to live with myself anymore, my Hazel lost and her lifeblood covering my hands!"

The cleric waited a few more moments until Daniel had calmed down a bit, then he spoke up. "Loss in the family is something that always weighs down hardest on the ones who cared the most. But it happens every day, to dozens of people, young or old. God does not make a difference. We do not always understand why they are taken from us. But thus is His way, my son. It was not your fault, nor your father's. It was the sickness that carried her off."

Daniel lifted his head. His sleeves, which he had used to cover his face, were wet with tears.

"Now she is released from her suffering", the cleric said.

"Released...", Daniel echoed.

"She is in Our Heavenly Father's arms now, in a place out of reach of illness and pain. And she looks down upon you, Daniel. She sees you, and smiles on you, and wishes for you to keep on living."

Daniel stared at the cleric as if he was hearing the voice of God Himself out of his mouth, eyes wide and mouth agape. Then he convulsed and fell into wild crying again, grasping for the hands of the holy man and holding onto them. He could not take it all in, but he saw it all so clearly before him: Hazel, finally in a place where she could be free of the shackles she had been carrying all her life, running and playing like she had always hoped to do. It had been so selfish of him to want her to stay in this world where she had to suffer, only so he could have her.

"Daniel, listen to me", the cleric called for his attention. Daniel looked up at him, not caring that his face was tear-stained. "There is another life, a new little human, who depends on you right now." The stern expression on the man's face turned into a benign smile. "Do not dwell on the past. Concentrate on the now and appreciate what God has given you", the cleric closed. With the glow of the stained-glass window illuminating the man, Daniel truly could not tell the difference between the cleric and the saints pictured on the glass.

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His memories of Brennenburg and the thoughts of Hazel tore at the very core of his being like a roaring storm. Yet the words spoken by the clergyman were the life line. His muscles were aching from grasping onto them so tightly, he was freezing and weak. Nevertheless, he clung to them, and they kept him from drowning.

The letter that arrived the next morning reminded him of other pressing issues. The Hyndmans had invited him for supper. Alexander needed godparents, and Daniel had already waited for the opportune moment to approach the couple with his request. Mr and Mrs Hyndman were his friends, he could trust them. And after all, Mr Hyndman had already expressed his support for Daniel's endeavour.

After having spent the day with Alexander, Daniel made for the house of the Hyndmans. They had heard of his loss and expressed their deep condolence. Daniel had to swallow back more tears, but even though his throat did not stop hurting for the rest of the evening, he felt up for asking the two for their sponsorship of the young Alexander. They agreed cordially, and plans for the exact day of the christening were made. At last, things were starting to look up again.

When Daniel had been about to leave, Mr Hyndman had taken him aside and reassured Daniel to seek him out whenever he was in need of help with a short squeeze of his hand.

Talking and thinking about something different, having a task occupying his mind, Daniel felt getting up in the morning became easier again. Having something to look forward to, and if it was only seeing Alexander's little face, watching the boy take one step more each day, gave him enough motivation to pick up work again. It was heartbreakingly sweet to see how gleeful the child was whenever Daniel paid him

attention, played with him or sat down to try and teach Alexander words. He saw it in the boy's attentive eyes. He was glad to have him back.

Daniel decided to cut back on the laudanum again. The pain was bad, but he had to endure it if he wanted to be able to cater to Alexander's needs.

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As soon as Daniel had sent out the invitations, the days suddenly seemed to fly by. He barely found the time to think about the embroidery of the christening gown. Though he had to admit that he did not know much about fancywork in general. Fortunately, the tailor was a very helpful man and assisted Daniel in his decision-making. He was a bit surprised when Daniel told him that the baby that was to wear the gown was already of about a year old, but the finished ensemble was no less lovely. With a smile, Daniel found himself looking forward to seeing Alexander in the neat little sleeves and ribbons.

The day before the event was planned to take place, he received the present of the Hyndmans. It was a wonderful claret jug that was adorned by delicately cut floral ornaments. Mrs Dinges, apparently a lot happier with the new arrival now that he was about to be baptised, sent a little set of finely worked silver cutlery. She probably could just as well have given it to him personally, but she was one to insist on formalities. Daniel arranged the presents on the tea table in the drawing room, which he and Mrs Dinges had already decorated.

He had not invited his parents. He still had not told them about Alexander. In all truth, he had not talked to them since their discord. He felt guilty thinking about it. Then again, they would probably not approve of this whole undertaking anyway. He would tell them when the time was right, but right now he did not have the mental capacity to deal with his father's complaints.

The Hyndmans arrived around noon, both very eager to see the boy.

"So young and he already had to endure so much loss", bemoaned Mrs Hyndman as they sat around the table for luncheon. She was a robust lady, which was enforced through her pregnancy, fitting her husband in form and presence. For Daniel's taste, she was a tad too bold. But as Mr Hyndman's wife, he respected her.

Mrs Dinges set the last dish on the table and joined them. Daniel had invited her, too, as an attempt to make up for having troubled her so much lately. "A feisty one he is, though!", she said.

"So you have seen him already?", Mrs Hyndman asked.

"Yes, of course! Truth be told, it was fairly unavoidable. Time and time again his nurse and I had to keep him from scrambling down the stairs!" The small company broke out into laughter. Daniel's fork scraped over the china bit too hard, producing an ugly screeching noise.

"But Daniel, you need to tell us the story about how you came upon your Alexander at all! Harriette here has not heard it yet and is very curious", Mr Hyndman said and gestured towards his wife with a smile that seemed almost mocking. "She has the most absurd interest in everything connected to Herbert's lost expedition", he added turned to Daniel with a low tone.

Mrs Hyndman did not react to her husband's taunt, but instead said with a smile and raised eyebrows, "You see, my husband thinks it is a far better course to ignore anything has happened at all!"

Daniel quickly glanced back and forth between them, but Mr Hyndman did not seem to mind his wife talking back like this. He just chuckled, threw Daniel a conspirative wink and repeated his request for Daniel to tell the story of the dying man and his last wish again. Daniel did not exactly feel comfortable having to once more tell this lie, so he abbreviated the tale as much as he could without seeming dubious.

It was not much later that the carriage with the clergyman arrived. He asked for a moment alone in the drawing room to prepare. Daniel waited anxiously until they were given the sign to enter. The nurse had already dressed Alexander, and when Daniel saw the little boy in her arms, draped in his long, fair christening gown, his round face surrounded by the white lace of a bonnet, contrasting against the dark skin, and bright eyes shining curiously, Daniel could not help but feel a comforting warmth flood through him.

They entered the room, first the nurse with the baby, then the Hyndmans, and Daniel last. Mrs Dinges was already waiting in the drawing room and undeniably touched by the little spectacle. Daniel could not fail to note the surprised expression on the clergyman's face as he laid his eyes on the child when it was given from the nurse to Mrs Hyndman, who clearly announced Alexander's new full name, and then to him. Yet he did not say anything but proceeded in his routine.

The holy water was sprinkled over Alexander's head, and the boy stayed piously silent, as if he knew something of substantial importance was happening to him.

As the clergyman said his prayers for the boy in his arms, Alexander seemed as attentive as the small audience that was listening devoutly. Daniel wondered whether the boy was at all aware that he was in the centre of all their attention, absorbed as he was by the cleric's voice. Daniel was not the only one to notice. When Alexander was then handed back into the arms of his now godmother, she said rather fondly, "What an extraordinarily well-behaved little gentleman." Daniel felt pride swell in his chest upon her remark.

However, he did not feel quite as comfortable when she went on to praise Alexander's golden eyes and Mrs Dinges was quick to chime in, "Yes, this boy has quite a peculiar foreign beauty, hasn't he?"

Daniel did not approve of the direction in which the conversation was heading, but before he could intervene, Mr Hyndman had taken the opportunity to start speculating on the potential in savages to be brought forth by culture. It was then

that Daniel decided it was high time for Alexander to retire.

After Alexander had been brought back to bed, all settled down for refreshments. Mrs Hyndman entertained the cleric and Mrs Dinges with plans she had for her own child once it was born, and Mr Hyndman had sat down beside Daniel to talk to him in a lower voice to have a more private conversation. "Daniel", he started, his beard once again making it hard to make out his expression. "We are very honoured you asked us to be your child's godparents." He did not wait for an answer but proceeded with a sigh. "I am sorry if my wife's curiosity seemed intrusive."

Daniel shook his head. "Oh, no harm done, sir", he ensured.

"Yes, you know how she is. And Herbert... well, he was her cousin."

If only Mr Hyndman had known that his continuous talk about Herbert was much more unsettling to Daniel than any brashness of his wife.

"She likes to fancy herself a researcher. And right now, she is determined to find out what exactly has happened to that expedition. She is coming up with the most abstruse theories. Do you want to know what she said to me just recently?"

Daniel did not want to know.

"She said, she suspects an ancient curse behind all this." Mr Hyndman stared at Daniel with a face that obviously expected roaring laughter. Daniel could not even cough out a giggle. "Well you know how people are these days", Mr Hyndman continued. "Give them a magic trick and they believe the occult to be behind it all." He made a dismissive gesture towards his wife.

Mrs Hyndman, who had been conversing animatedly, shot Daniel a short glance. She must have overheard her husband's last sentence. But instead of glaring at him, she looked at Daniel. And he could not help but feel her gaze was a whole lot too knowing.

"Mr Hyndman...", Daniel started, without really knowing what it was that he wanted to say. Should he tell the truth about the Shadow? But then, how would he explain his own escape? Would Mr Hyndman believe him? Or would he consider him delusional, just like his wife?

But before he could finish the sentence, Mr Hyndman interrupted him. "Forget about all this. What matters today is to be cheerful. You have given us your trust, and I shall return the favour. You should call me Samuel", he said almost solemnly and put a hand on Daniel's shoulder. With that, he clearly considered their quite one-sided conversation to be over.

After everyone had left, it was in the late afternoon, and Daniel felt exhausted. It had been a while since he had last found himself in the company of a whole group of people. He was not used to the presence of others being this tiring for him. It had strained him a lot more than he would have expected. And over all of this, he could

not get the look Mrs Hyndman had given him out of his head.

It was a relief to finally have his undisturbed privacy again.

He sent the nursemaid home and returned to Alexander alone. Daniel sat down, took the sleeping boy out of his cradle in his arms and let his fingers lightly brush over one soft cheek of the small face.

So from now on, he would be Alexander Mayfair.

The cleric had been right. Daniel did not know how long it would take until remembering Hazel would stop hurting so badly that it choked him. But right now, there was something more important calling for him. When he looked upon the baby, Daniel was filled with so much warmth and protectiveness, it was close to unbearable. He had expected it to be because his admiration for the man Alexander had been was so great, and that it was gratitude, or dutiful commitment that made him feel this way.

It was just then, with a sudden rush of excitement, he realized, it was not. Well, not solely, at least. A noise Alexander made startled Daniel. The child's hand reached for his collar, as if it knew.

And what Daniel saw resting in his arms, relying on him, was his family.