

Tabula Rasa

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Kapitel 1: Now It Is My Turn

As he came back to his senses, Daniel could barely see. The room was still dimly lit by a handful of torches that hadn't burned down yet. In the half-dark, every shadow was cut into the walls as if with a sharp knife. The flickering of the red light lingered on the floor, and through the haze of darkness over his eyes, it seemed as if it moved and shifted, almost like...

With a gasp, he jolted up to look around himself. He was familiar with the tide of fear building up inside of him, threatening to overcome him and crush him as it had done so many times already. Trying to keep his breaths long and even, he rubbed his eyes to clear his vision. But there was no flesh-like tissue covering the walls as he had expected. Still he anticipated the ghastly howl that had pursued him even in his dreams. Yet as he stood completely still and concentrated on his hearing, he couldn't detect the faintest noise except for the quiet crackling of fire.

As he looked up at the altar, he noticed that the orb, too, was nowhere to be found.

He almost did not dare believe it. Was the Shadow really...gone...?

But that was impossible, he still recalled it so clearly! This very room had been completely consumed by the horrors, he remembered the creature engulfing him, the light of the orb exploding beneath his hands, and his own screams. Screams for...

Alexander!

He turned his head so quickly he got dizzy, looking around for the other man. No trace of him, even though Daniel knew for sure he had been with him when he had lost his consciousness, firmly grasping Daniel's wrists.

When he tried to get up, he realized he should have waited a few more minutes, as his knees gave in immediately. He was not sure whether it was out of relief or exhaustion though.

Where could Alexander have gone? Surely he would not just leave Daniel lying here? He had so many questions! What had happened? Had they managed to ban the Shadow? Was he finally free? Had Alexander saved him? When first his anger had boiled up at Alexander's absence, as he closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths, he felt an unusual warmth grow instead inside of him. It took him a moment to realize that it was overwhelming gratitude. All at once, tears streamed down his face and he could not keep himself from calling for Alexander, his voice a hoarse croaking.

When no answer followed and Daniel still could not get up, he looked around the room once more, wiping the incessant flow of tears from his cheeks. But the smile that had started spreading on his chapped lips froze quickly. An ice-cold thought had crossed his mind.

What if the Shadow had consumed Alexander? Daniel remembered his words, that the Shadow could be lead astray by the blood of another...

Alexander wouldn't have sacrificed himself to save him, Daniel... would he? Panic rising within him again, he called for Alexander once more, louder this time. Still, no answer.

But wait, wasn't there a noise...? Something like a weak whimper... Daniel scrambled to his feet, a sudden headache almost making him keel over again. A hand pressed against his forehead, he forced himself to keep standing and look around the room. He propped himself up on the altar while carefully walking around it. He had no idea what he was most afraid to see. Images of maimed and torn bodies sprang to his mind, so vivid he could almost smell the disgusting stench of their ripped intestines. It took him all his willpower to look down on the ground behind the stone.

What lay there were clothes, Alexander's clothes it seemed. His red jacket was all bunched up, and now that Daniel moved closer he saw, and he had to muffle another scream with one hand, that it moved! Carefully, he got down on one knee to take hold of one sleeve and, trying to ready himself for the worst, he hesitantly pulled it away.

What came to light was the last thing he had expected. There on the stone floor, nestled into Alexander's clothes, was a baby. As Daniel stretched out a hand to touch its little arm, to assure himself that this was real, he noticed that the poor thing was freezing. Instinctively, he raised it off the ground, properly wrapped it into the jacket and held it in his arms. The baby stopped its whining and became quiet immediately.

"Where did you come from...?", Daniel asked absent-mindedly.

A small child was so very ordinary opposed to these otherworldly horrors and in its helplessness so entirely non-threatening that he could hardly take much notice of it now, his mind preoccupied with more unsettling questions.

The infant sniffed a few times and then opened its eyes to look up at Daniel. It nearly took his breath away. Bright amber eyes stared directly at him, eerily conscious, as they had done so many times before. Daniel was glad he didn't drop the child out of sheer shock. He went to the walls, towards one of the torches, to let it light the baby's face. Never had he seen someone else with such an uncommon eye colour in his life. But could it be...? He knew the orb possessed great powers over what was probably nothing else but time and space. And maybe, in a way, it could rob people of their lives in different ways than he had imagined.

"Alexander", he whispered, and the baby in his arms contently snuggled up against him.

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It had been early when he hurriedly left Brennenburg. He was still weakened and tired, but he could not have stayed a single second longer in this place. As he pushed the grand front gates open, the sunlight was warm and blindingly bright. He raised

one hand to shield his eyes, and through his fingers he saw the whole glistening beauty of the forest on a late summer morning. Were these the same woods that had left him with such a dark and gloomy impression at his arrival? The smell of moist earth, the concerto of singing birds and trees swaying in the breeze, the warmth, the clarity of the air, he took it all in with the wonder of someone who had never experienced anything like it.

With his hastily packed bag over his shoulder and the baby in his arms, it was difficult to progress, especially because his body was exhausted from the experiences of the last few weeks. Yet he felt a weird lightness to his steps. Maybe it was the relief, the weight of constant fear lifted from his shoulders.

Even though he had taken more and more breaks, he arrived at the gates of Altstadt before dusk. The merchants he passed on the town square were about to close up their stalls. One of them noticed his condition and lead him to the inn. Daniel thanked the man before he looked up at the sign and a resigned laugh escaped him. Of course. Die Mühle. It seemed ages ago.

The innkeeper did not recognize him immediately. It was when Daniel started talking, that his eyes went wide and he gestured at him excitedly.

"Wir dachten schon, wir würden Sie nie wieder sehen!", the man greeted him with his broad Pomeranian dialect that made it hard for Daniel to understand him.

He remembered how fearful they had all been at his announcement to go to Brennenburg about two weeks ago. They had talked about superstitions, about monstrosities wandering the forests at night, about the castle being the Devil's lair. That would have explained the way they treated him now, as if he had clawed his way out of the deepest depths of Hell. That certainly resonated with how he felt.

"Kann mich nicht daran erinnern, dass Sie ein Kind dabei hatten", said the innkeeper. Daniel would have expected him to get suspicious about the child, but instead, the man seemed confused. After a short moment of silence, the innkeeper inquired as to where the child had come from. Daniel mumbled something about having rescued it somewhere, and the man nodded with a compassionate glance at the little bundle in Daniel's arms. "Guter Mann."

Daniel made a half-hearted sound of agreement, thankful that the man did not probe him any further. He would have to come up with a better excuse, and soon, Daniel thought. People wouldn't be this gullible in London.

Apart from that, he did not get asked too many questions. It seemed as if his host had told his own version of what this strange Englishman had gone through and accomplished to the whole rest of the town. The locals were astonishingly supportive, especially the innkeeper who treated him with a mixture of admiration, fear and sympathy. Daniel realized he really must look like someone who had gone through nightmarish terrors.

The innkeeper's wife helped him out with fresh cloth and a bottle to feed the child,

while prattling on and on in this hard to understand dialect as she doted over the baby like only a mother could.

He had expected people to be more wary towards him, but then again, maybe it was normal for a man to travel with an infant. He wouldn't have known after all. He hadn't carried a baby in his arms since...

Fortunately, he had not quite forgotten his way around a nursing bottle, which as he realized was not exactly befitting for a grown man like him. But it could not be helped. He remembered how to mingle water and bread into pap - what he had not done before though was boiling out the bottle. Alexander had taught him about the importance of sterility, and even though the concept still was a bit strange to him, he did not want to take chances.

The changing of nappies became an inevitable necessity as well. He knew he was not doing all too good, but the innkeeper's wife taught him how to properly swaddle the baby with an indulgent smile.

He spent his time writing letters, arranging his return to England, and musing over the little being that grasped for his collar and hair with a gurgling laugh. The baby seemed to be healthy, which gave him comfort.

It was the first day after his arrival in Altstadt which allowed him some leisure that he sat down by the bed on which the baby scrambled about until it rolled over and stared at him with surprise. It opened its mouth with a plopping noise. Then it laughed, with both hands holding onto one of its feet.

Daniel settled down on the floor, folded his arms on the mattress and rested his head on it. He still found it hard to believe that this should be Alexander, the sublime, tall man who had taken Daniel under his wing. On the other hand, even he himself had been this small once, no matter how hard that was for him to imagine. Nevertheless, this was all so surreal to him. That a grown man should be reduced to a child, incapable of speaking, not even able to walk! But he had accepted the invasion of the supernatural in his life long before. Beyond all that, he was far from challenging the proceeding of things. To see Alexander turned into a frail but very alive baby certainly was better than having to behold his shredded remains.

He shuddered. The infant, now very close to his head as Daniel noticed, winced at that. It sat down on its behind, facing Daniel, and reached for his hair to weakly pull at a strand. Daniel smiled and tugged the strand out of the baby's minute hand.

"You probably don't remember me", he said, knowing that his little opponent would not understand him. But he needed someone to talk to right now. The baby's eyes shot up to meet his, to look at him again in this eerily aware way. Maybe it does understand, Daniel thought, even if not completely. "I am Daniel", he said.

The infant gave a sudden, funny and decidedly delighted "aah" sound and flapped its arms.

Daniel laughed. The baby laughed in response. "You like my voice, eh?", Daniel asked. Then he let out a deep sigh. "I am still trying to puzzle together what has happened. I wish you could tell me."

But the baby only clumsily fell to its side where it kept lying, eyes still fixed on Daniel. Thoughtfully, he regarded it for a moment. He could not remember Alexander's skin being this dark against his own. On the other hand, Daniel had barely seen the man lighted by anything other than torches and the dim daylight that somehow managed to find its way into Brennenburg. And the eyes, these yellow, knowing eyes... those definitely belonged to the Baron.

He could feel his tears welling up again. Alive or not, Alexander had still sacrificed himself. Willingly or unknowingly, Daniel did not know. At any rate, he would not dare to doubt the man who had released him from his deadly curse.

"I will care for you, do you hear?" Daniel noticed his voice wavered, but he did not pay heed. "I will let no harm come to you. You have saved me, now it is my turn."

The baby, however, appeared to have fallen asleep.

The days were quiet and bright, the still hot August sun heating up the cobbled streets. Had he not been able to find sleep a week ago, Daniel now would doze off by the window of his room regularly, until the child in his lap demanded his attention. He had decided to postpone all pondering over whatever it was that he was doing there to after he was back home.

His mind was blank and he finally had all the time he needed to relax, yet he still woke in the middle of the night, sweat covering his brow and memories of blood sticking to his mind. In these nights, he reached for a flask of laudanum, but he had to restrain himself from taking more than a few sips, though that was hardly enough to bring much ease. He had gathered what he could as he had left Brennenburg, yet it was not much and he feared he would run out of it too soon. The only thing that could soothe him in times like these was the sound of faint breathing and a tiny hand holding onto his fingers.

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It had been days since his return to England, and he still did not dare to get back in touch with the director. To his own shame he sometimes did not manage to get out of bed until late in the day. When he eventually ventured out, he felt disoriented in the busy city, even though he knew the streets as he'd always known them. At the oddest times a sense of alarm would overcome him as if his body had not yet realized that the murderous thing was off his trail.

The museum could wait, he decided. First, he had to figure out this new... situation. Preparations had to be made. First and foremost, a cradle had to be purchased.

During the first days back in London, Daniel had considered giving the child in the care of a wet nurse, yet he felt highly uncomfortable with the thought of putting the

infant into the hands of a stranger. He was well aware that the baby's appearance with his golden eyes and darker skin would seem strange to others and he was not sure how to answer the questions that might arise. First, he would have to think of a sufficient and believable explanation as to where the child had come from and why he had decided to care of it as if it was his own.

But more than anything, he simply could not make himself part from the child, he could not even leave its side for too long. He was worried for the helpless little thing, transformed by a dark power Daniel himself did not even begin understand. Who knew what other strange things might still occur? Somehow he could not quite lure himself into feeling safe again, and he was anxious and determined to let nothing happen to his little fosterling to whom he owed everything.

After all, as unusual as it seemed, was it not only right of Daniel to take these matters into his own hands? They were both bound together by their dark secret, even if the baby had to be blissfully oblivious of it, and Daniel had a life-debt to repay. Leaving Alexander's fate in any hands but his own was not acceptable.

Also the child was not the only one he was so anxious for, though he did not openly admit this to himself. The task he had burdened himself with gave him purpose and he was loath to part with the comfort of the child's presence.

So he decided to raise the young boy on his own for now and keep it a secret as long as he could. To his relief, the baby seemed to be fine as long as Daniel kept him fed, warm and clean, and content with his company. Yet there was always doubt nagging, the worry that Daniel might not be able to care for him properly. After all, Daniel was neither his mother, nor did he have the nurturing instincts of a woman.

Oversight would be a horrible mistake, and Daniel was afraid there was something he did not know about, something he would inevitably miss.

The boy was rather quiet and did not cry most of the day, except when strongly neglected, which Daniel hoped to be a good sign. Yet he still was very clueless what to do when the problem was not apparent, and he would helplessly sit by the cradle, exasperatedly trying to figure out why on earth the child was crying so persistently.

Then, following a sudden intuition, he picked the baby up and started to tell a story, some remnants of a book he had read out once, in a soothing voice, and after a while, the crying faded into a soft hiccupping.

Daniel's nights were still restless, but now the screams that woke him were not his own. To ensure he would be woken by the cries, Daniel did not dare to take as much laudanum as he had become used to, yet as he spent a lot of his nights awake, it made little difference. Sitting by the cradle in the light of the flickering lamp, he even thought it relief from his nightmares.

Sometimes the crying was so full of anguish, he couldn't help but wonder if the child was plagued by similar horrors. So Daniel would always leave a lamp lit by his bedside, making sure that Alexander would not wake up to a dark room, and Daniel stayed by

his side and read him stories to soothe him back to sleep.

At first, he was reluctant to use this name, Alexander. It seemed odd, the meaning it bore too vast for this fragile little infant. Yet as he considered other names, it felt wrong. After Alexander had lost so much to save him, how could Daniel take this from him, this last remnant of his old self?

Alexander he would remain, and even though in Daniel's mind, the name was still laced with reverence and admiration, he found himself soon uttering it fondly when the child's bright eyes looked up to him, awake and curious, and tiny hands reached for everything they could grab.

"Alexander, let go", Daniel chided the boy softly as he tried to prevent him from pulling at strands of his hair, and he couldn't help but smile as the child got hold of his finger instead with a sound of gleeful triumph.

The presence of Alexander alone was enough to soothe him, to distract him from his own fears. Daniel had felt like treading water for months, and finally there was ground beneath his feet. This fragile child that had once been his friend and saviour was like his grappling hook to reality. Whenever he felt like he was pulled under by that whirling maelstrom of dread and panic, one look at Alexander was enough to hold him, to stop the world from spinning. He was still afraid and overwhelmed, but there was this tiny beacon that showed him the way and reminded him that the nightmare was over.

And for the first time in what seemed like ages, Daniel felt like things could be right again.

Kapitel 2: A Generous Thing To Do

Yet this wave of optimism that had gotten hold of Daniel only solved so many of his problems. He knew he could not hide the child from the outside world forever. The last thing he needed right now were baseless rumours about him. Those would be hard to avoid in any case, as he had been away for more than two weeks without much of an explanation. And, as Mrs Dinges, his housekeeper, remarked with displeasure, had left his apartment in quite the dreadful condition.

He recalled the time before Brennenburg, these last days before his departure. But somehow, it was hard to remember how he had felt back then. Surely, he must have been frightened, yet there was no echo of it in his mind. Daniel reclined in his chair, looked up at the ceiling and furrowed his brow.

It was in the evening. The days had been getting noticeably shorter recently.

Daniel sat in the study when Alexander was sleeping, leaned back in his chair, and dabbed the pen against his chin. He really had to do something about Mrs Dinges. If anyone was likely to suspecting something, it was her. She was a good and hardworking woman, but also very curious. He had practically felt like a smuggler, getting the cradle past her, up the stairs and into his bedroom. He could not go on like this.

As if on cue, she knocked on the door and asked him to join her in the dining room for supper. Daniel had not yet come to a definite conclusion how to address this issue when he followed her downstairs and he was very inclined to just postpone it for now.

Once he had sat down at the table and she brought his supper, Mrs Dinges took the decision from him.

"Quite a darling child you have there", she remarked, pointedly, as she busied herself with setting the table. Daniel almost jumped at this, though he was very aware that she had to have noticed the noises at some point and that she easily could have had discovered the baby when she did the cleaning.

"Yes, uhm, I", he cleared his throat. "I brought him with me from my travels." As truthful as this answer was, it was also very unsatisfying, and he knew it would hardly suffice.

"Oh", she said, and her hands stopped arranging the dishes as she looked up, doing little to veil her curiosity. "I thought he did look rather outlandish."

"Yes", Daniel was quick to concede. "Yes, he is quite strange, isn't he?" He considered himself an honest man, and thus he was not a good liar, but he had thought this through in his waking nights already and decided his version of the story would be acceptably close to the truth, considering the circumstances.

"Well, it is a long story", he scrambled a bit for the sentences he had already well-laid out in his head but that somehow would not come over his lips as effortlessly.

"On the expedition in Algeria I joined this summer, I became involved in dangerous events", he swallowed, hesitating to dig up the memories. Due to Mrs Dinges giving an alarmed gasp he hastily continued, "I do not want to go into the horrible details too much and cause you distress. So let me just say that when we were exploring the tomb, the doorway of a chamber collapsed and I was trapped."

With slight confusion, Daniel noticed that he did not see the darkness of the tomb before his inner eye as usual when he recalled the incident. No remaining, lingering fear of suffocating. In fact, he did not feel any emotion at all when referring to the tomb. It was as if he had read about it somewhere and was now reciting it. Puzzled, he lightly shook his head and continued. "In any case, I could have died in there, and it was the child's father who saved me. But shortly after, he became fatally ill. With his dying breath, he had begged me to take care of his son. I owed him my life, so how could I not respect his wish?"

There was conviction in his tone, as he steeled himself by thinking that there was truth in the core of it, namely that he unquestionably did a righteous thing here by honouring such a debt. Still, he could not look up to her and see whether she was eyeing him more skeptically, so he distracted himself by rearranging his napkin.

"The child had no family left to care for it", he added almost defensively, "So I took it with me." Daniel faltered as he looked up and saw that her knitted brow confirm his worries. But he had practiced this, he knew what he was saying, and most importantly he felt that any doubt she had for him was highly unfair. She really was not in any position to question his choices, was she?

"As someone interested in anthropology, this could prove to be thrilling, to see this boy grow up in our civilised society. I am sure", he closed, defiantly this time, "I could make a fine gentleman out of him."

For a moment, she simply looked at him and he realized how this all must have sounded, shocking and adventurous, and maybe even too far-fetched to her. But then, she nodded as she picked up the teapot.

"What a generous thing to do!", she announced finally, and there was admiration in her tone. "Unheard of, really! But very generous, to take pity with this little thing."

Daniel made a noncommittal noise and did his best to appear rather preoccupied with stirring his tea. As flattered as he was by her praise, now he felt a bit uncomfortable about it. But it was good that she believed him, definitely better than the talk that might arise if people would suspect he had a child with some foreign woman. A ridiculous notion, especially since no respectable man would have taken such a bastard child home with him.

He would probably do better and introduce Alexander to his colleagues soon, so there would be less room for suspicion, even if he was not exactly keen on telling his

tale again and again. Still he felt more confident, now that it had been brought to the test.

But Mrs Dinges interrupted his train of thought. "Has the boy been christened yet?", she asked. Her voice sounded oddly cheerful and nonchalant as she added, "I would not want to have an unchristened child under my roof, you know!"

Daniel almost choked over his food. He hadn't even thought about that yet.

"There is no need to worry about that, Mrs Dinges", he said as he tried to appear as relaxed as possible.

"Of course not, Mr Mayfair." She gave him a brief smile before she turned away to busy herself with the plates, but Daniel knew they would come back to this.

After supper, Daniel went back upstairs and immediately went to look after Alexander. The child was awake, greeted him with a little cry and eagerly wiggled in the cradle, waiting for Daniel to finally release him from his confinement. Daniel sighed, lifted him out of the little bed and on the ground of his bedroom, where Alexander promptly started scrambling about on all fours.

Watching over him, Daniel pondered. Did Alexander have to be christened? Of course, he was a child, but what if he had been christened before, the last time that he... had been a baby? Had the man even been religious? With a twinge to his stomach, Daniel noticed that they had never talked about it. Now that he thought about it, he realized he barely knew anything about the man Alexander had once been.

In an attempt to distract himself from these ruminations, he got up and walked over to the baby boy who thoroughly investigated his bedside cabinet while babbling to himself nonsensical strings of noises.

"Alexander, come here", he said and picked up the baby. "Look at me!", he instructed, and Alexander did, as if he understood. "Now, you will have to learn how to talk!", Daniel announced. "My name is Daniel", he explained very slowly and gestured towards himself.

Alexander kept gabbling excitedly.

"Daniel", Daniel repeated, with more emphasis.

"Gah!", Alexander responded.

Daniel tried it a couple of times, even with other words like "bottle" or "bed", and Alexander seemed to be very enthusiastic about their little exercise, his eyes wide when Daniel gestured at the things he was naming. But so far, the boy did not seem to be able to replicate his words. Even though he did answer with incoherent noises, the sounds were not even close to what Daniel tried to teach him.

Eventually, Alexander lost interest and wriggled about on Daniel's lap until he gave

up and put him back down on the floor so he could keep exploring the vast and exciting realm of the bedroom under Daniel's watchful eyes.

Anyway, Daniel thought to himself, if I want to introduce him as my adoptee, he will have to be christened. He decided he would send for a cleric as soon as he found the time.

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First and foremost, however, Daniel felt he could not postpone the inevitable any longer. It had almost been a month since his return and he had to get in contact with the British Museum. The letter he wrote to announce he was back in London was rather vague. He did not want to disclose many details of his whereabouts, although he dreaded the questions that would arise.

When he finally prepared himself to visit to the museum, he realized that he could hardly leave Alexander alone and unsupervised. For this one day, it might be alright, once Mrs Dinges did agree to give the boy his bottle around noon. Yet Daniel had to plan for the days to come.

Some of his work could be done at home, and he usually would write and take notes in his study, but he also had to consult specialists at the museum and the university from time to time, categorize artifacts that he could not possibly take home, and most importantly, he had to present and discuss his work and listen to the talks of others. His presence was required and he could not hole himself up at home completely.

There was no way around it - he had to employ a nursemaid for the times that he left the house. It made him a bit uneasy to think about leaving Alexander behind, yet he could not take care of him properly if he did not work. And really, it was silly to be this worried, he told himself, as Alexander was quite capable of spending a few hours alone already while napping in his cradle, so he would surely not feel abandoned.

Back at the Museum, he was more at ease. The familiar cool wide halls had a soothing effect, and with mild surprise he noticed that he was not too nervous about meeting up with Professor Samuel Hyndman, who had announced great interest in everything Daniel could report. After all, Daniel could not refuse him, nor did he want to - he owed the man a whole lot.

Hyndman was a straightforward and earnest man, who possessed a great passion for the ancient cultures that was nothing but admirable. He had been Daniel's mentor and supporter at the Museum ever since Daniel had assisted him with the study and translation of stone carvings in ancient temples. It was largely thanks to his influence that Daniel had been introduced to Herbert and could accompany him on his expedition.

"Daniel", the man greeted him as Daniel had entered the room. He instantly rose from the chair at the table, where he had been contemplating some letters over a cup of tea, to shake Daniel's hand with a genuine smile on his broad face. "Good to see

you again. Take a seat."

Daniel sat down on a chair on the opposing side of the table and Hyndman poured him some tea. The study was spacious, framed with massive bookcases filled to the brim with a substantial amount of books, some of them already very familiar to Daniel and others he would love to read whenever the opportunity might arise.

They exchanged some pleasantries, and Hyndman readily told him how the restructuring of the exhibits in the course of the moving from Bloomsbury was coming along, until he eventually put his cup down and regarded Daniel over the table.

"But enough of this, what about your endeavours?", he asked. His full beard, blond like his hair, covered most of his face and sometimes made it difficult to fathom his expression. It were those shining small, blue eyes surrounded by faint wrinkles, that revealed his interest. "You seem to have been busy ever since you came back from Algeria."

Daniel found it hard not to shift under his bright gaze.

"We are all very curious about this expedition. Little has been found out about the tombs, and we know even less about the whereabouts of Herbert!" He glanced down with a sigh for a moment. "Some even say it was all for nothing. That would be a catastrophe, Daniel." The last sentence, he uttered with emphasis, his piercing eyes right back on Daniel.

"Hasn't Herbert's journal been examined yet?", Daniel asked, a lump building in his throat.

Another sigh. "It has. But there are still so many gaps! If only we had someone who could help us understand better..." Hyndman furrowed his brow at his table and seemed to get lost in thoughts.

The lump in Daniel's throat had started aching, and Daniel feared his voice might fail him if he spoke up right now. He took a few deep breaths. Better. "I... could help", he said eventually.

"Daniel, my boy. I knew I could rely on you!", Hyndman exclaimed. "Yes, I had hoped you would suggest that. You were there, you can tell us what you have seen and what Herbert means by his accounts!" Hyndman stroked his beard with an accounting glance at Daniel. "Maybe you can even give us some new information!"

"Well", Daniel raised both hands. He suddenly felt very tired. "Well, I read through Herbert's journal and I don't think... I am of the opinion that he described all we saw very well." At Hyndman's disappointed face, he quickly added "But I have been into one chamber I suspect Herbert has never seen. I will give that a better look."

Hyndman nodded, apparently satisfied. He folded his hands on the table and shook his head. "Too strange, this whole ordeal. And a tragic story as well."

"So you believe Herbert is dead?"

"Let me be honest with you, Daniel. A lot of people try to delude themselves and others. I can not agree with this kind of thinking. We are doing nobody a favour with it. Neither ourselves, nor Herbert. No, I do not think Herbert is coming back."

Daniel swallowed. He of all people knew Hyndman was right. But hearing it from somebody else like this still made his stomach turn.

"We can only thank God that you made it back here safely before these strange occurrences started happening." He gave Daniel a smile that probably was supposed to be encouraging, but Daniel could not even meet his eyes.

"I will look through Herbert's journal and add annotations and explanations to the best of my ability", Daniel said to the clenched fists in his lap.

Hyndman must have noticed his unease, as he changed the subject immediately. "Very well. And what have you been up to these last weeks? We haven't heard a thing from you!"

More excuses, Daniel groaned internally. "I researched something I thought would shed some light on the expedition", he said. "It turned out to be... a waste of time though", he hastily added as he saw Hyndman's eyes light up with curiosity once more.

"A shame", Hyndman noted.

A short moment of silence, and Daniel realized he would have to come up with a change of subject this time. Before he could reconsider it, he blurted out the first thing that came to mind: "I have adopted a child!"

Hyndman looked at him in bewilderment for a second, then he laughed. "Good for you, Daniel. I am glad that you are keeping your chin up in these hard times." With a raised eyebrow, he asked, "But what about its mother?"

"She's gone", Daniel answered quick as a shot. Then, after another awkward pause, he elaborated once more about the Algerian man and his debt.

"For an unmarried man to raise a child, that is quite uncommon", Hyndman mused when Daniel had finished. Then he leaned forward on the desk, lowering his voice as if to tell Daniel a secret, and so Daniel did the same. "You see, Daniel, my own wife is expecting. Our children are our legacy. So we must put all our means into their education." Proudly, Hyndman raised his head. "You have my support, Daniel."

Strangely, this simple expression of acceptance made Daniel feel like a heavy weight had been lifted off his heart.

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As it turned out, getting back to work had been the right decision. Alexander seemed to thrive well under the part-time care of the nursemaid Daniel had employed, even though the boy was always happy to see him, which dissolved any of Daniel's worries. Daniel was sure Alexander loved spending time with him most, so he indulged him as often as he could.

Frequenting the museum again helped a great deal to make him feel like he had truly arrived home. Even with Alexander preoccupying most of his time in the evenings, he was more than able to engage himself into his researches in the hours he dedicated to working in his study.

Finally it seemed that his mind had gotten rid of the misguided assumption that he was still wandering the dark corridors and cells of Brennenburg, and with a sip of laudanum against the shivering and sweating, he would even sleep soundly.

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Now that he had settled into this new routine, there was something rummaging about in his head, as if he had forgotten something important. It was about mid-September when he eventually got reminded.

"And how do you plan on spending your birthday, Mr Mayfair? With your family?", Mrs Dinges asked casually as she brought him his freshly washed laundry. At his surprised face, she laughed. "You would not forget about your own birthday, would you?"

"No, of course not", Daniel responded a bit more brusquely than what would have been necessary. In truth, all this stress and change in his life had kept him so busy that he had indeed forgotten all about his upcoming birthday. First, he was shocked just how preoccupied he must have been. Then again, he mused, maybe having a surprising birthday to celebrate would do him good. Apart from Alexander, there had been no person in his life which he could interact with on a personal level. He recalled memories of his birthdays when he had been a child. Some were happy, some not so much. But one thing always brightened up his mood whenever it crossed his mind: The face of his dear little sister.

Oh, how he had missed her! He had hidden these thoughts from himself, not wanting to mix the gruesome deeds he had committed in Brennenburg to ensure his own sheer survival with memories of her. It was not until he remembered her laugh and her little hands in his that he realized just how much he ached to see her once more, how much he had been afraid never to hold her in his arms again.

When the nursemaid arrived, he informed her that he would be away for a day due to important family issues, and instructed her to stay until he was back.

Immediately he called for a coach to Canterbury. If he would have some time left, he thought, maybe he could pay his parents a visit as well. But more importantly, he would go to Canterbury Hospice. He knew Hazel was not allowed to eat sweets, so he had gotten her flowers. Cornflowers, her favourite.

The ride from London to Canterbury was not all that long, yet it seemed unbearable to Daniel. What a funny thing, Daniel thought. He had actively erased her from his memory for weeks, and now he sat in the back of the coach, fidgeting about like an impatient schoolboy. The day was windy and chilly, but the sun shone through the windows on Daniel's legs and warmed them. The trees on the roadside swayed in the breeze. As he regarded all this, once more struck by its clarity, a smile spread on Daniel's lips. Who would have thought he would indeed manage to leave all this darkness behind him, to see the sunlight again, to live and to reunite with his Hazel?

As the coach halted, he all but jumped out of the door, hastily paid the driver and had to contain himself not to run towards the building. He greeted a nurse who assisted an older woman with her stroll near the fence door, maybe a bit too gushingly, as the nurse raised both eyebrows and enjoined him to silence. He apologized, though he could hardly feel sorry, before asking her where to find the ward sister.

He did not even have to look for her in her office, as he spotted her just down the ground floor. He knew the elderly woman. She had been present when Hazel had arrived. She turned and gave him a courteous smile that quickly vanished from her face again and made room for her usual stern expression. "Young man, how can I help you?", she asked.

"Oh, I'm Daniel Mayfair", Daniel answered, feeling almost a bit offended that she did not remember him.

She gave a deep sigh. "Yes, Mr Mayfair." Another nurse quickly walked by and whispered something to her, awaited a nod and then hurried away.

"I am here to see my sister, Hazel!" He put a bit more emphasis to his words, seeing how the ward sister seemed to be distracted.

"You have been away for quite some time, is that right?", she asked, eyes now back on him, but making no move to lead him to Hazel's room. Daniel, getting more and more fretful by the minute, nodded and added "I went on a journey, I suppose it has been a few months."

She still did not move.

And as he understood, it started happening.

In all probability it took only a blink of an eye, but for Daniel, the moment seemed to stretch on forever. He saw her hands clenching around her clipboard, how the tendons in her fingers protruded, how she slightly turned her body towards him to face him better. The world started turning at the assumption that he did not want to make.

She opened her mouth, but Daniel noted that he did not want to know what she had to say. Her lips moved, but he could not hear a thing. Her eyes went wide. Suddenly, there was nothing but the white ceiling and the rustle of flowers scattering on wooden panels.

How have I gotten to the floor?, Daniel asked himself before the ground gave in beneath him and he fell into the nothingness.

Kapitel 3: God's Work

He had been all too ready to assume all this had just been a bad dream when he woke up, eyes still closed and trying to make himself believe he was at home in his own bed. But as he had looked around to find himself still in the hospice, he had known there was no way to escape. The nurses had helped him up and made sure he was alright before sending him on his way again.

Like a sleepwalker, he had shuffled through the streets of his hometown. Only a few weeks ago, he had wanted to return to this place so much. Now he could not even lift his eyes from the pavement. His head was empty. He had not been able to grasp what had happened. He did not want to understand it. Every single part of his brain had seemed to struggle to accept the inevitable.

Eventually, he had stopped moving, like a passenger in his own body that had brought him here without his control. Daniel had looked up to see where his feet had led him. It was his parents' home.

The next thing he knew, he sat at their table, his spoon in a stew, mother and father across from him.

"Eat something, dear", his mother said with a weak smile and gesticulated towards his plate.

He lifted the spoon to his mouth and swallowed, but it felt more mechanical than necessary. He could not even tell whether the stew was particularly hot or not.

His father put aside the cutlery and wiped his mouth. Without looking up at Daniel, he asked, "So how was your little adventure." Gruffly, he added, "It's been months since we last heard of you."

Daniel tried to speak, but no word came out, only a suffocated squeak.

"For heaven's sake, pull yourself together, Daniel!", his father barked at him.

Daniel winced. As if he had just woken from a deep sleep, he stared at his father in surprise. "What did you say?", he asked, and when he saw his father furrowing his brow, Daniel quickly mumbled, "I'm sorry."

His father harrumphed and gave him a short glare. "We heard you have been to Prussia. Mrs Dinges told us, bless her soul. Without her, we would not know the least thing about you."

"I'm sorry", Daniel repeated, facing his plate again.

For a moment, only the sound of silverware against china could be heard.

"When did it happen?", Daniel asked, following a sudden impulse.

"What?", his father asked.

"When did Hazel...", he could not even finish the question. The lump in his throat was back. The stew seemed to look way more interesting than his parents' faces.

His mother gave a sudden, choking noise, and his father pressed his lips together. "Do not speak of it, Daniel", he growled.

"But..."

"Daniel!" His father all but shouted at him. Daniel jumped in his seat and stared at him. There it was, that face, these piercing eyes staring at him with anger and Daniel could almost feel himself shrinking, shrinking, until he was so small that his father could have just picked him up and thrown him to the ground.

He quickly glanced at his mother, who did not return the look. Her hands were clenched into the fabric of her dress. Even though they were hidden by the table, Daniel knew.

"You will eat your mother's stew, and you will be grateful that we still welcome you into our home." His father had straightened up to full height in his seat and glowered down on Daniel. Daniel cast down his eyes, sucked in his lips and bit down on them to hide their trembling. He felt afraid, ashamed, and unbearably upset. His intestines hurt as if knotted together, so much that he wanted to scream. Just scream all his pain into his parents' faces so they could not ignore it any longer. Scream until his mother looked up at him, scream until his father had to cover his ears.

But under his father's fearsome gaze, he was paralyzed.

"I'm sorry", he said one last time.

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This numbness did not leave him, not when he returned home and not the morning after. Hazel was gone. Even though it was hard to grasp it in its entirety, in its finality, there was the knowledge like a constant weight on his mind.

It took away any enthusiasm he had for resuming his work, but he forced himself to sit down at his desk and at least continue with his task of putting down his remarks and additions to Herbert's account, in hope it would distract him.

Even though reading through Herbert's journal had proved to be no problem for him before, now he could hardly bear looking at it without a creeping feeling of dread. He decided to leave the rest of the journal for another day and that he should rather go through his own notes again until he was in a less agitated state of mind.

Expanding his descriptions of the ancient corridors and chambers would be simple

enough, so he sorted through his papers scribbled with notes and took the pen to hand to add some more. He still recalled the stone walls in the light of the flickering lamps, the darkness in front of him spreading down the corridors that went down, down to the chamber.

It hit him all at once. There was a sudden strike of panic as the tomb swallowed him and he was trapped. The darkness closed in on him, and he gasped, helplessly tearing at the collar of his shirt. He could not breathe, the darkness was too thick. And while he was desperately struggling for air, he was all too aware of what was waiting beyond it, quickly approaching with an unearthly cry—

Daniel jerked at the sound of a door closing loudly downstairs and his eyes darted through the room. It was his study, with the books and dictionaries, his journals, notes and drawings, all crammed into the tiny space of the small room, and the autumn sun was still shining through the curtains. There was nothing unusual about it, yet Daniel's heart was pounding in his chest and he clenched his fingers into his shirt as he tried to catch his breath.

His notes were covered in ink, as he had pressed down his pen with too much force and it had bled on the paper, the dark spot spreading slowly.

Daniel felt horribly sick. He tried to get up, yet his legs gave in and he had to catch himself on the table before he could stumble to the door and barely made it to the bathroom in time.

He did not dare to enter his study again, so he lay on his bed, wiping the cold sweat off his brow and tried to calm his nerves by downing half a bottle of laudanum.

As he was lying there, dazed but not calmed, his heart beat sluggish but still loud in his ears, he watched Alexander scramble about with his little ball made of cloth. Daniel had bought it for him as a small present so he would have something to play with while Daniel was preoccupied with his work. Usually, he enjoyed the happy display of Alexander pushing the ball around and chasing it, until the boy sat down and contently attempted to gnaw on it with his little teeth, drooling all over the blue cloth. Yet despite Alexander's presence, Daniel's mind was racing with dreadful thoughts. We have escaped, Daniel reminded himself. He did not dare to close his eyes but kept them on Alexander, who was lying on the floor and completely taken in by his toy – this child was the living proof that it was off their trail.

The most frightening thought, however, was that even though he was safely back in London, the nightmares that had haunted his mind in Brennenburg might have followed him, waiting to resurface at night. It was this fear that kept him from finding any sleep.

The next day was not treating him any better. In addition to his lack of sleep, he was feeling rather ill. The dizziness did not leave him and it was hard to force down his breakfast.

"You look dreadful", Mrs Dinges commented.

Daniel mumbled something about staying in bed for the day and excused himself from supper.

Back in his bedroom, he discovered to his dismay that he had already taken all that was left of his opium tincture, and hectically searched for another bottle in his bedside cabinet. The lamp on top of it, which he would always have within a hands reach to light in the night, fell to the floor as he rummaged about inside of the cabinet with shaky hands and increasing desperation. Daniel jerked at the sound to quickly check if there was any crack in the glass. To his relief, it was still whole.

He sat back on the floor and rested his throbbing head on the mattress. So very tired was he that he inevitably drifted off into an uneasy dream of impenetrable darkness filled with ominous noises and unknown terrors. In the distance, he spotted someone. A little girl in a dress so bright it was almost glowing. He called out for her, but she turned and ran, and Daniel quickly realized why. The pitch black sky above him was crumbling, a deep chasm spreading quickly towards him. He tried to flee but he could hardly run for the ground was shaking beneath him. All of the sudden, the floor was no longer solid but strangely soft and unstable, sucking his feet in so he could no longer move forward. He could still see the girl. She was too slow. The muddy ground sucked her in as well, he could see her terrified face. It was Hazel! Daniel reached for her, struggled to get free, but in vain. He sank quickly into this warm and moist thing—

Daniel woke with a choked scream and found himself lying on the floor, disoriented and trembling.

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As the days went by he was almost sure that he was truly ill. His hands kept shaking and no matter how tightly he wrapped the blanket around himself, he still shivered. Whenever he got up, he almost tumbled over, as his legs were wobbly and his mind was swimming. There was a dull ache in his bones that made moving around rather tedious. It reminded him of when he had been terribly sick as a child, with his head hurting, nose running and his body shaking from fever. He felt vulnerable like this, restless yet helpless, and he did not dare to leave the apartment anymore.

When Mrs Dinges, who brought him soup he could eat in his drawing room, suggested he should go see a doctor or let her sent for one, the thought alone made him tense up. He declined with a rather blunt, "No, thank you."

"But what if you caught some strange disease on your travels, Mr Mayfair?", she insisted, slightly insulted by his rudeness, but no less worried. "Be responsible."

Daniel cut her off by claiming that he was already feeling better – a blatant lie that she did surely not believe, because she was rather cross with him from then on, especially when he did not show any signs of recovery.

It was his decision whether to see a doctor and none of her business, and Daniel

remained adamant about his choice not to send for one. The truth was that something about it made him feel very uncomfortable, afraid even. How he was feeling now reminded him too much of the awful state he had been in during his stay in Brennenburg. The last thing he wanted to do is confess to a doctor his dreams and fears. No one must know, and with this in mind, he kept hiding in his home.

Daniel spent his time mostly in bed, in a half-awake state, trying to keep warm by curling up in his blankets. When he could not bear the threat of nightmares creeping up at the corner of his consciousness any longer, he got up to settle in his armchair in the drawing room.

He took Alexander with him when the boy was awake and making loud protesting noises when Daniel left the room, calling for his attention. In hopes that it would keep Alexander entertained, Daniel gave him his ball so he could play with it while he tried to read something to occupy his mind. Despite his continued efforts, he did not succeed in immersing himself in his books. It was impossibly hard to concentrate and his eyes were awfully tired.

Almost dozing off over his reading, Daniel jerked awake when Alexander suddenly grabbed onto his trouser leg. The boy's tiny fingers were clinging to the fabric as he pulled himself up to stand, a bit uncertain still, supported by the chair and his grip on Daniel's leg.

It was not the first time Alexander had achieved this using the chairs as support, even though he could not walk more than a few steps. As Alexander looked up at him now, eyes wide, waiting for a reaction, Daniel forced a smile.

Apparently content, Alexander took a clumsy step and then let go to take another. Suddenly he stopped, as if in wonder over the fact that he had not fallen over yet, and immediately dropped on his behind. Daniel, who feared the boy would now cry, out of shock or because he was unhappy about his failure, quickly rose from his chair. His head hurt, and the room swam before his eyes as he bent down, so he hurriedly grabbed one small arm to pull Alexander up again. Maybe his movements had been too uncoordinated, for the boy cried out and tumbled over again.

Daniel let himself fall back into the armchair, his hand pressed to his aching forehead as Alexander started to wail softly. "Get up on your own", Daniel said weakly, burying his face in his hands to ease his pain and nausea. "I cannot help you."

The crying swelled on to a louder whining, a noise that was torment to his aching skull.

When the nursemaid finally arrived around noon, Daniel withdrew to his bedroom again.

As it turned out, she was rather excited about Alexander's attempts at walking. Before she left in the evening, she reported them to Daniel, who was sitting in his bed, propped up by pillows. He was still attempting to concentrate on the pages of his book and really wanted to hear none of it.

"Stop talking so loudly", he snapped at her. "I am sick. I need my quiet. And why were you not here in the morning?"

She did not even argue against this quite unjust accusation, because he had never asked her to be here any sooner, but retreated with a softly whispered apology.

However, she did remember his words and came a lot earlier from then on, which was probably for the better. With his nerves raw like this, Daniel could not handle the child at all.

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Daniel had lost track of time. He had been out once or twice, wrapped in a cloak and a scarf to ward off the cold, slightly disoriented as he stumbled hurriedly through the streets like a madman. He found the way to the pharmacist through the haze of his sleep-deprived mind, and once he was back home, the laudanum let him finally find some rest.

Whether it was thanks to the healing properties of opium or maybe due to him finding sleep again, he could not tell, yet as soon as he regularly swallowed a generous dose of laudanum, his body seemed to recover from the aching and shivering. His mind, it turned out, was not as easily cured. He could not get rid of the stupor clouding his thoughts.

Even though he slept at night again and did wake with only crude memories of his dreams, it was hard to get up in the morning and he kept haunting his own apartment like a ghost. Sometimes, on worse days, he did not get up at all.

If he could not bear his own thoughts any more, he drowned them in laudanum. At times, Alexander's screaming pulled him out of his deep dark sleep, yet Daniel would just lay there on his back and not open his eyes, the room spinning about him, his limbs too heavy and his head too light to move.

When he did not feel numb and tired, the weight that rested on his chest grew. It was so heavy that sometimes he feared he would be crushed by it. It pushed the air out of his lungs and made him gasp for breath. He lay in bed, his arms wrapped around himself, and once again he was overcome by the wish for it all to be over.

Every now and then, when despite his fatigue and the consumption of laudanum he couldn't sleep, he would even ponder how it could be done. His burning eyes would not stay closed and so he stared at the ceiling, and pictures of himself drowning filled his thoughts. He wondered how it might feel, how quickly it would release him.

And while the thought was weirdly comforting, the small part of him that still hurt was surprised by it. Not at the outrageousness of these considerations. There were memories of his childhood, of the priest admonishing the congregation about the sixth commandment: Thou shalt not kill. He had talked about how this rule did not only extend to others, but also to oneself, about how no human had the right to

decide over the day of death. Daniel remembered the priest's words clearly, as he had recalled them numerous times just a few weeks back, to reassure himself of the righteousness of his own actions.

Only God had the judgment over life and death, and that fiendish terror definitely had not been under His command. It had only been just for Daniel to defend his own life from this creature of malignity. Those who had been sacrificed for it had been doomed through their misdeeds anyway. Daniel had only done God's work with cleansing the earth of their filth.

But Hazel... she had done nothing to deserve this fate.

It was so unfair.

Daniel choked and rolled on his side. If only he could have cried. But there was nothing but a dull pain in his head. The priest's word did not mean anything compared to this. There could be nothing worse than this.

Then again, had he not been this miserable before? In Algeria, back in London and then in Brennenburg, yet he had never considered ending... it.

Maybe, he pondered, it had been because his whole mind had been set on making it out of this hell alive. He had done all this, he had run and struggled and kicked and screamed to save his own bare life, to be safe, to get home.

But now that he was home, Daniel thought, what had it given him? He had fought so hard for his right to live, he had wrested his soul out of the devil's hands, and for what? To come back to loneliness, to darkness, to nightmares and to loss. If God had allowed him to live through everything he had had to endure, then why had He taken away what meant most to him? Was this supposed to be some kind of cruel, divine joke? But could something be divine and unfair at the same time?

The dull, painful throbbing in Daniel's head became stronger. He groaned and pressed his knuckles to his temples and squeezed his eyes shut. He wanted to stop thinking, but the whirlwind that had started building up in his head could not be stopped.

At once, it was like a sudden shaft of light broke through the tempestuous chaos.

God was not to blame. A being as pure and innocent as his dear Hazel could never have been taken from this world by God. Somebody else was at fault for this.

The idea had given him a sudden surge of energy. He sat up, far too quickly as his still pounding head reminded him. But he did not care. As he got up on his feet, for a second everything went black before his eyes and he swayed a little, so he held on to the bed post until the room stopped turning. There were still sparks flying before his vision when he got dressed and hurried down the stairs to call for a coach.

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Dark, high skies spanned over the town and its graveyard. The cold wind was pulling at Daniel's clothes and hair, the smell of snow lying heavily in the air. His eyes were stinging, and his hands were clenched to fists at his sides. In front of him the small grave with the even smaller gravestone. Hazel Mayfair, 1824 – 1839, he read for about the fiftieth time.

He waited. He was expecting the grief to overcome him, for his weak knees to finally give in, for his tired eyes to finally start crying. But instead, all that grew inside of him was anger. The more often he read the words that were delicately engraved into the cold and heavy stone, the higher the bile boiled within him, until his teeth were clenched so hard that his lower jaw started hurting.

Where had his parents been? Not just when Hazel had died, but all these years before? Where had they been when the girl had needed them the most? It had been him, Daniel, who had read her stories until deep at night when her coughing and fever would not let her sleep. It had been him who had comforted her, who had tried to give her hope when she was upset. When she had lashed out, desperate in her helplessness, it had been him who had endured it and calmed her. Her distorted little face rose from the depths of his memory, as if through the surface of restless water, and it was like looking into a mirror.

There had always been things that he could have blamed his father for. Yet Daniel had never criticised him, had not even dared to think of it! His own cross, he could bear. But this was for Hazel's sake.

He turned around and stormed off. A man who took care of the graves gave him an indignant glance, but Daniel did not care.

This time, he found his way to his parents' home consciously. Walking through their door this upright, he felt as if he had become a giant. His father came downstairs, already exasperated. "How can you dare to make such an upheaval?", he said, then he looked upon Daniel, and pressed his lips together. "Go into the drawing room and wait there. And stop making such a racket. You know how that upsets your mother."

He did as he was told. A few minutes later, his father joined him. He sat down in an armchair opposing Daniel. "What is it now?", his father asked impatiently.

Daniel took a deep breath. And when that didn't work, he took another one. "I want to know what happened to Hazel."

His father stared at him in bewilderment for a moment, then he said "Well, she died of course."

"But how? When? Why?", Daniel revolted, surprised at his own courage.

His father furrowed his brows again. "She had lived a lot longer than we had all expected, Daniel. We should be grateful she was given so much time."

"But..."

"Gracious goodness, Daniel! She was sick, she has always been sick! There is no sense in denying the undeniable! She was going to die, she did die. And she would be glad too, knowing that she is no longer a burden to us!"

Daniel sat there, motionless, only his hands trembling with badly concealed anger. "A burden to you...?", he started out, trying to keep his voice down. "How could she have been a burden to you when you have never cared about her well being in the first place?" The words had tumbled out of his mouth before he could hold them back.

He stared at his father in shock and saw the muscles in his jaw tensing. His father rose from his chair, towering over Daniel and glaring down on him with these infernal piercing eyes. Daniel knew, he had stepped out of line. What would follow was his punishment. He steadied himself for the first hit. Yet his father did not even raise an arm.

Nothing happened.

Something had changed.

And as Daniel got up on his feet, as if getting ready to run, he noticed what it was. For the first time, he realized that he was taller than his father. He could not pick Daniel up and throw him to the ground. Never again.

Daniel's surprise quickly faded. It had made room for the held back, pent up, aimless fury of a lifetime.

"All you have ever seen Hazel as is a waste of resources!", Daniel yelled. He did not care anymore whether his mother would hear. He did not care whether the whole world could hear. As his father did not answer, he continued. "You have abandoned her to that hospice, even though you knew she never wanted to be there! She could have lived! You are her family, but you have forsaken her!"

There were so many other things whirling around in his head that he wanted to say, but he could not grasp them. He did not know how to put them into words. He thought of the basement, of the darkness, of the darkness everywhere. In the tomb in Algeria, in Brennenburg, in his own apartment. And he thought of his loneliness, the coldness that was left now that Hazel was gone.

It was all his father's fault.

The man slowly shook his head. "You have not been there, Daniel. You did not hold her hand as she slipped away."

Something like icy water began to spread inside of Daniel and smothered his anger beneath it.

"She has always asked for you. 'Where is Daniel', was all she wanted to know." There

was no joy, no spite in his father's voice, only exhaustion. "I was there. I was the one to reassure her you would be back soon. We have abandoned her, you say? No, my son. It is you who has abandoned her." With that, he left Daniel to himself without another word.

Daniel could hear his mother sobbing just outside the door.

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 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.

Kapitel 5: Between The Wall And The Backrest

The streets were busy, not only with those who were working and running errands, weaving through the crowd and the coaches passing by, but also filled with people who had put on their good coats and dresses to stroll the streets on a nice summer day and do some shopping for leisure.

And really, it was such a lovely day that Daniel had decided to take Alexander into the city to look for a birthday present. After all, the 14th of August was approaching, the day he had taken the boy under his wing, which, theoretically, made it the day of Alexander's birth. Or so Daniel had worked it out. It would be Alexander's fifth birthday now - or at least his fifth year with Daniel. That was the only fix point they had in regards to Alexander's age, as Daniel was not quite sure how old the child had been as he had found him. But as he had been a small baby, Daniel figured he could not be too far off in any case.

Alexander held onto Daniel's hand as they walked down the pavement, his small fingers curling around Daniel's who in turn grabbed his hand more tightly. Daniel looked down at the boy in his burgundy tunic with his white round shirt collar poking out at his neck, and he smiled.

Yes, Alexander was a rather reserved child, but Daniel thought it was a sign of maturity and no need for worry. After all, Alexander was very passionate and talkative when it came to his interests. More than anything, he enjoyed being read to in the evenings, so Daniel thought a book full of children's stories a very fitting present for him. In fact, the boy had such an interest in the written word and was so good at remembering, Daniel wondered if he would be able to learn reading as easily as he had mastered talking.

Alexander had uttered his first word soon after he had learned how to walk across the drawing room. One day, he had demanded for his favourite toy by saying "ball", and then had continued to amaze Daniel every day. As it turned out, the boy picked up new words very quickly and it was not too long until he was putting his demands in small sentences. And as a result of Daniel's constant admonitions, Alexander had even started to phrase them more politely.

As the boy was getting more and more eloquent, Daniel could hardly read anything without Alexander interrupting and asking questions about why and how, and he would press on until they were answered to his satisfaction.

He was undeniably intelligent, that much was for certain, and Daniel was not too surprised. Alexander was and had always been remarkable, after all.

Alexander's intellect was however not the only thing that was striking about him. Whenever they left the house, the boy stood out wherever he went and drew a lot of unwanted attention. People kept turning their heads and commented in awed whispers as they passed them, but Daniel did his best to ignore them and held onto

Alexander's hand a little tighter.

He used to think that Alexander was just both an extraordinary and quite gorgeous sight to behold in his little tunic and white shirts. After all, he did look a bit unusual. Alexander's hair was still very pale and too thin to be curled into locks to frame his face like it was fashionable for children. His eyes had the colour of amber and he tended to stare at people even though Daniel kept telling him that this was a rather impolite thing to do. And then there was his skin, which had a rather strange darker shade, emphasized by the contrast to his hair. But even though all of this was uncommon, Daniel thought he did look quite neat and proper.

Yet he soon had to discover that the boy's unusual appearance caused more than admiration. What upset Daniel most were the preposterous assumptions people made when they looked at Alexander.

It had been on one of their first strolls through the city, when he had bought Alexander some sweets at a small store at the street corner. Alexander had received the bag from the shop owner with a clear, sincere "thank you, sir" before he opened it to eat a piece of liquorice gum.

There had been two gentlemen close by, maybe looking for a little something for the ladies they might be courting. However, rather than examining the different flavours of sweets on display, they looked at the boy with unconcealed wonder.

"Just one for now", Daniel told Alexander as they were about to leave, but he was interrupted by one of the two men who had been so interested in Alexander's behaviour.

"Is it not amazing?", the man told to his companion without even attempting to lower his voice as he gestured towards Alexander. "Here you have an excellent example of how the English civilization can even turn an exotic child like this into a young gentleman with proper manners." The other man agreed and even the shopkeeper murmured some words of approval, all their eyes on Alexander, who had stopped rummaging in his bag of sweets and looked back at them, wary and uncertain.

Daniel had felt the heat rise in him at so much audacity and took Alexander by the hand to leave the store. To make things worse, the man who had spoken gave him an approving nod as he was about to open the door, and Daniel stormed out on the street, fuming with barely contained anger and indignation.

It was horrible enough that his lie about Alexander's origins had entailed that his godparents thought of the boy as a foreign Algerian child, but strangers gawking at him like he was a savage was what truly outraged Daniel. He had wondered about Alexander's appearance of course, and he had little explanation except for blaming the supernatural forces which had turned Alexander into what he was. Yet if there was one thing he did know for certain, it was that the boy was no primitive savage of strange origins.

However, he had no way of clarifying that without disclosing the whole truth, and

even then he doubted anyone would have believed him.

So by now, Daniel did try his best not to pay any heed to whatever talk might arise when they were out in public, also for Alexander's sake.

Still, he could not help but feel righteous anger at such remarks, and when a woman stepped to his side to greet him, he was about to tell her that she should mind her own business. Yet he hesitated as her face under the dark bonnet seemed familiar to him, even though he could not quite place it.

"Mr Mayfair", she said with a courteous bow of the head. "It has been a long time, and you may not remember me. I hope you do not think it terribly rude of me to approach you like this. I was the boy's nurse for his first years."

Now Daniel did recognize her, yet was no less astonished that she would take notice of him while passing him on the street. It had been two years, after all. But then he suspected that this was probably due to Alexander who was admittedly easier to spot.

She smiled down at the boy who was still holding onto Daniel's hand. "And how is the little master?"

Alexander did not answer, instead he closed up as he often did when others approached him. That he had barely talked to her at all had been one of the reasons why Daniel had decided Alexander did no longer need a nursemaid anymore. And really, it turned out that Alexander could occupy himself with his tin soldiers and wooden toys while Daniel was gone, and rarely did any damage to Daniel's things in the drawing room when examining them on his own.

Mrs Dinges did not approve at all, yet she did complain less when Daniel always returned early to make sure Alexander would eat his dinner.

"He is doing very well", Daniel informed her with emphasis.

Her curiosity concerning Alexander seemed odd to him, as well as the way she had practically jumped at him in public which he could hardly consider appropriate. He still clearly remembered her complaining that something about Alexander's nightmares did unsettle her, yet that she had refused to say what exactly she had meant by that. Daniel had of course dismissed all of her complaints entirely and she had never mentioned such things again. Still, to him she had seemed not awfully distressed over losing her employment soon after.

"Alexander, now tell her how old you are", Daniel demanded, determined to show her that Alexander was growing up just fine without any meddling of a nursemaid. When Daniel pulled him forward by his hand, Alexander finally looked up.

"Five", the boy said, a bit defiantly.

The woman's eyes widened.

„Five?“, she echoed, and there was a note of disbelief in her tone that Daniel did not like.

“Well, in a few weeks. Is there any problem with that?“, Daniel asked, his tone harsh, yet he did not care.

“Oh, no“, she hastily assured him. “No, not at all. He is just a little, well, small for his age. But I am sure that is not too uncommon.” She seemed very uncomfortable all of sudden, probably rightfully ashamed for her insulting demeanour, and was quick to add, “I apologize for bothering you, sir. I am sure you are very busy and I think-, I think I should leave now.”

“Yes, I believe you should“, Daniel said with barely concealed anger. He did not bother responding to her awkward goodbye and with a bit of grim satisfaction watched her all but flee the exchange.

Alexander was quiet after this strange encounter, yet Daniel noticed he had raised his free hand to his mouth and cast his eyes to the ground.

“Do not listen to that woman“, Daniel told Alexander as they turned into an alley and approached the bookstore. “She does not know her place, and she clearly does not have much expertise when it comes to children.”

Yet he did not have to worry about it. As soon as they entered the store, Alexander seemed to have forgotten all about his former nursemaid and her rudeness. His eyes lit up and he pulled at Daniel’s hand, eager to examine the books on the shelves.

Daniel wished he could wipe her bewilderment from his mind just as easily, but it did bother him still. What did she know, he kept telling himself. Alexander was perfectly healthy and well. He would allow no one to belittle him in any way.

Then Alexander urged him to come with him, and Daniel could not dwell on these thoughts any longer. “Well“, he announced. “Let us look for a suitable book that I can read to you in the nights to come.”

Alexander’s excited smile was contagious, and Daniel felt he could barely wait as well until he had new stories to read for him.

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The lecture hall was rapidly starting to fill. That was no surprise, after all a renowned professor on the field of ethnology had announced to hold a talk for his fellow researchers. His books had gained popularity ever since he had presented his findings about the indigenous people of South America. Anyone who was anyone in the circles of anthropology in London had come, and neither Daniel nor Samuel would have missed it for the world.

“It will be enlightening, no doubt“, Samuel said, as he took a seat and Daniel hurried to sit down next to him.

"Yes, though I have heard there are already some who dispute his theories", Daniel answered while adjusting his cravat.

"Well, there are always those who do not have their envy under control", Samuel chuckled, before he turned to greet an acquaintance.

Daniel used the moment to check his slicked back hair in the reflection of one of the darkening windows. But even after reassuring himself of his dapperness, he could not stop fidgeting with the seams of his vest. Samuel addressed him in order to introduce Daniel to his acquaintances, and Daniel had to force himself to stay focused on the exchange of pleasantries. There was something nagging at him and he felt the need to address it, even though he did not quite know how.

As he and Samuel sat back down, he mustered up his nerves.

"I have received a couple of letters", he started.

"Letters?", Samuel repeated, his eyes on his pocket watch.

"From your wife." Daniel did his best to sound not too accusing.

"My wife?" One of Samuel's eyebrows rose sharply. As Daniel struggled for words, Samuel put away his watch and sighed. "Don't tell me it is about this confounded expedition again."

"Her letters find their way to me on a regular basis, admittedly, with about half a year between them", Daniel explained.

He had secretly hoped Harriette would give up if he just ignored her inquiries and so far he had fared well doing so, but her latest letter had made it very clear she had read Herbert's journal and was very intent on knowing more about the artefact they had found. It had caused Daniel greatest discomfort. He knew he had to stop her disturbing his peace of mind, but he could not find it in himself to answer any letters on this subject. So even if he did not want to bother Samuel with such petty things, he had to turn to him.

Samuel's face grew darker for a moment. "I will talk to her, my boy. Trust me on this. Pestering my colleagues like this, the nerve!" The last words he only grumbled into his beard as the professor had stepped up to the lectern, conversations died down and who had not been seated yet quickly settled down.

As much as he had been excited to hear this talk, Daniel felt it was hard to follow. His attention kept drifting, even when he tried to concentrate. Now that he had brought up Harriette's letters, it was difficult to willfully forget about them again. Daniel loosened his cravat. It was harder to breathe as usual with his corset on, which he wore for important events like this. Even though the hall was vast, the crowd seemed to press down on him, and it felt like the ceiling was getting lower, the walls were closing in.

Samuel beside him cleared his throat. That pulled Daniel out of his musings and made him realize that he had been jiggling his leg apparently for quite a while. Embarrassed, he shot a glance at Samuel. As opposed to Daniel, however, the man seemed to be completely taken in and made no sign that he noticed Daniel's restlessness.

Daniel tried to pull himself together and pay full attention to the orator, but every five minutes he realized he had not been listening at all. Instead, he had concentrated on concentrating. It was a bit too late that Daniel became aware he was making a face out of annoyance at his own absentmindedness.

A break was scheduled about halfway through the talk. Samuel and Daniel went for the lobby where they were provided with drinks and animated discussions about the revelations unveiled by the professor so far. Samuel joined his circle of friends, a preoccupied Daniel in the tow. The noise of dozens of men talking around him blended together into what sounded like a humming, and it surrounded him completely. Daniel was throwing the wall closest to him a glance. Standing with the back to it would probably feel better than here, right in the middle of the crowd.

"What do you think about this, Daniel?" Samuel, who had apparently been involved in a debate with his acquaintances, suddenly turned to him.

Daniel, not wanting to let on that he had no idea what the current topic of their argument was, quickly stuttered "I-I think what you said sounds quite reasonable!"

Fortunately, Samuel seemed satisfied with the half-hearted endorsement, as he turned his attention back to his conversational partner.

The bell signifying everyone to return to their seats rang.

In what felt like a kneejerk reaction, Daniel quickly excused himself from his friend and hastened away, leaving behind a very confused Samuel.

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Back home Mrs Dinges was still preparing supper, as she had expected him later.

"Better too early than too late", she said as Daniel apologized. "It won't be long though. You can take a seat if you want to", she offered.

Daniel did as he was told and leaned back in the chair. He took a deep breath and noted how much better he felt. The calm kitchen with only Mrs Dinges rummaging about, it was so much more soothing.

He thankfully accepted the plate Mrs Dinges set down in front of him a couple of minutes later.

"I take it you have not seen the mess little Alexander has left in the drawing room yet...?", Mrs Dinges asked.

Alarmed, Daniel looked up at her. "Mess? No, I haven't! What... What did he do?"

"Oh, I'm afraid you will just have to see for yourself", she answered slightly indignant. "As much as I appreciate your effort, Mr Mayfair, do you really think a working man like you is able to raise a child alone?"

Daniel had no idea what Alexander had gotten up to again, but it certainly was not worth questioning his parenting abilities! He did not answer, but his lips formed a disgruntled line. So far, he had been holding up pretty well, and by now he was convinced there was not a single thing Alexander had been lacking in his life. To be honest, he was even sure there was nothing a mother could have given him that he, Daniel, could not.

After finishing supper, he would see to this himself.

Making his way upstairs and into the drawing room, Daniel prepared himself for the worst. Alexander was nowhere to be seen, and the same was true for the source of Mrs Dinges's agitation. Daniel strode up and down, inspected the carpet and the armchair, until he climbed on top of the sofa and looked behind it.

The space between it and the wall was too narrow for Daniel, but broad enough for a child to squeeze in. There was something down there in the dark fissure behind the backrest. Daniel took a lamp and lifted it above the chasm, but he still could not make out what was lying there. He furrowed his brows. How had Mrs Dinges even found this secret hideout? ...Had she been prying about...?

Pushing away the thought, Daniel hauled the piece of furniture forward. Mote filled the air, and Daniel had to sneeze. Quickly, he looked around the room. The sudden, loud sounds rose his hackles, despite the fact that he had caused them himself. Vague thoughts of something sneaking up on him under the cover of the noise invaded his mind. He turned his head and checked the door connecting the drawing room to the corridor as well as the one leading to the bedroom. Nothing there.

It took a moment until he could will himself to direct his attention back to the space behind the sofa. First, all he could really make out were a bunch of Alexander's tin soldiers. It was when he got down on one knee that he recognized some of them were missing limbs. He picked up one tiny arm. It showed traces of scratches and cuts, like someone had used sharp objects to sever it from the body. Daniel picked up another little figurine. First he had assumed he was holding it the wrong way around, but then, and it felt like missing a step when going downstairs, he realized that in the place of its now missing legs, two arms had been stuck to the hip with small bits of wax.

"You are back!"

Daniel, who had sat on his heels, lost balance and fell to his side with a sound of surprise. Alexander came from the bedroom, smiling and apparently with intent to greet Daniel. But he slowed down and then stood still as he saw the tin soldier in Daniel's hand. Anxiously, he looked from the toy to Daniel and back to the toy, his

little hands wandering up to his mouth to bite his nails, as had become a habit of him.

Daniel got up on his feet again and held the figurine in front of him. "What is this, Alexander?"

The boy did not answer. Instead, he took two shaky steps backwards, away from the toy, or from Daniel.

"Answer my question", Daniel demanded. He did notice he sounded a lot harsher than he had intended to, but there was this nagging feeling that pressed him forward and left no opportunity for reconsideration.

Alexander winced, fingers now firmly in place, pressed against his teeth.

The fear in the boy's eyes was what got to Daniel. He bit down on his lower lip and sighed. "If you keep breaking your toys, I will not buy you new ones. These are expensive, you know?", he explained.

As Alexander still did not move, Daniel put the toy aside and stretched out an arm to pet the boy's head. "Now stop that. I did not mean to frighten you", he murmured. Alexander's eyes were still fixed on the tin soldier. He was not responding through words, yet the apprehension on his face made Daniel's insides churn. He picked up the boy and carried him on his arm. "I have an idea, Alexander. Do you want me to read you something?"

That finally seemed to break the spell. Alexander tore his gaze from the mutilated little figurine on the ground and looked up at Daniel, though he was still confused. "How would you like to practice your poems a bit more, hm?", Daniel asked, putting up a carefree veneer to conceal his own worry. Finally, Alexander lowered his hands again and dug them into his skirt. But there was the trace of a smile already back on his face again, and Daniel returned it, in earnest this time.

Kapitel 6: A Voice From The Night

For the special occasion of Alexander's birthday, the Hyndmans had invited Daniel and their godchild over for tea. Usually, they had visited Daniel to give the boy his presents whenever they were not too busy and felt Alexander needed a new reading book or a nice new toy. Yet this year, they had decided it would be an excellent occasion to have Daniel and Alexander over at their place. After all, their little daughter was about Alexander's age, and all agreed it would be nice if the children made each other's acquaintance.

As the coach came to halt, Daniel made sure for what must have been the fifth time that Alexander's collar was not askew.

"Be a good boy", Daniel reminded him. "I want you to be at your best behaviour this evening, Alexander."

Alexander nodded sincerely.

It had been a while since Alexander had last met his godparents, and Daniel wanted him to leave only the best impression.

After the servant had taken their coats and led them inside, Alexander had taken hold of Daniel's hand, yet when Samuel came across the hallway to greet them, Daniel let go.

"There you are!", Samuel said jovially. "And look at little Alexander, quite a gentleman already."

"Nice to meet you, sir", Alexander said very politely, even though he was not looking up at the man's face, but at his vest buttons.

Samuel smiled at this. "He even talks like one." With that, he took Daniel by the shoulder to lead him down the corridor. "Now come, we will sit down for some tea."

Harriette awaited them in the drawing room, seated in one of the chairs in front of the richly embellished mantelpiece. No fire was burning as it was the middle of August, and the room was filled with bright sunlight shining through the drawn back curtains. Daniel had always considered it pleasant, as it was beautifully furnished and not cluttered like the salons of those who were desperately trying to impress. Instead, it was both tasteful and inviting.

Harriette rose from her chair. "So nice to meet you, Daniel", she said with her usual curt smile. Daniel wondered briefly whether Samuel had talked to her about the letters.

As they sat down around the table, Samuel urged them to have some biscuits with their tea, yet interrupted himself when the door opened.

"Ah, there's our little Mercy."

A nanny came in and brought their daughter with her, a girl with chubby cheeks and her father's blue eyes. Daniel had rarely seen her in the last years, as he had usually simply been over for tea or to drink a glass or two with Samuel.

"Isn't she gorgeous?", Samuel said with pride in his voice.

Little Mercy with her blue dress and ash blond locks was indeed adorable. Of course, Daniel hurried to say so.

"Well then, Mercy, say hello to Mr Mayfair here", Samuel told her.

Mercy smiled a bit shyly as she dutifully repeated, "Hullo, Mr Mayfair."

Samuel had already turned to Daniel again. "She is such a well-behaved child. And a bright little girl, too", Samuel said, and then added, as if the idea had just come to him, "How about the children delight us with a poem or two?"

"What a lovely idea", Hariette agreed and looked expectantly at Daniel. "I am sure Alexander knows a few nice ones, doesn't he? My little Mercy just loves them."

Of course Alexander knew a few poems and Daniel had actually hoped he would be asked to recite one, as Daniel had spent quite a few evenings on teaching them to him. Alexander was not as eager about poems as he could have been, yet once he had noticed that it pleased Daniel, he had developed some ambition in learning his verses.

Still, Daniel could not help but feel a bit apprehensive as Alexander stood there next to Mercy, all eyes on them, for he feared Alexander might be inhibited and self-conscious with others present. Now that they were standing side by side, it was rather obvious that Alexander was quite a bit shorter than her, which made him appear even younger and smaller. It did not help ease Daniel's anxiousness.

Mercy said a short silly poem in a clear voice, half-singing the words while she rocked slightly on her feet.

"Little Miss Waver
Sings with a quaver,
A musical maid is she;
Her voice is as clear
As any you see —
Let little Miss Waver be."

Daniel was sure she had mixed something up in the end, but he did not say anything but clapped his hands.

"Well done, Mercy", Harriette said with a small yet genuine smile and her daughter beamed at her.

"Yes, that was very good", Daniel added, and Samuel looked pleased.

Alexander did not sing. Instead, he spoke rather fast and had to take deep breaths at the end of each stanza. He had his hands put together in front of his tunic and was fidgeting with his fingers while reciting, yet even though he seemed rather tense, he did not stumble over the words.

"Ah, the moon is watching me!
Red, and round as round can be,
Over the house and the top of the tree
Rising slowly. We shall see
Something happen very soon; —
Hide me from the dreadful moon!

Slowly, surely, rising higher,
Soon she will be as high as the spire!
It seems as if something must happen then
To all the world, and all the men!
Oh, I dare not think, for I am not wise —
I must look away, I must shut my eyes!"

Alexander closed and then stood there, twisting his fingers and waiting.

Daniel was a bit disappointed, for he felt the poem would have made a bigger impression if Alexander had not rushed it so.

The Hyndmans gave a few claps of applause and Samuel said with emphasis, "That was lovely."

"And quite a long one, wasn't it?", Harriette noted, her eyes on Alexander.

It was then that Daniel realized that the poem had indeed been noticeably longer than Mercy's and his chest swelled with pride. He had not been wrong – Alexander was indeed very gifted.

"It goes to show Daniel has taken my advice and is teaching him well", Samuel was quick to reply at his wife's remark. "And see how a good early education pays off! To be quite honest, the boy reminds me a bit of our Rufus." This was high praise since the Hyndmans' only son was attending a renowned boarding school. As Samuel never tired of pointing out, he was doing very well in all of his classes and was thus destined for a promising future.

"Now, how about a reward for such a smart and studious boy?" Samuel rose from the couch and waved the boy over. As Alexander followed his gesture, he finally looked up to Samuel's face, curiosity in his eyes.

"Do you know what day it is?", Samuel asked him.

Alexander nodded, and Daniel was about to tell him to answer the question properly, yet Samuel was faster. "Then tell me how old you are now."

"I am five", Alexander answered and Daniel was thankful he was not clamming up. After all, he should be familiar enough with the Hyndmans by now.

"Which means you will soon be a young man", Samuel said solemnly, but Daniel thought Alexander still looked very much like a small child and not much like a man, however young. "And a boy at your age cannot only play with small tin soldiers."

That was not fully true, as Alexander had some wooden toys - Daniel had bought Alexander a nice spinning top just recently – but Daniel did not object, for Samuel was now opening the door to the adjacent room and went out.

When he appeared again, he and the servant were carrying a rocking horse. It was a beautiful thing with a painted saddle and reins. Alexander's face lit up as they put it down and Samuel announced, "This is your present."

Alexander approached it and touched the wooden mane carefully, then he looked up at Samuel again, who was waiting expectantly.

"Don't you want to say thank you, Alexander?", Daniel prompted as he could not bear it any longer.

The boy looked at him, then back at the man in front of him, and after a few painful seconds, he finally said, "Thank you very much." And to Daniel's relief, he smiled at the horse.

Still, Daniel made sure Samuel would know how much his generous gift was appreciated by thanking him abundantly and reassuring him that Alexander was very excited and grateful.

"Only the best for my godchild", Samuel said benevolently. "And there is nothing a young boy loves more than a fancy rocking horse."

"It still is Rufus's most prized possession", Harriette agreed.

"I think he is quite too old by now to find such delight in playing with toys", Samuel corrected her with an amused tone as if he thought this notion rather sentimental and silly.

However, Harriette did not respond or indicate she had heard him at all, instead she announced, "Dear me, it is almost time for dinner. I will have a word with the butler to see whether the preparations are being made."

Mercy and Alexander joined them for the meal, and Samuel stressed that dining together was very important for a family, because it would give the child structure. "Also, it is a good opportunity for the family to spend some time together", he added and Daniel nodded at this.

While they were eating, Daniel had the distinct feeling that Harriette's eyes were on him now and then, yet he did not dare to look at her too often to verify his suspicions.

After dinner the adults settled down in the armchairs in front of the fireplace, while Alexander was trying out his new present and Mercy sat on the couch with a doll in her arm, watching him intently.

Samuel was leading the conversation as they discussed the theories presented in the talk he and Daniel had attended last week. He readily provided Daniel with what he had missed or rather, his own views on what had been said.

Harriette was listening in silence, until she remarked, "Dear, how about something to drink? Your throat must be quite dry after all this lecturing."

Samuel got up to make sure they would be served some exquisite liquor, and as soon as he had left the room, Harriette turned to Daniel.

"A pity you could not respond to my letters", she said, her tone serious yet no less polite. "You must be terribly busy, I am sure."

Daniel, who had been watching Alexander rocking on his horse with honest joy, almost jerked at her remark.

"Well, yes", he hurried to answer, "I am."

"Then I suppose you are still tasked with researching any new findings about the tomb in Algeria?", she inquired, not even attempting to veil her open interest in this subject.

Daniel could not believe the audacity of her! Had Samuel not reassured him that he would tell her to leave him be?

"Yes, that too", he admitted, rather annoyed but trying to stay civil. "It is mostly difficult archaeological research and analysis." He hoped she would see that those things were well beyond her understanding, as she could hardly claim to be any sort of professional.

Harriette nodded. "Of course. I already feared there would be little concern about the demise of my dear cousin", she said matter-of-factly.

Daniel did not know what to reply to this. It was oddly surreal to him to hear her talking about such gruesome things in this homely room. The light of the setting sun was still warming the air and he could hear Mercy humming softly, accompanied by the creaking back and forth of the rocking horse. The memories about his days shortly after his return from Algeria, when he had received the letter disclosing the fate of Herbert's expedition, were distant now, far away, and trying to recall them was like wading through deep water. It almost felt like a strange fever dream.

"But I would still love to hear about what you make of these events, Daniel", she insisted. "We must sit down for a chat some time." Her dark brown eyes were once again a bit too knowing for his comfort.

Daniel made a noncommittal noise. If only Samuel would be back soon, he thought as he pretended to be distracted by the children to evade both her gaze and further inquiries.

Mercy had slipped down from the couch and was now standing by the rocking horse, apparently very keen on riding it, too. At first, Alexander's eyes shot over to Daniel, and the boy stared at him helplessly. Daniel gave him a reassuring nod, to which Alexander got off the wooden horse and stepped aside, allowing Mercy to try it. Delighted, she smiled at him and climbed on it without much hesitation.

To Daniel's relief, Harriette did not press any further now but contented herself with watching her daughter tentatively rocking the horse, until Samuel returned with a bottle of fine brandy.

After his second glass, Daniel's attention to their conversation started drifting slightly.

He could not help but to be worried about Alexander, as the boy had never met a child of his age before, but it turned out that there was little to worry about.

Alexander did seem awkward and not sure what to do with Mercy, and he kept throwing Daniel nervous glances, but the girl had pretty clear ideas how they were supposed to converse and play. Once he had sat down on the couch beside her, she made him talk to her doll. When she noticed that he was unsure what to say, she did not get tired of providing the questions for him. Daniel was a bit surprised to see that Alexander did readily comply with whatever she asked him to do, even though this pretend play with her doll had to be rather boring. Yet Alexander indulged her until the nursemaid came in and Mercy was sent to bed.

It was getting quite late when Harriette decided it was high time for her to retire, but Daniel still had to finish his third glass and was enwrapped by Samuel's wide gestures which accompanied his now very passionate speech about politics.

It was already dark outside when Samuel announced he was getting tired and he told his footman to call a coach.

Over the course of their long conversation, Alexander had fallen asleep on the couch, so Daniel gently woke him up and told him to get ready.

The footman of the Hyndmans's had already carried the rocking horse over to the carriage. So all that was left for Alexander and Daniel to do was bid their host farewell and climb into their seats. Alexander sat beside Daniel.

"So, did you have a nice time?", Daniel asked once the carriage had started moving.

Alexander nodded vehemently. "Yes, I had a lot of fun!", he said. "The horse is very pretty!"

"And you played with Mercy, didn't you?", Daniel prompted.

Alexander smiled as he nodded again. "Yes! She is nice!"

"So you were not afraid of her?" Daniel remembered how timid Alexander had been around her at first.

"A bit, maybe", Alexander answered.

"I know this was all new for you. You did very well, Alexander." With that, he petted Alexander's head and gave him a smile.

The boy, whose cheery mood seemed to have faltered at the thought of being afraid of interacting with Mercy, made a little joyful hop in his seat and beamed right back.

But the eventful day had exhausted Alexander. Only a few minutes later he had already dozed off again. He slipped to the side, his small body weighed against Daniel's arm. It had been a few hours since the sun had settled, and the cold was creeping into the inside of the carriage. Daniel could feel Alexander trembling, so he took off his coat and draped it over the child. He put an arm around the small bundle by his side that moved ever so slightly with every breath.

There it was again, this comforting warmth and the peculiar feeling of safety that overcame him and almost had made him fall asleep as well.

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Daniel had picked up the old whim of preserving his memories in form of journals again. It helped him calm down in the evening, reminiscing about the day and especially about his progress. Sometimes it was hard for him to grasp whether he was moving forward at all, the days passing by and merging into each other. It was helpful outlining achievements he had made, so that they would not be swept along with the current as well.

And progress he made! Due to his own commitment and Samuel's support, and despite his recurring difficulties to concentrate, he was facing few troubles at work. It had taken him some time to read through Herbert's log once more while making annotations, giving explanations and additional descriptions. Some squeezes of the ancient walls had been found where originally the camp had been, and Daniel had been charged with analysing them. For that purpose, Herbert's journal had been officially committed to him. To his own surprise, Daniel found himself relieved over this turn of events. Maybe it was because he could be sure that it was safe here.

His musings were interrupted by the door opening and Alexander hesitantly poking in his head.

"What is it", Daniel asked, shooting the clock a quick look. It was past ten o'clock. "Can't you sleep?" And with a gesture, he invited Alexander to come in and close the door behind him. He lifted the boy up and sat him down on his lap. The two of them were sleeping in the same room, and Daniel was used to Alexander having bad dreams. If they were only half as frightening as his own, Daniel could hardly scold him for seeking comfort.

First, Alexander did not answer. His little hands were reaching for his mouth again, but Daniel gently pushed them down. He gave Alexander time to collect himself a bit. His sleeping problems had not been getting better. The dark was a dread to him, and he preferred falling asleep with his little lamp on. Every now and then, he even crawled into Daniel's bed in the middle of the night. All this Daniel could understand, even honestly relate to. What worried him was that Alexander was still wetting his bed on a regular basis. Though by now the child usually changed his blankets all by himself in the morning.

Eventually, Alexander looked up. "I can hear a voice", he said.

"A voice...? What kind of voice?", Daniel asked, eyebrows furrowed.

"It is in my head", Alexander answered and pointed at his temple.

"Is the voice in your dream?"

"No, it wakes me up. It calls me. And it won't let me sleep."

Daniel tried his best to appear not too unsettled. "Does it say anything?", he asked, and then realized it might not be the best question.

Alexander frowned at the floor again. Then he murmured "I know you are there."

"What?"

Alexander raised his head again. "I think... that's what the voice says." He had started fidgeting with his nightgown and there was that fear written in his eyes again.

Daniel pulled himself together. He could not lose his self-control. Not now, not in front of Alexander, not when the boy was this frightened. "I am certain it was just a dream", he said firmly, giving Alexander's right hand, which was still in his own, a light squeeze. "Sometimes a dream haunts us even when we are awake."

"Why?", Alexander asked.

"Because our mind is still convinced that it was reality", said Daniel, rose from his seat, Alexander in his arms, and made for the bedroom.

The boy contemplated on that for a moment, then he asked again "Why?"

Daniel laughed as he put Alexander to bed and pulled a chair closer to sit down. "Our

mind is a complex thing, and sometimes it plays tricks on us.”

Alexander did not seem to be satisfied with that answer, but Daniel quickly suggested reading out another story to him, lest their conversation turned into one of the sometimes hour-long lessons the topic of which only Alexander decided. The boy did have an astounding attention span.

Yet today it did not take more than two pages before Alexander had fallen fast asleep. Daniel let his fingertips brush over his fair hair one last time before returning into the study, leaving one light lit by the boy's bedside.

His eyes were getting tired from all the reading. Nonetheless, trying to pick up his train of thought, he skimmed through his journal once more. The day before he had written about the evening with the Hyndmans, and how much Harriette's comment had upset him. He gritted his teeth just thinking about it. He had always esteemed her for her contribution to the Hyndmans's household. This kind of disrespect though, he did not appreciate at all!

However, the worst part was that she was right. As much as Daniel would have liked to be as dismissive towards that woman's theories as Samuel was, he knew better.

With an aggravated sigh, Daniel got up and opened the drawer that contained Herbert's log. Harriette had read it, that much was for certain. And the later entries made it pretty clear for the inclined reader that unearthly forces must have been at play. It was getting harder and harder to focus. The words were starting to curl into each other, as if the ink was liquefying on the paper.

Out of the dark it appeared, the faint, blueish light. But it was different. Those were not the chambers in Algeria Daniel knew, but the glow still seemed so familiar. And the light was reaching for him, almost like the orb had done, but he could not move. He could not raise his hands to grasp for it, nor take a step towards it. Suddenly, it was like a sudden surge of anger pulsed through the light. It flared up in a white so dazzling that even as Daniel closed his eyes, he feared it would blind him.

Daniel woke. The sun was shining through the half-opened curtains and right on his face, glaringly bright. While his head still rested on the desk, he shielded his eyes and looked over at the clock. It was about six o'clock in the morning. Daniel rose from his uncomfortable sleeping position and felt his back hurt. With a grunt, he stretched a little. He hated falling asleep in the study.

The first thing Daniel did was check on Alexander. Fortunately, the boy was still deep in sleep. Smiling, Daniel closed the door.

Time for a cup of tea, he decided, straightened his rumpled collar a bit and went downstairs to ask Mrs Dinges for a pot of tea. She offered him breakfast, but he said he would wait for that until Alexander was up. After all, he explained, it was considered quite important for children to eat together with their family.

She had not received any letters for him yet, but the newspaper had arrived already.

So Daniel was planning on reading up on the latest developments in the drawing room, but not before he had cleaned up the mess he had left in his study last night. The sun had climbed up a bit and its light was lingering on his desk. Now Daniel could see that dark blotches were splattered over the floor. It seemed like the ink jar had been knocked down. Furrowing his brow, he stepped forward and picked it up, then took a closer look at the desk to make sure Herbert's log was unstained.

His grip tightened around the newspaper in his one and the ink jar in his other hand.

All across the last page, the very same Daniel had studied yesterday, a single sentence was written with scrawly, smeared strokes.

"I know what you have done, Daniel."