

the Dark Days Deceit

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BOOKS

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*To Ron, for all the reasons,
and many other besides*

HALF MOON STREET, LONDON
9 DECEMBER 1812

My dear Helen,

Regarding your letter of 7th December, I understand that you would wish to continue your stay at Bath with Lady Ridgewell and Miss Cransdon. The company of such lively young friends would naturally eclipse that of your old aunt, not to mention the fact that your betrothed's country seat is so happily situated near that fair city. Nevertheless, I do remind you that I have not seen you since July, when the Duke obtained Her Majesty's permission for you to marry. Now that your nuptials are less than a month away, I insist that I join you to help prepare for your wedding and finalise your gowns for the ceremony and ball.

I had hoped you would return to London for such important purchases, but Lady Jersey has assured me that the warehouses and drapers at Bath are equal to the task.

I am aware that Lady Ridgewell has no spare room for me, but I have had an invitation from Lady Dunwick to stay with her and her daughter at their house in the Royal Crescent. Ever since they happened upon you and the Duke on the Brighton road before your official betrothal, Lady Dunwick has become somewhat adhesive. I will stay with her until other arrangements can be made.

I expect to travel in the next week and will write again soon with a firm date of arrival. I look forward to our reunion.

*I remain always, your loving,
Aunt Leonore*

Chapter One

THURSDAY, 10 DECEMBER 1812

Lady Helen Wrexhall refolded the letter and pressed its wax seal back together, as if she could lock away the news it contained. Aunt Leonore, soon to arrive at Bath. Lud.

Of course, she loved Aunt and wanted her to be part of the wedding, but it was a complication none of them needed. She tapped the edge of the letter against the hallway table. Her aunt and uncle, along with the rest of society, were under the impression that she had spent the last six months enjoying the delights of Brighton and Bath; not, in fact, training to be a warrior, masquerading as a man, fighting Deceivers, killing murderers, and becoming one half of the Grand Reclaimer with Lord Carlston. Helen shook her head. How was she to keep all that from Aunt? It was going to be impossible.

The sound of footsteps descending the stairs drew her from her thoughts. Lady Margaret appeared on the landing above, one red-gloved hand sliding along the banister, the other encased in a golden sable muff that matched the luxurious collar of her pelisse. Her brother followed behind, adjusting the capes of his greatcoat, his hat already upon his head.

“We are to the Pump Room for our daily dose of foul water

and gossip,” Lady Margaret said, pausing at the bottom of the steps. “Will you join us after you have trained? We are all invited to breakfast with the Grays.”

Helen shook her head. It was the fashion to breakfast with friends after taking the waters, but it was not one of her favourite diversions; she now had the appetite of a Reclaimer, and even when she restrained herself she ate double what a lady should eat in public. “Please pass on my regrets, and Delia’s too. We will breakfast here and then the Duke is calling to take us to the porcelain showrooms. I am to choose a new coffee service.”

“Another one?” Hammond asked, ushering his sister past Helen. “Is he restocking the whole of Chenwith Hall?”

“It is for the Queen, Michael,” Lady Margaret chided. She addressed Helen. “Has his lordship arrived yet? He and Quinn finally returned late last night, did they not?”

“They are in the cellar,” Helen replied.

She had not seen the men arrive, but had sensed Lord Carlston enter the house ten minutes earlier. The pulse they shared – a steady beat beneath her own heart’s rhythm that confirmed their union as the Grand Reclaimer – had sharpened into a call. She felt the incessant draw of it, like a pin to a magnet. The two men had been gone a week; a dangerous foray into Napoleon’s Paris to search for Carlston’s traitorous wife, Lady Elise. Had they found her? Helen lifted her shoulders and let them drop, trying to shrug away the hollow unease that always came with the thought of that woman.

“We should go down and greet him,” Lady Margaret said. “Perhaps he has orders for us.”

“His lordship has made it clear the morning is for Reclaimers and Terrenes only,” Hammond said, ushering her firmly towards the door. He cast a smile back at Helen. “Steer your

betrothed away from French porcelain. We cannot have the Queen eating off the enemy's plate."

Garner, the butler, opened the door. A blast of freezing air swept into the hallway. Another bitter day, Helen thought, shivering despite the warm wrap of her woollen shawl. Outside, two wet footmen stepped forward to hold umbrellas over Lady Margaret and Mr Hammond as they made their way to the carriage. Garner closed the door against the elements and, with a bow to Helen, retreated to the butler's pantry.

"May I go down, my lady?" Darby asked. She wore the blue gown she kept for training and stood waiting on the top step of the staircase that led to the basement, clearly eager to reunite with Quinn.

Helen shook her head. They must wait a few moments more; she did not want to give in, quite yet, to the draw of the Grand Reclaimer bond. Darby, at least, knew her regard for Mr Quinn was built upon the man's worth. Helen's link to Carlston had been created by some heathen alchemical force that pulled them together regardless of the turmoil it caused.

She frowned at the empty hallway. "Where is Sprat? Did you tell her to come down?"

"I did," Darby said crisply. "She is most likely hiding from the idea of work, or she could be outside."

"Outside? Is she wearing her shoes? It is raining."

"I doubt it. She won't wear her shoes or her hose. I've told her over and over, my lady, but she won't listen to anyone but you."

Helen gave a nod of sympathy; Darby was trying so hard to help the girl. "I know, but we must keep in mind where she has come from. She needs time."

Darby's soft mouth tightened. "It has been a fair while, my lady, and she still cannot do your hair properly or sew a straight line."

“But she is an excellent pickpocket,” Helen said, only half joking. Lord Carlston had used Sprat’s more dubious skills on more than one occasion.

The quip did not draw a smile. “The other maids think she’s been going through their belongings.”

Helen’s smile faded. “Has anything gone missing?”

“A few small things: pins and what-not.” Darby paused. “She swears she’s not touched them, my lady, but she bends the truth something awful.”

“Well, we must not assume she is to blame. Nevertheless, I will speak to her about it.” *Again*, Helen added silently. Rescuing Sprat from Kate Holt’s bawdy house in Brighton had been an easy decision, but it seemed the girl was not interested in morality or training to be a lady’s maid.

With no Sprat to ferry the letter upstairs, Helen tucked it inside her long cambric sleeve and finally led the way down the steps. The beat within her body quickened as they descended. While his lordship had been away, it had been vastly subdued; a blessed relief.

She pulled her woollen shawl more firmly around her shoulders. The basement was brisk at the best of times, but during the current stretch of dismal weather it was unbearably cold. There could be no doubt that their proximity to the River Avon added to the damp chill; the house stood in the middle of a handsome row along Great Pulteney Street near the bridge, one of the newer fashionable addresses. It lacked the space they had enjoyed in Brighton, but even so, the house was a godsend. Nearly all of Bath had been fully let for the winter Season and it had taken the Duke’s influence to secure them lodgings at such short notice.

It could not be denied that her betrothal to the Duke of Selburn held many advantages, not least his constant regard for

her comfort. The thought brought a smile. Not only was he refurbishing his country seat, Chenwith Hall, but he had also taken it upon himself to arrange a grand New Year's Day ball to celebrate their wedding. It was to be held in a new dance pavilion being built in the gardens at Chenwith, the crowning event of a huge Night Ice Fair that would mark their union. An enormous undertaking, but as the Duke said, their wedding celebration was to be attended by Royalty, so it must not be a meagre affair.

Mr Quinn was waiting at the doorway of the cellar, still clad in his thick coat. The windowless room currently served as their training area, and although not ideal – the only light came from oil lamps and the space was not large – it afforded the seclusion they needed as she and Lord Carlston tried to control their power. Only Quinn, Darby and Mr Pike, the bureaucratic heart of the Dark Days Club, knew that they were the Grand Reclaimer dyad – two halves of a whole meant to wield great power – just like their unknown nemesis, the Grand Deceiver. Yet, Helen thought, after five months they had very little to show for their efforts. It was true she could conjure the electrical fire, but they had no idea how to make the energy into a weapon, or, indeed, what role Lord Carlston was to play in the partnership.

“My lady.” Mr Quinn bowed as Helen entered the cellar. “And Miss Darby, it is very good to see you again.”

Behind her, Helen heard Darby whisper, “Are you well, Nathaniel?”

“I am now.”

Helen heard the smile within Quinn's reply. Such sweetness between them.

Carlston stood beside the wine racks. The capes of his coat still glistened with rain and the yellow light from the lamps

gave a golden hue to the planes of his face, reminding Helen of a gilded statue she had once seen of Michael the warrior-saint. The beat of their union thundered in her ears and she knew he felt it too. It was in the clench of his hand around the wine rack and the tension that coiled through his body as he fought the urge to step to her side.

He smiled, the carefully maintained space between them spanned by its warmth. "It is very good to see you."

"Indeed," she said. "We had thought to see you sooner." In her mind, however, she screamed: *Why did you take so long? Are you well? Did you find her?*

He raked his hand through his dark hair. "I was hoping to be back three days ago, but the news of Napoleon's impending return from Russia meant Paris was in turmoil, so we waited until things quietened down."

"Was your trip a success?"

His mouth tensed at the question. Clearly not. Then again, she was unsure what would actually constitute success. Lady Elise had been a spy for France and had betrayed Lord Carlston in the worst possible way, leaving him suspected of her murder. Her retrieval could only end in her execution and further scandal for his lordship. Yet he was determined to keep searching. Was it because he still loved her?

"Paris held no answers."

He looked away and wet his lips, the unconscious action bringing a shameful rush of heat through Helen's body. Even now, after so many months, she could still feel the touch of his lips on her own. The light, sweet touch of the Duke's mouth had not in any way subdued the sordid burn of that illicit memory.

"I am sorry to hear it," she managed.

He nodded and lifted one shoulder, as if throwing off the last seven days. "We have lost more training time than I expected.

Let us devote the rest of today to the problem of your power. I've had some ideas that may—"

"The rest of the day? But I cannot," Helen said. "I am engaged this afternoon to buy porcelain."

"Porcelain?" Carlston's hand tightened on the rail again. "With Selburn, I presume? Can you not put him off?"

"We must do it today or the order will not be filled in time."

His jaw shifted, his silence more eloquent than any comment.

"I am more than happy to forgo breakfast and work right through until the appointment," she added.

"Thank you," he said dryly. He took a few steps along the narrow space between the two wine racks, as much pacing as the room allowed. "Quinn, close the door. Make sure we are alone."

Quinn checked the corridor, then secured the door. He and Darby stood side by side, their unity and affection as clear as if they were holding hands. It all looked so natural, Helen thought. No confused questioning or divided loyalty.

"The trip to Paris did at least give me time to reflect upon our progress," Carlston said. He rubbed his eyes, his frustration palpable. "I feel like the third wheel on a racing gig. After all that we endured to bond, we do not even know how we are to share the power stored within you. Has there still been nothing from the Ligatus? I had hoped the new meditations would have had some effect by now."

His question brought a flare of guilt – she held the key to their power in her memory, but could not retrieve it. When the two of them had blood-bonded to become the Grand Reclaimer, she had simultaneously absorbed the Ligatus: a madman's journal written in the blood of slaughtered people and Deceivers. The author of that foul book, the rogue Reclaimer Samuel Benchley, had bound his victims' life knowledge and energy into its pages

by alchemy. Now all their knowledge was locked in Helen's mind, frustratingly inaccessible, and their life energy an ever-present hum in her body.

"Nothing has come to me yet," she said, watching him pace across the brick floor again.

He stopped in front of her, eyes narrowed. "How hard are you trying?"

That was unfair. Helen crossed her arms. "I am meditating three times a day as you said I should. There is something at the edge of my mind. I just cannot catch hold of it yet."

She did, however, have a terrible sense of what it could be: the screams of a dying infant. There could only be one such pitiful voice in the Ligatus: little Timothy Marr, one of the poor Ratcliffe Highway souls brutally murdered for their blood by Benchley. Every time Helen meditated she heard the infant's distant cry, buried deep within her mind but slowly surfacing. More often than not it was accompanied by such an aching anguish that her own sobs wrenched her from the meditation. She had told no one of it yet. First she had to control her emotions so the little voice could emerge; and then she had to find a way to contend with all the others who howled their pain inside her.

Carlston paced back to the other side of the room. "I think it is time to try another way. I have asked Sir Jonathan to join us. He has studied mesmerism. You are aware of the practice?"

Helen wrinkled her nose. The field of mesmerism was even more disreputable than alchemy. "If I recall correctly, Mr Mesmer's theories have been wholly discredited in Paris."

"Mesmer has been discredited," Carlston conceded, "but Abbé Faria has developed a way to access thoughts hidden from the conscious mind, and he has had some success. Sir Jonathan assures me the practice is safe."

Sir Jonathan Beech was the Dark Days Club's senior Tracer,

responsible for tracking the progeny of Deceivers so they could be returned to full humanity by the Reclaimers. Not, Helen thought wryly, a theologian or physician qualified to delve into the hidden mysteries of the mind and soul. Nevertheless, she must try. She held within her not only the answer to their power, but possibly a way to destroy the Grand Deceiver and the Trinitas – a three-part alchemical weapon that, if brought together, could rip open a doorway between their world and the otherworld of the Deceivers and create a hell on earth.

“It would be prudent to continue with your own meditations,” Carlston added. “The closer you can get to drawing on the information, the better for Sir Jonathan’s methods.”

Helen nodded, although foreboding prickled her skin. Little Timothy’s anguish was just the tip of the pain buried within her mind. What would happen if Sir Jonathan brought out all the voices at once, as it had been when she had first absorbed the journal? She was not sure she was strong enough to withstand such an all-encompassing wave of despair again.

“When does Sir Jonathan arrive, my lord?” Darby asked, ever practical. “Will he be staying with us?”

“He arrives tomorrow and stays only two days. I have arranged a room at my lodgings.”

At least Sir Jonathan would be gone by the time Aunt arrived at Bath, Helen thought. Which brought her to her own news.

“Lady Pennworth is coming here to help me prepare for the wedding.”

Carlston, Darby and Quinn stared at her with similar expressions of dismay. It would have been comical if it were not so serious.

“You must stop her,” Carlston said. “It is a complication we do not need.”

“I know, but she will not be put off any longer. Besides, it would

be deemed odd if she did not have a part in the preparations.”

“Does she expect to stay with you?” Carlston demanded. “You will have to make some excuse. The risk of discovery is too great.”

“She says she will stay with Lady Dunwick.”

“Even so, she will demand your company every day. As it is, you are too distracted. With her here, we will make no progress at all!”

“I am not distracted,” Helen protested. “I am doing as much as I can.”

Carlston snorted. “You are forever at warehouses and shops with Selburn; and when you are here, your mind is on weddings, not training or the Grand Deceiver.”

Helen felt the humming energy within her rise. “I am no more distracted by my wedding than you are by your search for your wife.”

At the corner of her eye, she saw Quinn wince.

“Surely we do not need so much urgency,” she added, trying to moderate her tone. “I know the Grand Deceiver holds the Colligat, but it is only one part of the Trinitas; and they cannot get their hands upon the second part since it is in here.” She tapped her forehead. “Only we know I have absorbed the Ligatus, and it will take the Deceivers years to create another. Moreover, you have told me again and again that the third part of the Trinitas is safe – whatever it may be – so it follows that the immediate danger is past. We have time to gather ourselves, to train and find our power.”

“Time to get married, you mean?” Carlston said acidly. From his fob pocket he withdrew a heavy disc of gold attached to a bloodstained ribbon. He held it up before Helen, its ornate etching of Bacchus glinting in the lamplight. It had belonged to the late Comte d’Antraigues, Deceiver and spy, and he had passed it to Helen after he was attacked by the assassin sent by

the Grand Deceiver. “Louis gave us this for a reason. The Grand Deceiver is planning something and we must find out what it is.”

“We already know what was being planned,” Helen said. “To unite the Trinitas – but that is now secure. Besides, there has been no sign of Philip here or in London. Surely if the Grand Deceiver was planning something, they would send their harbinger of destruction. They have every other time.”

“Do you really think the Grand Deceiver has retired defeated?” Carlston demanded.

It was clear any answer other than *no* would be wrong. “I see that *you* do not,” she said.

He eyed her for a moment, as if she had disappointed him. “You and Pike have allowed yourselves to be lulled into a false sense of victory – exactly what I think the Grand Deceiver wants. We are meant to believe we have stymied their plan when in fact it is still in operation – a brilliant deception that is already halfway to defeating us. Louis did not mention the Trinitas when he gave you this fob. He told us to find the Bath Deceiver. Those were his dying words, and that is where the truth of our salvation lies. The Bath Deceiver holds the information we need.”

“You speak as if we have not been searching,” Helen protested. “To find one Deceiver amongst the hundred or so here in Bath is a monumental task, especially when all are doing their utmost to hide from us.”

“In five months we have found only fifteen, none of them Louis’s comrade. It is taking too long.” He shook the fob on its ribbon. “I need you focused on the search and our training, not on your wedding. Can you do that? Or are you in too much of a rush to appease society and marry Selburn?”

Helen narrowed her eyes. “You think I am marrying the Duke only to save my reputation?”

He lowered the fob, his face set. She knew that expression –

he was deciding whether or not to step over a brink. A brink that they had, by mutual silence, avoided for months.

Do not do it, she thought fiercely. *Do not*.

“Knowing the man, what else could it be?” he said flatly. “You were compromised on the road to Barnes and you think the only way forward is to marry him. You are clinging to the delusion that you can be both a Reclaimer and the woman society expects you to be. The woman *he* expects you to be.”

“Knowing the man?” she echoed. “You do not know the Duke. You see only your dislike of him. Selburn is offering me a chance to retain my reputation, that is true – but he is also offering far more than that. The chance of a family – my *own* family – and a life that holds more than reclaiming and killing. A life that is sanctified by God and society.”

He blinked; the barb had hit home. He could not offer her those things. It was the truth, but still, she should not have said it. She had wanted to punish him for things he could not change: a wife still alive, and her own wretched confusion about their Grand Reclaimer bond.

“Your life is already sanctified by God and society,” he said, his voice hard. “You have taken an oath as a Reclaimer. That is your life, and he is taking you away from it, away from your *duty*. What is worse, you are letting him.”

Behind her, Darby made a soft sound of denial.

“That is not true!” Helen said.

Carlston leaned closer. “He is making you less than you are, Helen. He will not play second to a woman, and you are already stepping back.”

“I am not!”

“Then show me I am wrong. Show me some damned focus!”

Helen drew herself up. She would show him focus. Concentrating all her outrage into her hands, she dragged the warm,

ever-present thrum of otherworld energy up through her bone and marrow and flesh until it sparked into a blaze of blue fire that engulfed her fingertips. Heat throbbed through her body, a furnace of power. She cupped her fingers, the blue humming flame in each hand slowly curling around itself, until she held twin incandescent balls of hot energy hovering an inch above her palms. Dear God, she was holding them *and* maintaining them! Her breath quickened, the exhilaration bursting out in a small huffing laugh.

The jutting challenge in Carlston's face shifted into anticipation. "Can you throw them?" he whispered.

In the periphery of her vision, she saw Quinn edge Darby back against the door.

She raised her hands, the crackling, humming blue orbs shivering at the movement. She felt them slipping, the heat ebbing. *No!* She tried to draw more energy from her centre, but it was too late. Each ball pulsed with a flash of light, then broke apart into hundreds of harmless sparks. The tiny lights spun upward and hung in the air like a silent explosion of miniature fireworks, then showered down around them, flickering into oblivion.

Carlston released a long breath, his eyes dark with disappointment. "I thought for a moment..." He closed his fingers around the gleaming fob.

"I am sorry." She lowered her hands.

And yet, deep down, she felt a tiny treacherous sense of relief. It was all very well for him to seek their power with such fervour, but he was not the one who risked being consumed by the burning energy and howling despair of the Ligatus.