

LADY HELEN

LUSUS
NATURAE

The title 'LADY HELEN' is rendered in a large, black, Gothic-style serif font. The letters 'H' and 'E' are particularly large and ornate, with intricate flourishes extending downwards. Two pentagrams are integrated into the design, one on the left and one on the right, each enclosed within a circular frame. Below the main title, a horizontal line separates it from the subtitle 'LUSUS NATURAE', which is written in a smaller, black, serif font. The subtitle is also centered and flanked by decorative flourishes, including two daggers pointing upwards.

A LORD CARLSTON STORY

ALISON GOODMAN

REGENCY LONDON, 30 APRIL 1812

ST JAMES'S PALACE

Lord Carlston studied the thronging State Room, every part of his body focused on finding one unnatural gesture or expression in the flow of humanity. It was the first Queen's Drawing Room since the King's madness had descended two years ago, and Carlston had no doubt that the thrum of nervous energy in the crowd had tempted at least one of the creatures. Any kind of sharp arousal attracted them — sexual energy was best, but fear and anticipation could work just as well.

He had positioned himself in front of the huge marble mantelpiece, the best place to view the room, but it was going to be near impossible to spot a mistake amongst the human distractions. All was in motion: nodding ostrich plumes in the women's hair, the sway of hooped skirts, fans carving arcs through the humid air, officials darting through gaps, and the dips of curtseys and bows.

Even so, Carlston was patient. If a mistake was going to be made, he would see it.

It was an instant of unnatural stillness that caught his attention. A man, no older than his own twenty-six years, standing in a patch of sunlight by the window that looked out across the Royal gardens. Well-fitted green silk tail coat, dress sword at his waist, tow-coloured hair brushed forward into a competent *à la Brutus*, and a sharp-planed face set with a moment of utter blankness. Then it was gone, replaced by the fluidity of a human smile. A Deceiver. Carlston felt the certainty of it in his gut.

From habit, his toes bunched, body tensing forward for the fight. Not that he could do anything in a Royal Drawing Room. And more to the point, he was there to meet and test the girl, not confront Deceivers.

He eased his body back, noting the man's companions. All human and all oblivious, of course. But there was something else about the creature. Something familiar in the way he held his head. Carlston frowned. Had he encountered this one before? He flexed his hands, unsettled by the lapse in memory.

‘She is standing with her aunt by the blue urn. Not quite what I was expecting, but then I have no firm idea of what one looks for in a Reclaimer.’

The voice at his shoulder, soft and mocking, brought a half-smile across Carlston’s disquiet. He had not heard that voice in over three years. Yet he did not immediately turn to face its owner, instead switching his attention to the subject of the remark: an overly tall girl across the room, somewhat awkward in the old-fashioned hooped dress still required for presentation to the Queen. Lady Helen Wrexhall: the focus of all his hope.

On first glance, the chit was disappointing. Unremarkable dark hair built up into the high coiffure needed to hold the regulation ostrich feathers, brown eyes that were bright enough but held no particular fire, and a very decided jaw. He had last seen her when she was ten years old, but there was very little of that soft child left in the bold bones of her eighteen-year-old face. Definitely not a beauty in the classic, rounded way of fashion, yet she had presence. And, it seemed, a sense of humour, for her mouth struggled to suppress a smile as the girl beside her bumped her own ridiculous hoop into a gallant and

almost knocked him over. Yes, a clever, knowing smile that brought its own kind of loveliness. Not unlike Elise.

He bowed his head, waiting for the pain of his wife's loss to pass. It seemed he was to be haunted at every turn in this damned country.

'It is fortunate then that I know what we are looking for,' he said, finally turning to face George Brummell.

'My lord.' The Beau's bow was as elegantly tailored as his plain blue velvet coat and white silk breeches. Although Court dress still demanded embroidery and lace, he remained unadorned. 'It is remarkably good to see you again, William.'

Carlston inclined his head. 'And you, George.'

His friend had not changed in face or manner: as sardonic as ever, and immaculate from his curled fair hair to the soft black leather of his buckled shoes. Not so himself — Carlston knew the years had bitten hard into his soul. The grief and anger were writ into the lines on his face.

The State Room was now so crowded with guests that some of the early arrivals had been edged up against the long line of red-velvet-swagged windows.

The afternoon sunlight shimmered across satins, silver embroidery and layered diamonds. Yet even with the hot, perfumed press of so many people, a wide half-circle of space had been left around him. Society had a long memory. Every eye he encountered held either cold dislike or shocked curiosity. The wife killer was back; a dark fox amongst the virginal chicks in their white spangled tulle.

‘Even after three years, the prodigal son is not welcome home,’ he said. ‘Are you sure you wish to stand here with me?’

Brummell gave a soft snort. ‘I lead society, William. Not the other way around.’

Carlston bowed slightly, acknowledging the truth of his friend’s words. Not even the Prince Regent had more influence on fashion and society than Beau Brummell.

‘Prinny invited me to the theatre two nights gone, and I have been summoned to the entertainment tonight. Your doing?’

George nodded. ‘His Royal Highness just needed a small push. In his own fashion he has always supported you.’

‘You have done a good job keeping him safe.’

‘Safe, but alas still wearing those foul embroidered waistcoats.’

Carlston’s sharp laugh brought the unfriendly regard of a nearby older man in regiment red — someone he remembered as once being a friend of his late father, the fifth Earl. The old man shook his head, murmuring a comment to his grey-faced companion. Even through the din of shrill conversation, Carlston’s Reclaimer hearing caught the word *murderer*. No formal charges had ever been laid against him, but his countrymen had gone ahead and convicted him in the broadsheets, clubs and assembly rooms anyway.

Christ’s blood, why had he returned? Although Bonaparte still rampaged across Europe, the Continent at least held anonymity. But he knew why he was back, and there was no getting around the duty. Or the responsibility.

He glanced at that duty again. Lady Helen was talking to her aunt, a woman with a similarly thin build and angular face, who had taken her and her brother in after the death of their parents. It had been ten years

since the Earl of Hayden and his wife had drowned off the coast of Cornwall, their bodies unrecovered, but Carlston still mourned the loss of Lady Catherine, one of their best Reclaimers. It pained him that such an honourable woman had died with the label of traitor sullyng her name.

It was his hope — his desperation — that Lady Catherine's Reclaimer abilities had emerged in her daughter too. She had once mentioned that the girl showed a cleverness beyond her age, but did that point to the child being a Reclaimer?

The unlikeliness of it sat like a stone in his gut. The talent was *Lusus Naturae*: a whim of nature, not an inheritance. He was proof of it. None of his ancestors had been burdened with the talent, yet here he was, built for strength and reflex and killing. So much responsibility, and so few Reclaimers in the world to maintain the uneasy Pact between human and Deceiver. Only the chance that Lady Helen was one of his kind had brought him back. One Reclaimer to train another. God willing. Nothing else would have made him return to England.

She suddenly looked over her shoulder at him, eyes alight with curiosity. What had prompted such attention? Perhaps she already had enhanced hearing.

He tucked in his chin; he must stop indulging in hope and get proof, either way. Of course, if she was a rare direct inheritor of the gifts, that brought a whole new swathe of problems. The arrival of a direct inheritor could mean the arrival of a Grand Deceiver — an even stronger foe to fight. They were damned if she was and damned if she wasn't.

The aunt had noticed his interest and turned her back, the obligatory low-cut bodice of her lilac gown showing bony shoulder blades like extended wings. It was a courageous gesture on her part considering he stood beside Brummell, the one man who could destroy social success with the flick of an arched eyebrow. Nevertheless, her cold shoulder did not change the fact that she was his second cousin by marriage; a useful connection that would bring him greater access to the girl. In a few minutes, the old hen was going to have to welcome a very unwelcome member of the family.

The thought of her discomfort brought a moment of

wry amusement. He pushed it away. *Schadenfreude* was not an impulse he admired.

‘Have you heard news of our latest literary genius?’ Brummell asked.

‘I presume you mean Byron?’

Carlston adjusted the *chapeau-bras* tucked under his arm. Carrying the flat crescent hat was one of the more irritating requirements of Court, along with the lace and velvet, but at least the dress sword was useful. The ceramic blade sheathed at his side may not be quite what Her Majesty had in mind, but if it came to close quarters with a Deceiver, it was good for one heart thrust.

‘Yes, the darling of the ladies. And,’ Brummell lifted his quizzing glass, a handsome monocle set in blue enamel, to survey a stripling dressed in canary yellow, ‘a surprising number of the men. Caro Lamb is so smitten she is not taking any care to hide it from her husband or the polite world. Lord Byron is fêted wherever he goes. I’ve not seen anything like it. And the vain fool is constantly courting more adoration.’

‘He can hardly know the consequences of it,’ Carlston

said. Despite the half-circle of space around them, it was still devilish hot and airless. He shifted his shoulders, feeling the damp linen of his shirt catch on the near healed gash across his back: a recent burn from the energy whip of a Deceiver. ‘Are we in immediate danger? Are they grouping?’

‘Perhaps. We may not have your talent for finding them, William, but we know they are circling. There is an extraordinary hysteria around my Lord Byron and they are lapping it up. They have already prompted two brawls with one fatality.’

‘Then Byron must be guarded. We cannot allow his energies to be sapped; we must find a way to defuse the hysteria that is drawing so many to him.’

George raised his quizzing glass again and studied the room. Even his forehead was sheened with sweat from the oppressive fug. ‘Do they know about our young hope yonder? Are they circling her too?’ he asked.

‘I believe I have found one so far: the fashionable buck over by the far window.’ The slightest of nods pointed George’s scrutiny towards the tow-haired man. ‘Whether he is here for Lady Helen or his own needs

remains to be seen.'

At that instant, the man turned his head and stared at them. A long, searching gaze followed by a smile of insufferable collusion.

A jolt of recognition fired through Carlston. He knew where he had seen the creature before: at Southampton when he had docked four days ago. That same smile had been in the doorway of a tavern as he passed. And he'd wager that the creature's earlier moment of blankness had not been a mistake, after all.

Perhaps he was an assassin. If so, a strange one to boldly show himself and court his target's attention. It was more likely he was interested in the girl. But what could he do here? Any direct action would result in what both sides were trying to prevent: knowledge of the Deceivers' existence by the populace.

This strange collaboration had been formalised in the Pact: an agreement for mutual survival. If George thought there was hysteria around Lord Byron, it would be nothing compared with the mayhem if it became general knowledge that Deceivers lived amongst them. Everyone would become a demon hunter, and every-

one a potential demon. And the government's mortal fear of the mob — born from the Terror in France, and fed by the latest Luddite riots in Nottingham — would only add to the chaos and slaughter.

‘Do you know who he is, George?’

‘Count Piotr Solanski. Polish. Aide to the ambassador.’

Of course George knew his name and position. He knew everyone and everything that happened in society. It was what made him so valuable to the Dark Days Club.

‘Has he any connections here?’

‘No English ancestry. Jonathan has confirmed that he has only two infant offspring. Both in this country.’

Carlston grunted. It was hard to map the legitimate and baseborn children of a Deceiver, but Sir Jonathan Beech was a diligent Tracer. He rarely made mistakes, not after the debacle in Exeter five years ago.

Solanski lifted his chin, an insolent acknowledgment of Carlston's regard. Although the man looked to be only in his third decade, the creature inside would have arrived centuries ago, like all the others. And like its fellow hunters, it would have survived hundreds of

years by stealing the bodies of its own human offspring.

Yet this Deceiver had only two infant children. An unusual lack of progeny.

Carlston felt the battle energy rise in his body again, tightening him like a hair-trigger. If he reclaimed the children back to whole humanity, he could destroy this Deceiver. It was not often he could deliver Mors Ultima, the final death. And infants were easy to reclaim. They had not yet manifested the appetites that came from their Deceiver dam or sire.

He lightly clasped his forearm over the soft velvet sleeve, feeling the last tenderness in a near-healed stab wound that ran from wrist to elbow. A memento of the Deceiver offspring he had reclaimed a week ago: a seven-year-old girl in Calais, mothered by a whore and already vicious from the Deceiver energy — the vestige — that her sire had embedded in her soul. It had been a hard extraction, the girl slicing open his arm with a candle spike as he struggled to rip the vestige from her spirit. But he had finally reclaimed her to full humanity: an untainted soul, and a body that could no longer be her sire's next lifespan.

Still, Carlston knew she was only one of the creature's many offspring. That particular Deceiver had whored his way across France, and there were many other children for him to possibly colonise when his current body died. All of them embedded with that spark that formed a pathway to their flesh. He tightened his grip around his forearm, trying to contain the call to battle that hammered through his veins.

'Are there any others in the room besides Solanski?' George asked.

'None have shown themselves.'

'We have sorely missed your keen eye, William. It has been a hard road without you.' Brummell touched Carlston's shoulder, a fleeting contact.

The Reclaimer reflex was upon Carlston as fast as an indrawn breath. They both looked down at the small black-handled knife in his hand, the tip of its glass blade pressed lightly against the white silk of George's waistcoat. Another shift of his weight and it would be in his friend's heart. He could almost feel George's pulse through the knife.

To the room at large, he had merely leaned in to

whisper a comment, his hand on Beau Brummell's shoulder.

'I would have chosen an ivory handle for the occasion,' George drawled, but Carlston heard the quaver in his voice.

A few years out of polite society and he had turned savage. Or was it the beginnings of the vestige madness? If a Reclaimer saved too many offspring, took too much Deceiver vestige into his soul, it eventually ripped away his sanity. No, it could not be the madness. He had years of reclaiming to do before he had to confront that possibility.

'I beg your pardon, George.' He drew back, pushing the blade up into his sleeve until he felt the reassuring lock of the silent, spring-loaded mechanism. 'From all I hear, you have done well without me.'

Brummell met his eye, a moment of hard blame in his face. 'Not as well as we would have if you had been here. Benchley is no longer the leader he once was, William. I've heard he is reclaiming again. I've heard that he is *affected* by it.'

Had George somehow picked up on his fear of

the vestige madness? No, that was impossible, and yet here he was saying that Benchley — Carlston's Reclaim-er mentor, the man who had been more of a father to him than his own unlamented parent — was heading towards that grim fate.

'Unlikely,' he said, voice clipped. 'Before I left, Benchley gave me his word he would stop. Besides, he is well aware of the danger if he continues. He would not risk his sanity.'

'I know you live by *your* word, William,' Brummell lowered his voice, 'but that does not mean everyone around you does the same. I've heard disturbing stories, and it cannot be denied that Benchley has failed as a leader. He has not kept the other Reclaimers united, and Pike, from the Home Office, has stepped in.'

'Pike?' Now there was a man without honour.

'Yes, and as you may imagine, he is more concerned with politics and his own power than maintaining the Pact.'

Carlston saw where this was heading. 'I will not be staying, George,' he warned.

'What if Lady Helen is like her mother? Will you

stay then?’

‘You know it is unlikely she has the talent. Her brother does not.’

Brummell’s mouth quirked in shared disappointment. ‘Nor has he the stuff to join our ranks.’

Carlston nodded his agreement. Andrew Wrexhall, the current Earl of Hayden, was a pleasant enough young blood, but he lacked guile and discipline.

‘So, you will stay if Lady Helen is what we need? And if she is not, you will return to your search for Elise?’

‘Yes.’

‘Elise is gone, my friend.’ To the untrained eye, Brummell’s customary sardonic expression was in place, but Carlston saw the tiny shift into entreaty. ‘There is no evidence that she is still alive. You can do nothing about what happened. We need you here.’

True, there was no evidence. Yet he had found the ruby signet that had been her wedding ring on the floor of the blood-spattered bedchamber. The ring was engraved on the underside with an interlocking W and E. *WE*: always together; the little pun a foolish, shared delight. Why had she taken it off? He spread his bare

fingers, feeling the ghost weight of his own ring.

Solanski was on the move. Carlston watched him bow to his companions and slowly weave through the clusters of young women and their sponsors waiting to be called into the Grand Council Chamber and the presence of Queen Charlotte. The man was smiling again, this time with pleasure. How he must be soaking up the women's nervous anticipation, wallowing in the energy wash from their sweating, bound bodies. He would be gluttoned with power before long, and at his most dangerous.

George's focus was back on the girl. 'What if she is what we need, but will not join us? Or does not have the necessary courage?'

'Then she becomes a liability.' Carlston eyed his friend, challenging any judgment. 'You know she will be a target for them. They must not have access to Reclaimer energy.'

'Is that how it is now? We dispatch innocents as well?'

'I have had some practice in the area.' Carlston kept all expression out of his voice although self-disgust clogged his throat.

‘Good God, man.’

‘We can safely say that God has nothing to do with it.’

Yet if he still had any right to pray, he would beg that Lady Helen was her mother’s daughter; as brave and talented, and as willing to step outside the confines of society as Lady Catherine. Then perhaps two souls would be saved: hers and his own. If indeed he had enough grace left in his soul for any kind of redemption.

George shook his head. ‘William, that young man in Exeter was as much Sir Jonathan’s mistake as he was yours. You cannot take all the blame for his death.’

Carlston raised his hand, silencing the protest. ‘I believe our friend is making his way towards Lady Helen, and we cannot allow that. Introduce me to her aunt, George. It is time to start.’



Brummell masterfully carved a pathway through the tightly packed room with a touch to a shoulder here, a bow there, and a raised quizzing glass at a particularly intransigent Lady Pembroke. Carlston kept his eyes on

their objective, ignoring the low murmur that followed their progress, the slowly converging figure of Solanski always at the edge of his vision.

The aunt saw them coming and clasped the girl's gloved forearm in warning. If the situation had been less serious, he would have been vastly entertained by the woman's warring expressions of delight at Brummell's approach and dismay at his own.

She received George's bow with a jerky tilt of her head, the plume of long lilac ostrich feathers dipping and shivering. The woman had made liberal use of lavender water, but underneath it was a strong earthy scent of powder, clammy skin and hairdresser's grease.

'Mr Brummell, how lovely to see you again.'

'It is always a pleasure, madam.' George bowed again and with an elegant flourish of hand made the introduction. 'Lady Pennworth, may I present the Earl of Carlston.'

She bent her neck in cold acknowledgment. 'Lord Carlston.'

He inclined his head. 'Madam.'

Beside the old hen, the girl gathered an object at the

base of her fan and closed her hand around it. A neatly executed manoeuvre, but he was attuned to subterfuge. She was hiding something. Had she brought contraband to her own presentation? Perhaps the girl had something of her mother's daring and initiative, after all. Or was he just clutching at straws?

With some attempt at grace, the Viscountess said, 'My dear, allow me to present the Earl of Carlston and Mr Brummell. Gentlemen, this is my niece, the Lady Helen Wrexhall.'

Carlston studied the girl as he bowed, intrigued to see that she watched him just as closely. She kept her expression well controlled, but his impassive face was clearly causing her some frustration. She was used to reading people with ease. He bit down on the tiny hope that it was a first sign of a Reclaimer.

'Lord Carlston,' she said, rising from her curtsy with creditable control of the hoop. Her cool glance also took in George. 'Mr Brummell. I am pleased to make your acquaintance.'

She was tall for her sex: past his chin, when most women, and a good number of men, hovered well

below. If it came to sword and knife training, it could be an advantage.

‘Lady Helen, it is indeed a delight,’ he said. ‘Particularly since we are related.’

‘Distantly,’ Lady Pennworth said, mouth small.

Carlston smiled his Earl’s smile. ‘And yet irrefutably.’
The aunt subsided.

George cleared his throat, alerting him to the fact that Solanski was getting closer. Carlston gauged the man’s approach. He was not quite mid-room and still had to make his way through the denser part of the crowd. But George was right — they would need to intercept him soon.

He turned his smile to the girl and targeted her most obvious point of weakness. ‘Lady Helen, I see that you carry a Vernis Martin fan.’

He had once given Elise such a fan; there could be no mistaking the maker’s high lacquer on the painted sticks. At the remark, the girl’s jaw tensed and she touched the damp, flushed skin on her throat: definitely hiding something, and a little afraid of him too.

‘I am a great connoisseur of fans,’ he added.

‘Really? Of fans?’ She kept a tight hold on her own. ‘And do you have much cause to use them?’

Carlston felt George’s shoulder twitch with a suppressed laugh.

The aunt’s eyes widened in warning at her charge. ‘Helen, dear, I am sure Lord Carlston merely has an interest.’

‘I do, madam,’ Carlston lied. ‘Would you allow me to inspect your example, Lady Helen?’

‘It is nothing out of the ordinary, Lord Carlston,’ she said with a delightfully false smile. ‘I’m sure it can be of no interest to such an expert.’

‘A Vernis Martin is always out of the ordinary, Lady Helen.’ He held out his hand.

She met his gaze but did not move. Such a look in those brown eyes: a mix of stony stubbornness and hunted animal. He almost wanted to step back and save her the ordeal.

‘Helen, show Lord Carlston your fan,’ the aunt ordered.

‘I cannot believe you are serious, sir,’ she said, attempting the coquette. ‘I feel sure you are funning

with me.'

There was some native charm in her manner, but it would have to be brought out more if she was to be as effective as her mother.

'You will find that I am always serious, Lady Helen,' he said.

'Show him, my dear,' Lady Pennworth hissed, her real message clear in the tilt of her head: *Show him the fan so that we may be rid of him.*

He used the small diversion to track Solanski. The man was still mid-room, called to the side of Lady Conyngham. He would be held there for a few minutes at least; the famous beauty would not be rushed through the required admiration.

Lady Helen still hesitated. Carlston extended his hand further, the gesture forcing her into either unforgivable discourtesy or compliance.

With her chin up, the girl passed him the closed fan, the riveted head turned to his palm. Her stiffened fingers pushed something round and heavy at its end into his grasp, her expression schooled into indifference. But his training saw the tension around her mouth —

dread and a little bit of fury — and the shift of her jaw. A quick mind playing out possible strategies. His hope lifted.

A flick of his wrist opened the carved ivory sticks, her secret locked under the crook of his fingers and shielded from all other eyes.

‘A very pretty fan,’ he said, pretending to study the pastoral scene on the varnished ivory.

Attached to the rivet on a short blue riband was a miniature portrait of her mother, Lady Catherine. Good God, no wonder she was hiding it. She was about to carry a memento of a suspected traitor into the Queen’s presence. Not to mention what was hidden inside the gold frame: Lady Catherine’s Reclaimer glass. She had shown it to him at the start of his training, and he now had one himself, concealed in the pocket watch on the chain at his waist. Did the girl know what she had hanging by that riband? Perhaps not. Whatever the case, she would not have it much longer, and he would see how she dealt with unforeseen events.

He looked up and paused so that all attention was fixed on his next words. The girl stood as motionless as

a hare circled by hounds. He released the knife, sliding it from its sheath up along his palm.

‘Was this represented to you as an original Vernis Martin?’ he asked.

Calculated words that brought the desired effect: a bantam spine-straightening in the aunt. As she gathered herself for protest, he tilted his hand until the razor-thin glass blade sliced through the riband. He gripped the untethered frame more firmly under his fingertips.

‘I will have you know that the fan was a gift from her uncle, Viscount Pennworth,’ the aunt said, nostrils pinched.

‘A lovely gift.’

He pressed the blade back into its sheath and passed the fan to Lady Helen, the miniature already hidden in his other hand. He watched her reaction.

A quick glance down, a heavy swallow, and a tightening of her fingers around the closed fan, but nothing else. Such control; and she was not giving anything away in the level gaze that rose to meet his own. He almost smiled but fought the impulse to acknowledge their complicity. For an instant, fury narrowed her face

— she had seen his enjoyment. His mask was not so foolproof, after all.

‘I believe we must make way for others who wish to make your acquaintance, Lady Helen,’ he said, bowing. ‘It has been a pleasure.’

‘Lord Carlston, I do hope you will visit us,’ she said, stopping his deft withdrawal.

Beside him, George paused in his own bow, eyebrows lifting at the girl’s audacity.

‘I mean,’ she continued, ignoring the rustle of horror from her aunt, ‘will you do us the honour of calling on us tomorrow? Since we are *family*.’

Clever girl, turning his own tactic against him.

‘Helen!’ Lady Pennworth was almost quivering at the girl’s abandonment of propriety. And, no doubt, at the idea of furthering their acquaintance with him.

‘Since we are *family*, Lady Helen,’ he said, ‘I would be delighted to call tomorrow. As would Mr Brummell.’

The aunt could not refuse a morning call from Beau Brummell.

George rose gallantly to the call to arms. ‘Yes, a pleasure, madam. Until tomorrow then.’

‘Tomorrow,’ Lady Pennworth said faintly.

They withdrew, their different notorieties easing their side-by-side passage through the crowd.

‘Really, William,’ George said, pained, ‘a call tomorrow? I had planned a visit to Hoby’s for a new pair of boots.’

‘Lady Helen wants her miniature back.’ He opened his hand.

George’s mouth pursed. ‘Is that what I think it is?’

Carlston nodded, closing his hand around the portrait again.

‘Does it mean she has her mother’s talent?’

Carlston heard the hope in his friend’s voice. ‘Maybe.’ He looked back at Lady Helen as he slid the tiny gold frame into his waistcoat pocket, alongside his watch. Through the undulating stands of ostrich plumes, the girl was watching him, her strong jaw mutinous. She held the fan clenched in her hand, and it was clear she wanted to club him around with the head with it. ‘I will know more after tomorrow’s visit. That is, if you can divert the aunt and give me a moment alone with the chit.’

George nodded. ‘Consider it done.’ He tilted his head at Solanski, freed from Lady Conyngham and heading towards them with purpose writ on his face. ‘It seems you are his target, not Lady Helen. What do we do?’

Solanski’s behaviour was baffling. If he was intent on assassination, he was possibly the worst assassin in the world. No, he must have some other goal.

A terrible thought took shape as he glanced around the State Room. So many diplomat guests: the American *chargé d’affaires* with a wondering smile upon his face, the more jaded Spanish and Turkish ambassadors conversing with their Sardinian and Neapolitan counterparts. And those were just the ones he recognised. The Queen’s Drawing Room had brought the world to St James’s Palace. Was suicide Solanski’s plan? Did he intend to display himself in the energy light show that was a Deceiver’s death and destroy his brethren’s hidden existence?

Carlston flexed his wrist at his side, sliding the knife back into his grip.

No, there would be no benefit. For all their lack of

cooperation with each other, the Deceivers shared an ultimate goal: to survive like every other creature in existence. If Solanski brought them to the notice of the world, they would be slaughtered in the hysteria, along with countless humans.

For a moment, Carlston was reassured. A short-lived comfort; there was still no good reason for Solanski seeking him out.

‘We will improvise,’ he said.

‘Excellent,’ George said dryly. ‘I had forgotten how thrilling it is to be around you.’ He lifted his quizzing glass and watched the approach of the Deceiver.

‘Lord Carlston,’ Solanski said, bowing with a militarist snap of his heels. ‘What a delight it is to meet you again. Please forgive me for bringing business to such a grand occasion, but I have some information for you that is to your advantage.’

Carlston met the steady gaze, his heightened senses feeling the prickle of energy from the man’s overcharged body. He had, of course, never been introduced to Solanski and could rapidly escalate the situation by refusing to accept the claimed association. Yet the possi-

bility of information stopped him. Deceivers were not in the habit of contacting their enemy.

He bowed slightly and said, 'Count Solanski, a pleasure to meet you again.'

The man's eyes flickered with relief.

'May I present Mr Brummell,' Carlston added.

The two men bowed to one another.

Carlston fingered the smooth wooden handle of the knife still in his hand. 'What is this information?'

'It is to be heard only by you, my lord. Perhaps we could step someplace that affords more privacy?'

George shifted uneasily. He was right, of course — it was an invitation to a trap. But it would get Solanski out of the crowded State Room into a more manageable space. Especially since the Prince Regent was due to make an appearance.

'You will want to hear what I have to say,' Solanski added.

Carlston had to admit he was curious. 'Do you know the whereabouts of the Chapel Royal?'

'Yes.'

'I will meet you inside.'

The chapel was at the west side of the great gate and would be relatively deserted on such a secular day. It was also full of wood and stone. Insulators.

With a bow, Solanski withdrew and started to thread his way towards the centre of the three doorways that led to the Grand Staircase. It seemed he did not want witnesses either.

‘William, do you think this is wise?’ George said, lowering his voice.

‘Wise? When has any of this been wise?’

George frowned. ‘I will go with you.’

Carlston briefly gripped his friend’s shoulder, heartened by the offer. It felt good to have the resources of the Dark Days Club behind him again. Nevertheless, violence was not George’s natural habitat.

‘No. I trust you to stay here and make sure that events do not cause any,’ he paused, taking in the *beau monde* around them, ‘unwanted revelations. I will collect Quinn on my way through.’

He waited for George’s reluctant nod, then walked into the tight pack of people. Heavy hooped skirts were pulled back and men stepped away, opening up a

pathway before him. There were some benefits to being a pariah.



Even with infamy easing his progress, it took some time to make his way down the Grand Staircase. It had become a solid block of gawking onlookers, guests caught in the jam leading into the State Rooms, and Yeomen of the Guard attempting to keep order. Solanski must have made excellent headway or taken a different route, for Carlston did not see him on the steps or in the passage that led to the grounds.

Outside, on the palace's front portico, Carlston took out his touch watch. The blue enamelled case was edged with twelve diamonds that stood for the hours, and a diamond arrow was set in the centre, affixed to the workings inside. In the dark, he could read the time by feeling the position of the arrow in relation to the circle of gems. A side button opened the enamelled cover to reveal a normal fob watch for daytime use. Carlston flicked open that cover now, but not to check

the time. He pressed a tiny hidden catch at the bottom of the face, twisting it left, then right. The frame of the watch swung out on an axis to allow three gold-mounted prisms to rise from under the workings: two of solid glass and one of Iceland spar. He fitted them together — the spar in the centre — and locked them into place. Newton's famous Light Prisms reworked into a Reclaimer glass.

Holding the device hidden in the cage of his hand, he walked down the steps and into the bright afternoon sunshine. First he would collect Quinn, and then they would make their way to the chapel and Solanski.

Carlston felt an old discordance. In the library at his country seat he had hundreds of historical papers that called these creatures *demons*, but he had never come across one that had been perturbed by entering a house of God or by facing any of the old exorcisms.

Quinn stood waiting with the carriage, broad shoulders leaned back against the polished side of the vehicle. A circle of other servants stood around him, gawking at the fiercely angled lines and swirls tattooed upon his dark face. Quinn ignored them, seemingly at

ease, but Carlston could see he was primed for either curiosity or attack.

He straightened as Carlston approached, the spectators scattering back to their own equipages. ‘Trouble, my lord?’ he asked, dipping his head into a bow.

Seven years as Carlston’s Terrene — his guard and aide — had attuned Quinn to his every expression.

‘I have been approached by a Deceiver. An offer of information. Most likely a trap.’

‘And you intend to walk into it?’ Quinn said flatly.

He fell in beside Carlston, clearly not expecting an answer. They had walked into many worse situations on the Continent.

‘Perhaps it really does have information.’

Quinn grunted. ‘Anything it says will be a lie.’ He glanced sideways, voice dry. ‘The clue is in their name.’

Carlston smiled. An old joke.

They quickly made their way through the various inner palace courtyards. Carlston was relieved to see the number of spectators diminish rapidly as they moved further away from the State Apartments. Quinn made one sweep of Colour Court, the closest yard to

the chapel, but all was quiet, and so Carlston led the way through the final archway to the Chapel Royal.

The entrance to the small church was still within palace bounds, but the building's far wall stretched along Cleveland Row near St James's Street and the racket of carriages from that busy thoroughfare was loud enough to reach him. Good. If events in the chapel escalated, he would need the cover of that street noise.

Both of the chapel's oak doors were closed. He handed his *chapeau-bras* to Quinn, then drew the ceramic dress sword.

'Ready,' he said.

Quinn pulled one of the heavy doors halfway open. With an eye to ambush, Carlston peered inside.

The chapel was dim and cool, the only light coming from three high windows and a line of sunlight through the opened door. The famous wooden ceiling was decorated with carved octagons and crosses, white paint picking out the shapes in stark outlines. A bank of wooden box pews stood along each wall, a single central aisle between them. The Royal balcony box was set high on the left wall, opposite the pulpit and the

darker rectangle of an open vestry door. If he recalled correctly, that side chamber also held an exit to the street. Another escape route.

‘Lord Carlston, do come in,’ Solanski called. ‘Or do you intend to remain in the doorway?’

The Deceiver stood near the pulpit with another, slighter man in black vestments. A priest. Or more to the point, a hostage.

Ignoring the jibe, Carlston lifted the Reclaimer glass to his eye and looked through the line of prisms. The priest’s body was surrounded by the soft corona of pale blue light that belonged to all humans. Beside him, the violent ultramarine of Solanski’s body pulsed with a long energy whip curling out from his left shoulder. Only one, but at least four feet long and bright with charge. The priest absently scratched his thin shoulder, unaware that the itch came from the lethal energy whip hovering above him.

‘Damn,’ Carlston breathed. The distance between him and the Deceiver was too great. If Solanski attacked the priest, he’d not get there fast enough.

‘How many whips?’ Quinn asked quietly, squaring up.

‘Only one.’

Even so, it was going to be difficult with just a glass knife and ceramic sword to hand. Carlston palmed the prisms and the workings back into the case and pocketed the watch, its metal clinking against the girl’s miniature.

‘Is that your man Quinn behind you?’ the Count called, stepping closer to the priest. ‘I really must insist that he stay outside, my lord.’

Quinn shifted uneasily. Carlston gave a small shake of his head. He could not risk the priest.

‘Quinn will stay back,’ he said, then stepped fully into the chapel, allowing the door to thud shut between him and his Terrene.

The Count gestured towards the priest. ‘Allow me to present the Reverend Alexander.’

‘My lord.’ The priest bowed, his thin pale face matching his slight frame. ‘Count Solanski tells me that you are both interested in the history of the chapel.’ His voice held a note of doubt but he pressed on. ‘I have a pamphlet you may find illuminating. The ceiling above us, for example, is attributed to Holbein.’

‘Reverend, leave us,’ Carlston ordered. He gathered

himself, ready to spring into Reclaimer speed. ‘Count, I swear if you harm him—’

‘Harm?’ The priest stiffened. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Go, Reverend!’ Carlston roared. ‘Now!’

Perhaps God did look after his own, for the man jumped as if Carlston had shot at him and rapidly backed away through the side door that led to the vestry.

Solanski made no move. ‘I had no intention of harming him,’ he said mildly.

Carlston forced down the clamouring call in his blood. ‘You have built a four-foot whip,’ he said, walking slowly up the aisle. ‘In my experience, that holds a great deal of intention.’ He stopped a pew box away from the pulpit.

‘Your reputation precedes you, my lord. I would be a fool to come without defence.’

‘You approached me. What do you want?’

‘I have come to make a bargain.’

Carlston snorted. ‘Again I say, with a whip?’

Solanski paced into the centre of the aisle, his blond hair catching the soft light. He was giving himself room.

Carlston casually leaned his hand against the pew

box door beside him. It shifted slightly towards him. Box doors that swung out: a veritable line of insulating shields.

Solanski took in a deep breath. ‘I will discharge into the ground if you vow, on your honour, to listen to me without attack.’

Discharge? Carlston studied him. What was his game? He had never come across a Deceiver who wished to parley, let alone one that offered to weaken itself as a sign of good faith.

‘Discharge then.’

‘On your word as a nobleman?’

Did he want to give such a solemn bond? Yet he could not walk away from the possibility of information.

He held up the ceramic sword and placed it across the corner of the box pew. ‘On my word. I will not attack.’

With a nod, Solanski squatted and slammed his hands against the tiled floor. Carlston did not need his Reclaimer glass to see the energy driving into the ground. The rumbling force sent up spinning stones and tiles. He ducked as they clattered back to the

ground and drummed a short tattoo along the wooden pews. Dust plumed into the air, bringing shape to the shafts of sunlight across the ruined floor. The air smelled of dirt and the strange clean odour that came after lightning.

Carlston held his breath and listened for shouts of alarm. There were none.

‘It will not have been remarked,’ Solanski said. He stood and brushed dust off his green silk coat. ‘The ground has swallowed most of the noise.’

Carlston straightened. This was all uncharted territory. A slight movement in the vestry caught his attention: the priest peered from behind the door, hands clasped over his mouth. At least the man had the sense to stay there.

Carlston took out his watch and deftly reassembled the Reclaimer glass. He held it to his eye. The three prisms confirmed that Solanski’s energy was no longer the bright ultramarine of glut, but had been reduced back to the same pale blue corona of a human. And the whip was gone.

‘So we have both kept our word,’ Carlston said, clicking the instrument back into the watch case and sliding

it into his pocket. ‘What is this bargain?’

Solanski wet his lips. ‘I have been delegated by some of my kind to speak to you.’

‘Your kind does not work together.’

Solanski inclined his head. ‘That is true. This agreement did not come easily to us. However, if centuries of living in flesh have taught us one thing, it is the value of cooperation.’

Carlston tightened his hand on the smooth edge of the pew box. Deceivers cooperating with each other was the last thing the Dark Days Club needed. ‘So what do you want to say?’

‘You have a reputation for upholding the Pact with rigour and fairness. Is that still true?’

‘Of course. It is a Reclaimer’s sworn duty.’

‘Yet one of your kind is breaking the agreement. Killing us beyond the allowances of the Pact. All we want is to live our lives in peace, so here is the bargain, Lord Carlston. I ask for your intervention, I ask you to stop him; and in return I will give you information about your Dark Days Club. About the danger you are in.’

‘Who is breaking the Pact?’

Solanski met his eye. ‘Your fellow Reclaimer, Samuel Benchley.’

Carlston gave a sharp laugh. ‘That does not tally with the man I know.’

And yet George had just been hinting that something was awry with his old friend.

‘I assure you I am speaking the truth, my lord,’ Solanski said. ‘Just as I am speaking the truth when I say Benchley is also killing humans.’

Now he knew Solanski was lying.

‘That is ridiculous. There is no bargain to be had here.’

‘Ask your people about Ratcliffe Highway.’

‘Do not try to place that horror upon Samuel Benchley. I assure you I will not believe it for a second.’

The Ratcliffe Highway murders were the worst killings in London in recent memory. Seven innocent people slaughtered in their homes, hammered to death with a maul for no apparent reason. One of them an infant.

‘I tell you, Benchley is the perpetrator, and your people know it. There is something rotten at the core of your Dark Days Club, Lord Carlston.’

‘What reason could he have for such a heinous crime?’

‘He thinks he is preparing for a Grand Deceiver.’

Carlston stepped forward. Here was a chance for real information. ‘Has a Grand Deceiver arrived in England?’

‘That is what I hear.’

‘Who is he?’

‘I do not know.’

Carlston shook his head — that was no answer; but Solanski showed his palms, an insistence of sincerity.

‘A Grand Deceiver has many faces. I swear upon the lives of my offspring, and thus upon my own existence, that I do not know.’ Solanski laughed; a hollow sound. ‘You have no idea what is coming your way. A Grand Deceiver is not like us. I have heard your kind called *Lusus Naturae*, because of your speed and strength that matches our own. Well, a Grand Deceiver is *our Lusus Naturae*. As normal humans are to you, weak and slow, so we are to a Grand Deceiver. Can you conceive of that kind of power? Are you ready to battle it?’

‘Stand aside, man, I wish to enter!’ A woman’s voice,

outside the oak door.

Damn, they had company.

‘Lady Drummond, please!’ Quinn’s voice. ‘There has been an accident within. It is not safe.’

Lady Drummond: one of the more pious courtiers.

‘Will you keep your word, Lord Carlston?’ Solanski asked, skirting the hole in the floor, heading towards the vestry door. ‘Will you stop Benchley?’

‘I will inquire,’ Carlston said.

Solanski nodded, a last sideways glance meeting Carlston’s own. For an instant, that strange unnatural stillness wiped the humanity from the man’s face, then it softened back into smiling bonhomie. He quickened his pace through the side door, the little priest holding up his cross and flattening himself against the wall as the Count passed.

Carlston slumped back against the pew. Did he believe Solanski? Perhaps it was just a sophisticated Deceiver trick to undermine the Dark Days Club. Yet if a Grand Deceiver had arrived and was as powerful as Solanski claimed, it was going to take much more than a united Dark Days Club to defeat him. It was going to

take a Grand Reclaimer.

One of the oak doors swung open, sending a shaft of sunlight across the ruined floor.

‘Lud!’ Lady Drummond stood in the open doorway, the gold silk of her gown flaring in the bright light. ‘What has happened here?’

Carlston straightened and bowed. ‘An unfortunate collapse of the foundations,’ he said hoarsely. ‘You should withdraw, Lady Drummond, for your own safety.’

The woman stared at him for a hard moment, then backed away. The door closed again and the sound of her shrill astonishment receded.

‘Collapse?’ The priest was at his side, staring at the hole in the floor as if it were a doorway to Hell. ‘I saw what happened, my lord. What was that creature?’

‘I think it best that you stay with the story of an accident, Reverend. I am acquainted with your Bishop, and he will agree. I shall, of course, recompense the chapel.’ He pulled the diamond pin from the folds of his cravat. It would be at least two years’ income for the man. ‘Here, take it. For yourself.’

The priest hesitated, then reached for it. ‘I will take

it for the poor,' he said fiercely.

'Very worthy,' Carlston murmured, but he liked the little man for his hesitation and unexpected backbone.

Holding the pin away from himself, the priest asked, 'Do you know what diabolic forces you are dealing with, my lord?'

'It is not what you think.' Then again, he thought tiredly, maybe it was. He pressed the heel of his hand into his forehead.

The priest crossed himself. 'Did he harm you?'

'No.'

Dear God, if Solanski was telling the truth, there was no one in the Home Office he could trust. Surely that was a lie?

The priest took a step closer. 'I shall pray for your soul, my lord.'

Carlston pushed himself upright and picked up the sword. He walked stiffly to the chapel entrance and opened the heavy door. A bright shaft of sunlight barbed his eyes.

He squinted back into the dim chapel at the lone figure in the aisle. 'Don't pray for me, Reverend. Let

your prayers be for a girl. Pray that she is everything she needs to be.'

'What girl?'

Carlston stepped out of the chapel and let the door shut behind him. 'Lady Helen Wrexhall,' he said softly. 'Pray for Lady Helen Wrexhall.'

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