



“She groaned with the effort of holding back the mad desire to strike. It was as if some savage, wild part of herself was taking over.”

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# Demon Slayer



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Eighteen-year-old debutante Lady Helen Wrexhall is set to step into Regency Society and find a husband. But this step will take her from glittering ballrooms and the bright lights of Vauxhall Gardens into a shadowy world of demonic creatures and deadly power.

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the  
Dark  
Days  
Club

ALISON GOODMAN

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*Demon Slayer*



Eighteen-year-old debutante Lady Helen Wrexhall arrives at Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens for the evening to discover what the Dark Days Club is really all about...

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## Chapter Fourteen

Wrapped in the shield of his greatcoat, Helen followed Lord Carlston further into the darkness. Questions whirled through her mind, but only one found an anchor in the tumult of emotions that rocked her between bewilderment and fear. Could she really be a harbinger of evil? It was a ludicrous idea. It *had* to be ludicrous, because if it was not, that meant... She gulped for breath. She had no clear idea *what* it meant, but the thought crushed the air from her chest.

Before long, Carlston stopped in a dark stretch between two lamps, his shimmering blue arm pointing to a break in the bushes. He pulled the touch watch from his pocket and deftly assembled the three-part lens. A loud bell rang. Helen recognised it: the call to the start of the fireworks at the other end of the Gardens. Everyone would be streaming towards the display, leaving the Dark Walk and its surrounds deserted.

“Stay behind me,” Carlston whispered.

They entered the dark cavern of undergrowth, both stooping under the overhanging trees. The narrow, flattened path smelled of crushed leaves and the sap of broken branches. Newly forged, Helen thought, then felt absurdly pleased at the

logical deduction. There was comfort in logic: it brought order and sanity, unlike this brutal Reclaimer world that had the likes of Mr Benchley in it.

She glanced back to see the paler blue figures of Lady Margaret and Mr Hammond still at the start of the path. She was to be alone then, with his lordship. The prospect should have been alarming, but her idea of danger had shifted somewhat in the last half-hour. She tightened her hand around the hard oval of the miniature.

Behind them, a large popping explosion made her duck her head even lower, shoulders tensing. Above, a staccato run of high-pitched whistles threw whizzing red and green wheels past the treetops. The fireworks had begun.

Carlston held a large branch out of her way. "The display will keep the area clear, but we must hurry. The show does not last long."

She edged past the straining branch, ignoring the dig and scrape of smaller twigs against the woollen coat. They stepped into a compact clearing, an expanse of night sky visible again, lit with a showering bloom of pink stars. Combustive cracks boomed through the air, bringing an orange comet arcing through the slow fall of pink. The spectacle held Helen still for a moment, her neck craned back. But she was not here for childish wonder. Turning from the fireworks, she found his lordship already by a clump of pale, ghostly trees across the clearing, his lens lifted to study another kind of light: an ominous blue glow about thirty yards away, near the boundary wall. Even at that distance, Helen could see it was brighter than the blue shimmer around Carlston. A virulent ultramarine.

He beckoned. "Come. Meet one of our adversaries."

*Adversaries.* The word tolled through her.

She crossed to his side and squinted into the deep blue light,

the edges of the miniature biting into her clenched hand. What she saw did not make sense: a jumble of arms and legs and long trails of energy that pulsed in her sight. Then her skin tensed with cold understanding. It was two people up against a wall, enveloped in the violent, throbbing ultramarine: a woman, garish pink skirts up around her waist exposing a pale thigh and ragged stockings, and a man in a greatcoat pressing her against the bricks, holding her pinned with the length of his body. But this was no normal man: two long tentacles of energy protruded from his back, whip-thin and bright with brilliant blue charge. Another tentacle, as thick as an arm and the blue-black colour of a new bruise, weaved through the air above the woman like an obscene, oversized leech, then plunged into her chest. She convulsed, her head hitting the bricks as it impaled her body, the tentacle shivering with an influx of pale energy. The man slammed up against her, the sound of his grunt carrying across a lull in the crack and whirl of the fireworks.

Helen stepped back. "Holy God, what is he doing to her?"

"He is fornicating with her, and at the same time harvesting her life force," Carlston said calmly, lowering his lens. "That is a Deceiver. He and his like are why you have your gifts."

She felt her blood rush in her ears, her breath hard as if she had run for miles. *Fornicating*. She had seen the carnal act illustrated on Berta's card and that had been shocking enough. But to see it enacted before her, by some kind of heinous creature, was truly terrifying.

"Is it a demon?" she finally gasped. No, demons were metaphors for the evil in man, not monsters made of flesh and blue energy that walked Vauxhall Gardens. They could not be real. Yet here was the proof, pulsing before her eyes.

"They have been called many things," Carlston said. "Evil

spirits, hellions, lamia. Whatever they are called, they have been amongst us for centuries. Creatures that thrive upon human lust.”

Even with the horror before her, Helen could not help flinching at such language. *Fornication. Lust.*

“Forgive me,” Carlston said quickly. “I use the word in its broader sense: overwhelming appetite. These creatures feed upon human yearning and desire. They seek to foment it amongst us, according to their needs. This one is a Pavor: a particularly foul creature that feeds on physical and mental suffering and our most primal desire to stay alive.”

“Will he kill her?” She could barely form the question.

“He will, but not yet. The energy within her fear is what he feeds upon.” Carlston’s face was grim. “This type of Deceiver is one of the worst, but there are others: the Cruors, which feed on bloodlust and dominance; the Luxures, which seek out the climactic energy of se—” He stopped, visibly correcting himself. “The physical expression of love; and the Hedons, which seek to sustain themselves from the energy of art and creativity.”

Helen motioned to the man. “But it looks human.”

“Yes. You start to perceive our difficulty. They colonise human bodies and live at all levels of society, wherever their particular taste will be best satisfied. These Pavors are more often found in the lower and middling orders. You will always find Luxures in the *demi-monde*, the Cruors are often drawn to the military, and the Hedons are generally amongst our own social sphere.”

The Pavor’s bruise-black tentacle was writhing through the woman, her back thudding against the bricks. The light of the fireworks flashed across her face, bringing detail to the pale, drained features. Helen recoiled. Under her revulsion, she felt a sickened outrage gathering in her body. “He must be stopped!”

“Yes, and he will be. But I must wait for Quinn. You see those two energy whips that come from his back, on either side of that feeding tentacle?” Helen nodded, transfixed by the awful flexing of the appendages. “They are very effective weapons. This is not his first victim tonight. He is in a glut – feeding to his fill – and close to forming a third whip from the energy he has gathered. Do you see how the feeder penetrates her chest?” Helen nodded again. “He is draining her life force through her heart. The first rule: always protect your heart.” He tapped his chest. “This is what they aim for. It is difficult to fight two whips and still stay clear of a feeder tentacle, but fighting against three whips is almost impossible for one Reclaimer.” He shot a glance at her. “One *trained* Reclaimer.”

“Is that what you do? Fight them?”

“It is what *we* do.”

Helen stared at him. She could not fight anything, let alone one of these creatures.

A large explosion of green sparks lit the sky. The Pavor looked up, his face clear for a moment in the sickly light. It was a normal man’s face, but his lips were drawn back in a loathsome smile of lust that seemed horribly stretched beyond the mouth it was fixed upon.

She turned her head, unable to keep watching. “Where did they come from?”

“Some have said Hell; others say they were born from our own hatreds and base natures.” Lord Carlston lifted his shoulder: the shrug of a practical man. “Whatever the truth, it is the duty of the Dark Days Club to keep them in check.”

*Them.* Helen stared into the darkness, seeing leering faces in every shadow. “Are there more here now?”

“If there are, they will stay clear. Deceivers are territorial and do not gather together. Collaboration is not in their nature.

From our standpoint, a most fortunate trait; it would be disastrous if they did.”

At the corner of her eye, Helen caught something moving across the clearing. She spun around.

Lord Carlston laid his hand fleetingly on her shoulder. “Be easy. It is Mr Hammond.”

“All clear,” Hammond reported. Helen’s face must have worn her horror, for he swiftly stepped to her side and said, “Do you need to sit down?”

“Lady Helen is coping well,” Carlston said, peering through the lens again.

He thought she was coping well? She felt as if her whole world had been torn apart.

“Here is bad news though,” he added. “The creature has two whips.”

“Two?” Hammond’s attention turned fully to his leader. “Already?”

“Almost three.” Carlston closed the touch watch with a snap. “He is in another glut. Bow Street have already found six bodies in Cheapside – no wonder they want him stopped. If the deaths are linked to one perpetrator, it will be another mass panic.”

He stared at the Pavor again. In the hard, clean lines of his profile, Helen thought she discerned a fleeting weariness.

“And as we now know,” he said softly, almost to himself, “the Home Office will go to any length to avoid a panic like Ratcliffe again.”

Hammond frowned at the violent scene in the distance. “What if he builds the third whip? You cannot take a full complement.”

“I know, I know, but we cannot leave him killing at his leisure in Vauxhall Gardens.” He gestured back towards the path. “Get Quinn. He should be back by now.”

“I must protest, sir. You cannot take three whips.”

“Well, he does not *have* three yet, does he?” his lordship said dryly. “But if you keep standing there instead of finding Quinn, he will have the third by the time I get to him.”

“Yes, sir.” Hammond disappeared into the undergrowth.

Helen peered into the bushes and heard a moment of low-pitched, fast conversation, and then the rustle of movement. Lady Margaret burst into the small clearing, her gown gathered scandalously high above her ankles.

“You must not take three whips,” she said, stopping in front of Carlston. “Not for a whore.”

Helen stepped back from her vehemence.

“Calm yourself; he has only two at present,” Carlston repeated. He pulled off his tailcoat, the close tailoring taking some force to remove from the width of his shoulders. “This has to be done. The poor unfortunate out there is just his latest victim. Bow Street wants him curtailed.” He tossed the coat to the ground. “And I can think of no better way to show Lady Helen the role of a Reclaimer.”

Lady Margaret drew herself up – a small but furious height. “Bow Street be damned.” Although her eyes cut to Helen, she refrained from damning her as well. She jabbed her finger at the sky. “It is only a quarter moon. Everything is against this, my lord. Please, we have only just got you back.”

Helen looked up at the slim crescent in the sky, a band of cloud crossing its pale light. What did the moon have to do with it?

“Lady Margaret, this kind of foul attack is one of the reasons why I have come back,” Carlston said reprovingly. His eye lit upon Helen, and she knew she was the other reason. “I have been too long gone from my duty.”

He tugged at his cravat, unravelling its intricate folds and pulling it free. The waistcoat was next, thrown to the ground with no regard for the ivory silk. He stood clad in only boots,

buckskin breeches and white shirt, the lower part of each sleeve covered by a thick black armguard laced from wrist to elbow. Heat rose to Helen's cheeks: she could almost see the skin of his chest through the fine linen. He pulled on the end of one leather glove, working it well over the edge of the guard. The sound of approach made him turn.

Hammond and the huge shape of Quinn emerged from the undergrowth.

"Two whips," Carlston said in way of greeting to his man. "On his way to three, but there should be enough time to stop him. We cannot kill him yet – he still has progeny – so I will only disarm the whips."

Quinn nodded, his eyes flicking across to Helen. He reached inside his greatcoat and pulled out a long knife. It had a smooth, pale handle – ivory, perhaps, or bone – but the blade was not steel. It was transparent. Helen leaned closer. It was made of glass and easily her handspan in width.

His lordship rolled his shoulders. "Ready?"

"Aye, sir." Quinn straightened, his coat falling back around a scabbard strapped to his leg.

Carlston held out the touch watch to Helen. "Keep this safe for me."

The drop of its small weight into her hand felt like a finality. She had a sudden image of him lifeless on the ground. "But don't you need it?"

"Here is your second rule," he said. "We must absorb a certain amount of a Deceiver's whip energy to defeat it, but metal acts as a conduit for their power and concentrates it into a lethal blast. Never carry metal when you face a creature that has glutted and built whips. If you do, you will be dead in the time it takes to blink. That means no normal knives, swords or pistols."

Quinn passed him the glass knife. Helen could not take her

eyes from the blade. Its broad length was etched with a swirling design around a phrase: *Deus in vitro est*. God is in the glass.

Carlston hefted the weapon in his hand. "Use that miniature, Lady Helen. Watch carefully. This is what you are. A Reclaimer built to fight Deceivers." He paused. "Perhaps to fight something even worse."

She stepped back. No, she was not built for battle. Nor was she some harbinger of evil. She was just a girl.

Lady Margaret picked up Lord Carlston's jacket, holding it against her body. "Do not take on three. Please."

He gave a nod and strode from the clearing, Quinn following like a huge shadow.

"What does he mean, use the miniature?" Hammond demanded.

Helen showed the portrait in her ungloved hand. "When I hold this, I can see the energy around everyone. Around that creature."

"Without a lens?" Lady Margaret asked, clearly astonished. She crossed to Helen, her voice urgent. "We are not Reclaimers, we cannot see the energy, *ever*. All we see are two men fighting. You must tell me what is happening with the whips. Please!"

The force of Lady Margaret's fear gathered Helen to the edge of the clearing. Mr Hammond took up a position on her left side, his sister on the right. Perhaps to stop her from fleeing. No, a mad thought, born from her own fear.

Carlston walked directly towards the Pavor. The creature was still intent upon the woman, its feeder buried in her slumped body, the two bright blue whips curved over its back. But Quinn no longer followed his lordship. Helen scanned the trees and finally found him moving stealthily into a position near the wall.

"Does Quinn fight the Pavor too?" she whispered.

“No,” Hammond said. “He is not a Reclaimer. He is Lord Carlston’s Terrene.”

“Like Parker was for Mr Benchley,” Helen said, recalling the reference to Benchley’s servant. Hammond glanced at her in surprise. Did he think she could not put two simple pieces of information together? “What does a Terrene do?”

“When his lordship takes the energy from those whips, it will stay within his body. He must be in contact – the whole length of his body – with bare earth in less than twenty seconds to discharge it, or it will render him insane. It—”

“Or kill him, if it is three whips,” Lady Margaret cut in. “If it was a full or new moon, he would have a better chance, but it is a waning quarter.” She chewed on her lower lip, her eyes fixed upon the figure of his lordship moving cautiously through the undergrowth.

“The gifts of a Reclaimer are linked to the energies within the earth, and those energies are at their peak during the new and full moons,” her brother explained.

“But what if the creature is indoors, or his lordship is too far from bare earth?” Helen asked. “How would he discharge the energy then?”

A grim smile flitted across Mr Hammond’s face. “In the words of the Bard: *The better part of valour is discretion*. His lordship would not fight a creature without a clear path to earth. The risk is too great. Quinn does not fight because he must be ready to get Lord Carlston onto the ground straight after the battle. He must hold his lordship there until he releases the Deceiver energy into the earth.”

“He must hold him?”

“Yes, his lordship will fight to keep it.”

“Why?”

Hammond shook his head. “He has never explained why.”

“If Quinn cannot help him, then why don’t you, Mr Hammond?” Helen asked. “Why is he fighting this creature alone?”

It was as if the air contracted between them. Hammond rounded on her, his voice tight. “Do you think I want to just stand here and watch like some God-damned coward?”

Lady Margaret’s attention snapped to her brother. “*Michael!*”

He bowed his head for a moment, his hands balled into fists, then took a deep breath. “Forgive me, Lady Helen. His lordship has forbidden anyone to approach. You will see why once they start. He and the Pavor will move faster than anything you have ever seen; too fast for a normal man to keep up. Too fast even for a Terrene like Quinn. His lordship says if anyone tried to help, it would just distract him and put him in more danger.” He looked back at the unfolding scene at the wall. “I would be a liability.”

Lady Margaret reached over and covered one of her brother’s fists with a gentle hand. “You would help if you could.”

He nodded, but frustration pulsed from him.

Lord Carlston stopped two yards away from the creature and its victim, the glass knife catching a flash of light from the fireworks. He must have called a challenge, for the Pavor suddenly ripped his feeder from the prostitute and spun to face him, the obscene blue-black length retracting somehow into his back. The woman’s body slid down the brick wall and slumped to the ground. Was she still alive? Helen could not tell.

“Has it built a third whip?” Lady Margaret asked.

Helen tightened her grip on the miniature, as if more pressure might give her a clearer view in the shifting light. “No, I can see only two. What are they?”

“Weapons made from the creature’s true energy form. If those whips penetrate a human body, they can lock a man into

convulsions, or stab and slice like a rapier. They burn flesh too,” Mr Hammond said. “That is why his lordship is wearing gloves and armguards.”

“For all the use they are,” Lady Margaret said under her breath.

The Pavor advanced upon Carlston, whips curling back into striking position above his shoulders, like two scorpion stingers. The primeval curves sent a shudder through Helen. Although the man was shorter than Carlston and more heavy-set, it did not seem to hinder his speed. He punched a whip at Carlston’s chest, the other swinging into a savage slash at his neck. Helen gasped, hearing the crack of energy as Carlston spun to the left and ducked away from the first lash, grabbing for the second as it sliced above his head. His gloved hand grazed it, but did not connect. Hammond was right: they were both moving with abnormal speed. Carlston’s grace and agility thrummed through Helen’s body, as if she too were spinning and ducking and grabbing for the Pavor’s whip.

She looked down at the touch watch in her other hand. “How does he see the whips without the lens?”

“He doesn’t,” Lady Margaret said tightly. “He is using his other senses to locate them. He says he can hear their shape in the air, feel their movement, even smell them.”

“What?” Helen croaked, her mouth dry. “He is trying to grab those whips without seeing them?”

“Yes,” Hammond said, eyes fixed on the fight. “He must wrap both whips around his forearm and hold them so that he can cut off the creature’s weapons with the glass blade. Only then can he absorb the energy and discharge it into the earth.”

The Pavor lunged at Carlston. For a second, the Earl did not move – why wasn’t he moving? – then Helen realised he was listening for the creature’s next attack. Suddenly, he launched

himself to the left, dropping into a roll, the end of a whip biting into the earth inches from his head. So close! He clawed at the energy, but it was already snapping back. The Pavor ran forward again, both whips curved high above his head. The left one snaked towards Carlston's chest, the right massing into a ball of power that swung horizontally through the air like a mace. His lordship dived to the right and then launched himself at the flicking end of the left appendage. Helen heard his gasp of pain as his glove closed around the pulsing blue power – her fear leaping at the sound – but he did not hesitate, circling his wrist to wrap the lash around the armguard.

“He has caught one!” she said. The danger of it throbbed in her blood.

“Thank God,” Lady Margaret said breathlessly.

The Pavor wrenched at the hold, pulling Carlston off balance. His lordship hit the ground as the other whip slammed down. He rolled, the blue shaft of power plunging into the earth next to his head, sending up an explosion of dirt and grass that merged with the cracking roll of fireworks. Carlston staggered to his feet, shaking his head, blinded by the shower of dirt, but still holding the end of the first whip. The other snapped from the ground and came at him, too fast to duck. He turned, taking it across his back, shirt slicing open into a bloom of blood. Helen flinched.

Lady Margaret gasped. “No!”

“He is still holding the first whip,” Helen said.

Carlston staggered then recovered, pulling himself up with the writhing energy whip. The Pavor, seeing his advantage, kicked at Carlston's shoulder, trying to free himself. The other lash curved back for another attack, the dark length of his feeding tentacle flicking out behind it. Carlston dropped his knife and grabbed the man's foot, twisting. The Pavor fell

face-down onto the ground, his free whip rising up, striking at Carlston's head. But this time Carlston was too fast. He caught it, forcing it down, the effort baring his teeth.

"He has the second," Helen cried.

Carlston wrapped the writhing end around his wrist alongside its mate, and snatched up the knife. A slash high across the pulsing energy severed the whips near the man's shoulder blades, just missing the feeder as it retracted into his back. Helen heard a scream, but could not tell if it was the Pavor's agony or Carlston's as he lifted the captured whips and slammed their blue energy into his own chest. The force of it dropped him to his knees.

The Pavor kicked at him, the weak blow making no impact on Carlston's arched, rigid body. Then the creature hauled himself to his feet, panting, the glow around him reduced to the same pale blue that shimmered around Lady Margaret and Mr Hammond. Helen blinked at the bright corona around his lordship, an intense, burning ultramarine light that throbbed with power. Through the blue haze she saw him throw back his head and smile up at the Pavor, the glass knife still in his hand. Helen had never seen such a smile. It was beyond joy; an ecstasy of total abandon. Of madness. There was no boundary left within him, and it was terrifying.

The Pavor staggered back, then turned and ran.

"Does his lordship have the Pavor energy?" Lady Margaret demanded.

"He is – he is surrounded by bright blue light," Helen stammered. She followed the Pavor's retreat through the trees. "But the creature looks as if he only has human energy now."

"Unless they are glutted, their life force looks the same as ours," Hammond said. "That is why they are so hard to find amongst us." He searched the dark wood. "Quinn should be on

his way. What is holding him up?”

Lady Margaret peered intently into the undergrowth. “Why does he not come?” She clutched Helen’s arm, fingers digging through the layers of clothing. “Lady Helen, prepare to run to Lord Carlston. In an emergency, one Reclaimer can absorb a share of whip energy from another. You can share the load. It will save his life.”

Helen tried to pull her arm free. She did not want any part of that mad energy.

“Margaret, no!” Hammond said. “She cannot. She does not have her Reclaimer strength.”

“But Quinn is not coming. Why is he not coming?”

As if conjured by her despair, Quinn emerged from his hiding place at a dead run, dodging trees and leaping over bushes with astounding speed and agility. He tackled Carlston just as the Earl rose to his feet. The brutal impact sent both men sprawling to the ground. Quinn recovered first and launched himself at the Earl’s prone body, straddling his chest. He grabbed Carlston’s wrist and forced it back until the glass knife dropped into the grass, then slammed his knee across Carlston’s arm, pinning it against the ground. He groped at the scabbard strapped to his leg, but the momentary slackening of his grip let Carlston free his other fist. He drove it into the big man’s jaw, the vicious blow rocking Quinn backward. Carlston tried to throw him off, but Quinn hammered his elbow into the Earl’s face and grabbed his flailing arm, forcing it back down. He threw himself over Carlston’s body again, pressing him into the ground. The Earl strained against him, bucking under the fierce hold of his Terrene as he tried to wrench himself free.

“Let it go, sir!” Quinn’s desperate voice reached Helen. “Let it go. Or I must use the spike!”

Lady Margaret pressed her fingertips to her mouth, as if

she could not bear to ask the question. “Is he releasing the energy?”

“No.”

“It must be near twenty seconds. He is running out of time,” Hammond said.

Quinn had come to the same conclusion. In one fluid movement he pulled a spike from the scabbard and raised it high. Helen gasped as he drove it straight through Carlston’s left hand, pinning it to the earth. The Earl screamed, writhing as the bright blue energy roiled around them, the sound melding with the booming finale of the fireworks. Quinn’s head jerked back, his teeth bared in pain as he grimly held onto the spike. The pulsing ultramarine power imploded. This time the Earl’s scream was a howl of loss as the brilliant blue light collapsed through his body and drained away into the earth under the two agonised men. Above, a final explosion of green and red and white stars burst over the Gardens, the clap and rumble fading into distant cheers and applause.

“He stabbed him!” Helen cried.

“But is the energy gone?” Lady Margaret clutched Helen’s arm. “Is it gone?”

“Yes.” Helen watched, horrified, as Quinn wrenched the spike from Carlston’s hand and rolled off him, huge chest heaving with effort.

The Earl clutched his wounded hand, the last of the Pavor energy flickering from his body into the earth. He rolled onto his side, curling around his hand.

Hammond exhaled. “Thank God.”

“He stabbed him,” Helen said again.

“It is not always the case,” Hammond said quickly. “Sometimes his lordship keeps enough of himself to let the energy go.”

“I think he has got worse since we last saw him,” Lady

Margaret said softly, searching her brother's face for confirmation.

He gave a short nod. "Three years of fighting on the Continent has taken its toll."

Helen drew in a sharp breath. Did he realise Carlston had used the same words about Benchley?

Hammond touched his sister's shoulder. "We must help get him back on his feet and out of here, then return to the supper box." He led them swiftly through the bushes.

"Will he be all right?" Helen asked as she kept pace with Lady Margaret.

"Yes. Now that he has released the energy."

Helen nodded, trying to maintain her calm, but the shock of what she had seen could not be contained.

"His lordship seems to think this is what I am meant to do. How could I ever fight such creatures? I cannot do what he does. His own man stabbed him!" She stopped, her sudden halt bringing Lady Margaret to a standstill. The dark shapes of the garden tipped into a dizzying whirl. "It is impossible." She flung her hand out, trying to push it all away.

Lady Margaret grabbed her arm. "There is no choice, Lady Helen. His lordship has shown you this hidden world because you are a Reclaimer, and we are desperate for your talents."

Carlston was on his feet again, his injured hand cradled in the other. He turned to give an order to Quinn, and for a moment Helen saw his back through the wreck of his shirt. A long, bloody slash stretched from the muscles of his shoulder to the base of his spine, crisscrossing a half-healed older wound. She looked away from the shock of his bare skin. And the awful damage.

Quinn passed them, intent on the woman slumped against the wall. He kneeled beside her, his hand hovering at her mouth for a moment. "She still breathes, my lord. She may survive."

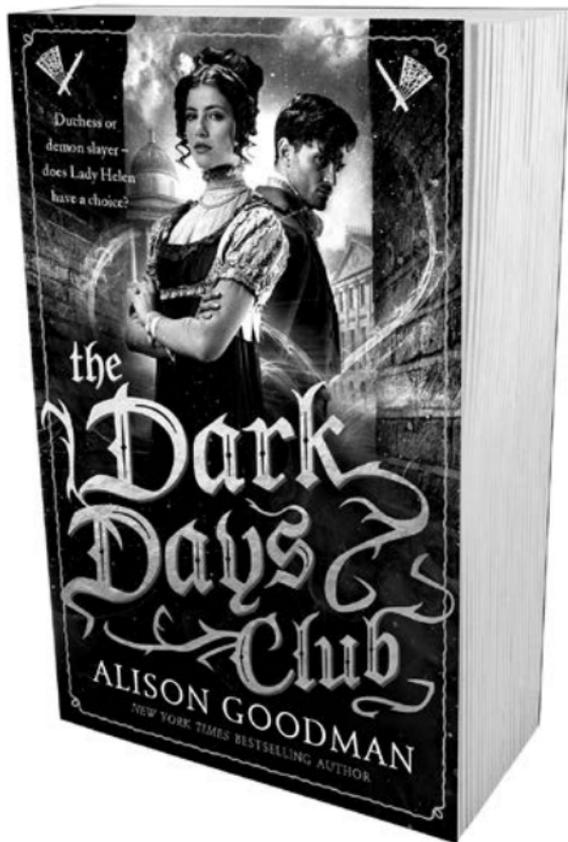
He gathered her into his arms and, in one mighty hoist, lifted her up.

Carlston flexed his injured hand, hissing as the wound stretched. A cut across his forehead oozed blood through the lift of his eyebrows.

“This is what you had to see, Lady Helen,” he said, wiping blood from his eye. “Welcome to the Dark Days Club.”

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**Alison Goodman** is the author of the international bestselling and award-winning *Eon/Eona* duology, as well as the acclaimed *Singing the Dogstar Blues* and the adult thriller *A New Kind of Death* (originally titled *Killing the Rabbit*).

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