



DIABLO
Witness

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Witness



I always know when a visitor is about to arrive. The air in my parlor—normally still and close with woodsmoke and dust—shimmers like it is alive. And shortly, it *is*.

Within minutes, a stranger materializes, becomes flesh and blood out of the nothingness in front of me.

First-time visitors are inevitably surprised, suddenly finding themselves in an unfamiliar parlor, facing a mysterious figure shrouded in shadow and fog. Is it what they expected? Sometimes they have been sent against their will and have no idea what is happening to them. But usually they choose to make this journey, even if they don't know that it will take them here. I don't know what they have been told to expect, and I never ask them.

I must keep my distance from these visitors. I am a scribe. A diligent recorder of

history. To ask would go against the rules.

But I am something else too. I am a facilitator in the affairs of mortals.

I watch the air thicken in front of me as it pushes into another dimension. Colors appear: the gray haze of smoke, blinding slivers of white, nuggets of the man's blue eyes, the glint of the metal hilt of his sword. Then he is standing whole, in front of me. This one is tall and thin and wiry. His age is elusive—not young, not old—but he is clearly strong and nimble. His hair is long, but his face doesn't match the number of years it takes to become that silver-gray. He wears traveler's clothes, a cloak and good boots, all well made and costly but showing the miles. He takes off his broad-brimmed hat to reveal a foxlike face. High cheekbones, a pointy nose. There is intelligence in those eyes but also a touch of frost: his guard is up. Far and away, the most honest of his features is his mouth, which is wry and cunning and tight.

There's something about this one. And it is not just his sword. It is a serious blade, meant for use. Not merely a warning.

He isn't disoriented for long, not like most visitors. Sometimes guests come through their dreams, but most often they make the journey from Sanctuary using elixirs and even certain teas. He seems to be recovering from the effects quickly. He likely didn't take much of whatever he took, or perhaps he used the least potent. Not tincture of nightshade or salvia divinorum. Maybe, at worst, a thimble of hound's blood or powdered stag's horn. But it's impossible to know; many of those who claim to be magicians are charlatans, and who knows what they put in their potions?

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath to steady himself. When he opens those eyes again, his gaze settles on me. My hair is still mostly black, my eyes a watery sea green. If someone were to come in search of a Damji, to look at me they would know they had found one.

Regardless, my clothing has been chosen to conceal. There is little exposed skin, between my leggings, sleeves, and a bodice formed of leather straps and bronze fittings. A hood conceals the particulars of my face, hides too the telltale eye darts and flickers that could reveal what I am thinking. I cannot let visitors know what is really going on in my mind. The hood lets the visitor see what will comfort them and draw them in: my striking pale eyes and the smile that many tell me is bewitching



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still. A smile meant to put a visitor at ease, promising a patient, sympathetic ear.

His gaze drops to my hands and forearms. Tattoos peek out from my sleeves. They could be mistaken for symbols, but they are words. He won't be able to discern their meaning. The language is dead and long gone. But over the words are new images, drawings that crawl over the old tattoos, that curl around them, meld with them, obscure them. My present hiding my past—there's a message there, if one is patient. But his eye skitters off quickly and goes down to my ink-stained hands. The stains reach up to the middle of my forearms, for they are a sign of my trade and I have been at it for a long, long time.

He stares at one finger in particular. It's been amputated above the second knuckle and capped with an obscure piece of jewelry: an inkwell. The inkwell is one of the tools of my work. It is the reservoir that holds the dye that mixes with my blood to create a special ink.

He opens his mouth as though he's about to ask a question. Just as quickly, he licks his lips, smiles wolfishly, but asks nothing. Does he know what that amputation signifies?

I'm not about to ask. I am secure in the knowledge that he can't hurt me, and I sense that he knows this too.

"Welcome, stranger," I say with my customary confidence, though today I do not quite feel it. Usually, I am happy to have a visitor. I look forward to the company, the distraction.

But not this time.

Then he smiles as he starts to understand where he is. Where he has landed. "What in the name of all the hells . . . Well, I'll be damned. It worked, didn't it? You're Hedaji, aren't you?"



The Hedaji are among the most mysterious creatures of the universe. Some visitors seek me merely out of curiosity.

I knew nothing about the Hedaji before I met Badaal, the man who would become my mentor. Badaal saw something in me that made him think I would do well as one of them. At the time, I was not in a position to turn him down.

That happened so long ago, in fact, that I have lost track of the exact number of years. Of course, time is meaningless to Hedaji, as it would be to anyone who can see past and present and future.

The stranger doesn't know that he is lucky to be visiting me. I don't need to be modest: I am one of the most respected of the Hedaji. I have been witness to many, many epic feats, recorded many fearsome battles and many glorious deaths. That is because I have never lost my curiosity. Even after all this time, I am eager to learn more. Knowledge is as strength as armor. Knowledge is a weapon in and of itself. Some Hedaji are content to be summoned to bear witness to one important moment or another, but I have always thrown myself headlong into the hunt. My thirst is endless, my quest boundless.

But the reason for my quest has changed.



The visitor draws back and starts to pace along the walls of the room, like a wild thing trapped in a pen, trying to find a way out. He takes a few steps in one direction, then turns and strides off in another. A bank of fog rises up suddenly and stops him like a wall, and he stands there, trying to find a way around it, even though he can't see it properly, can't tell if it's solid.

"Where am I?" His voice has a singsong quality to it. It makes him sound gentler than he probably is. But he is trapped, and he knows it.

I extend a hand toward the center of the room, attempting to guide him away from the walls. "Welcome, stranger. Take your ease. What's your name?"



THE CARDS APPEAR OUT OF
THIN AIR AS I REACH FOR
THEM. THEY DANCE ABOVE
MY HANDS, SHUFFLING
THEMSELVES.

“Giaran. My name is Giaran.” It won’t be his name the moment we part company, of that I have no doubt.

“You’re in my parlor. Did you not mean to come here? This is not an easy place to get to. Few people come here by accident . . .”

“Yes, I came here on purpose. I went to see a reclusive alchemist. He came well recommended. The last thing I remember is drinking this potion . . .” A hand flutters to his forehead. He closes his eyes, trying to bear down on a memory that wants to slip away.

Something is different about Giaran. Something feels off. “You’re fine. You’re exactly where you should be. You are welcome to browse—my dwelling is home to many curiosities, many treasures—but know that our time is limited, and I want to see that you get what you came for. Is there something special you seek?”

He looks me up and down now, as though he’s never seen the likes of me before. “You are Hedaji, aren’t you? The man who gave me the potion said it would summon a Hedaji . . .”

“The effect is the other way around,” I explain gently. “It has brought you to me.” As we speak, I can’t get over the feeling there is something familiar about him, even though we haven’t met before. After all, I have traveled the length and breadth of Sanctuary. I have seen more tribes and clans than most anyone can lay claim to, except the gods themselves, so I don’t let myself be distracted by this odd sense of *déjà vu*.

“My name is Tejal. Come, sit at my table.” A huge wooden table materializes between us at my command. It’s draped with an ancient red tablecloth, threadbare in places. It’s anchored with touchstones: a ceremonial skull, coins of fortune, a divining blade.



He touches the cloth as though to convince himself that it's real, then staggers to the seat opposite me.

"Laid before you is the bounty of history!" The cards appear out of thin air as I reach for them. They dance above my hands, shuffling themselves. When I extend my arms to my sides, the cards fly, fanning into a circle that floats in the air. The visitor gawks, as well he should: it is clear that each card bristles and thrums with a life of its own, each a portal to its own story. And then as I draw my hands back together, the cards follow, falling into place until they are a stack again. Waiting.

For each card, there is an image on the front, usually the likeness of a person but sometimes an object, and that very person or object also appears over my shoulder in a dim light, like a spirit escaping from another plane.

"Perhaps this item is to your liking?" I make the card hover level with Giaran's eyes so he can see the image before flipping the card over to reveal the text, the person's or artifact's story. There's a river of words, tiny and densely packed, too small to read without a glass. Then I flip the card again and the stranger recoils: the image has been replaced by more words as well as a drawing, a study of a detail. An insignia, say, or the exact pattern of scars from a fearsome wound. And on and on it goes as I make the card somersault. The sides keep changing, an endless recounting of the item and the item's owner, an entire book captured on those two small surfaces. The stories inscribed on those cards—I know them by heart. In my humble opinion, that is the true magic of the Hedaji: the infinite amount of wisdom each of us holds. We are worlds within worlds.

The stranger tries to still the card, but it eludes his grasp. "What is this, a trick? What is this you're showing me?"

I ignore his question. He will settle eventually. All visitors are nervous when they first arrive. They will concentrate on the artifacts soon enough, remembering their needs. What brought them here in the first place. "Look carefully." I wave my hand, and we are back at the beginning, at the meticulously rendered illustration of a monstrous rat's skull. It has been thoroughly stripped of fur and flesh, the bone cleaned. The way it has been preserved, it is almost beautiful, and the artwork has captured this, down to the lacquered sheen that has been lovingly applied over bone, the way it adds a veneer of iridescent color over the ivory.

Over my shoulder, the skull appears out of the darkness.

"It was a part of the armor of Vylum, the druidic son of a lord of Westmarch," I tell Giaran. "Have you heard of him? No? He was beloved by the lowly animals of the city's sewers and cellars and mausoleums. Not so beloved by humans." It's not that I think this dapper stranger has come for the scourge of Westmarch's frightening piece; I am merely trying to draw him out. I tap a finger on the image.

"The skull belonged to one of his favorite minions, an intelligent rat by the name of Plato, who was killed by the city guard appointed to exterminate all rats in a time of plague. Plato's master couldn't bear to say goodbye, so he kept his skeleton to adorn his tunic. The Rat King is quite the fearsome sight. Picture him festooned with the bones of his fallen rodent comrades, hides and teeth and tails. He leaves a rat skull as his calling card when he's made a kill, to let his enemies know who was responsible. But he couldn't bear to part with Plato's."

The stranger scowls. Well, it is a disquieting sight, though I sense he is not squeamish. This man is not frightened by the sight of death.

"You know his story well. It's almost like you were there."

"I was there." I study his face, hoping for clues to his true desire, but he is like an actor, hiding what he doesn't want me to see. "That is the Hedaji's role, you know: we travel time and space to record moments of great battle and glory. We are the historians, capturing moments in crystal clarity so they are not lost to time."

I take one last look at the rat's lacquered skull. "Not of interest?" I flick the card away. "Perhaps this is more to your liking?" The rat skull recedes into the darkness, replaced by a huge helmet gray with layers of tarnish.

The stranger leans forward, intrigued by the gilt barely visible beneath the gray. The helmet is, in fact, a massive iron bell that was stripped from a Zakarum church in the little town of Saint's Calling.

"This is the helmet of a barbarian named Klath-Ulna, the Golden One. He was bent on sacking the iron bells from all churches built in the name of the Zakarum faith, and cutting and breaking them into shape to become part of his gold-stamped armor. Sacrilegious, some might say, but Klath-Ulna had long given up on the beliefs of the church. Vengeance became his religion. Besides"—the bell, though molded and carved with a mask of eye sockets and skeletal teeth, still had a lilt of gold that had been grafted onto the bell—"gold brings beauty to this object of terror . . . It mocked his enemies by using that which they idolized to forge his own frightening visage. He made them look into the face of *judgment*."

Giaran licks his lips again as he studies the image. Yes, gold is definitely more to his liking. A man who appreciates coin, then. Perhaps even worships it. Has he come for a piece of Klath-Ulna's legacy? Does the frightening barbarian mean something to him, or is he merely tempted by the presence of so much gold?

He rises from the table and approaches the helmet. It sways heavily in the misty air just beyond his reach.

Then I realize, no, Giaran doesn't want to touch the helmet: he's trying to look *beyond* it. He wasn't confused earlier and trying to find a way out. He's trying to see what other treasures I possess.

Reluctantly, he returns to sit at the table. I flick the card away. The area behind me goes black, and there is nothing else to compete for his attention. It is just him and me.

I decide to confront him directly. "What are you looking for, stranger?"

He turns shy—or maybe obstinate. For a second time, he doesn't answer. He asks, instead, "Are all Hedaji like you?"

"Do you mean, are we related by blood? No, we are more like priests, I suppose: drawn from every clan, every class, every race that exists. I think we're chosen because we possess certain attributes, specific tendencies."

He glances at the spartan walls of the chamber. "You would have to crave solitude, I suppose. It's just you here, in these chambers, isn't it? You're alone."

An icy finger runs down my spine. Should I be worried? Is he probing for weaknesses?

He grins wolfishly again. "It wouldn't be pleasant for someone who needs to be surrounded by people."

When I was a child, people said that I was happiest in the company of others. A born leader, my father had said. He thought I would lead the community of our clan one day, like my mother.

That was not to be, and that girl has been gone for a long time. Though she has been visiting me lately, reminding me of what I once was.

"This lonely life seems to suit you," he says, almost smug. So sure of his judgments, this one. "Does it? Are you happy here, living in the shadows?"

I shuffle the cards. The feel of them in my hands offers a bit of comfort. They are the stories of others. These may not be stories *about* me, but in a way they are my stories too, ones I've recorded over the millennia. They are all I have. They are my children, my family. "It is necessary, regardless of how one may feel personally. We seek out those moments in time that must be captured, the moments that can't afford to be lost."

"I understand you're not allowed to interfere."

"That's right. We are there to record and nothing more. We can't change history, even for the individual."

He leans forward so that our faces are close. I can smell the oil he uses to dress that silvery mane of his and the woodsmoke that clings to his clothing. "But I've heard of a time when a Hedaji did more than just record. When a Hedaji interfered with destiny."

I have the presence of mind not to react. I manage to keep my breathing and my gaze steady. There is no way he could *know*. He is fishing for information. *That* is what he's come here for.

I smirk. "People *want* the Hedaji to break their oath: that would make us seem more human. Relatable. But—no. That is not our way."

He nods. But he is not done yet with this line of questioning. "It must be hard, Tejal, to see all sorts of good people in danger, being killed, and not be able to do something about it."

Is this why he's sought me out? Did I witness some terrible slaughter that is meaningful to him? Has he come for something besides an object? I don't know what that could possibly be.



HE IS SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING IN PARTICULAR.

"It's not my place to become part of the moment. The Hedaji make sure there exists a record. A record is only good if it is shared with others. In that way, the Hedaji fulfill a vital role. We enable remembrance, of both the bad and the good."

He stares at me pointedly: he means to get an answer. He will not put up with my deflections and half-truths any longer. "But surely there have been times when you wanted to take action . . . Debasing of maidens, the slaughter of innocents? Surely you have seen acts so unfair, so unjust, that you knew it was a crime against the universe *not* to act."

He is fired up now, closer to the real reason why he has come here than I have seen yet. Is he here seeking justice? Does he foolishly think I am in a position to give that to him?

Or is he seeking justice *from* me?

"You know little about the universe, friend," is all I can say.

He rises from the table once more and goes into the darkness behind me. He wants to study the pieces I have on display, and this time I allow the shadows to let him go closer. He approaches the shelves, his eye skipping from one object to another. While it makes for an impressive display, my collection is mostly captured in the cards. The physical objects I keep with me are not the most important or most costly.

They are the ones that captured my imagination—or sympathy.

He walks from piece to piece, keeping a respectful distance at all times. He goes slowly, moving on only after he's studied an object with the rapt attention of a scholar. I can't help but think that this is an act, however. He is searching for something in particular.

He doesn't even pause at the scrap of red fabric that's part of my personal collection. Why should he? It's old and tattered and could easily be mistaken for a cleaning rag. He doesn't see the fragment of a faded sigil, barely visible on its corner. The line of a dragon's jaw, the curve of a crescent moon.

He stops at the plainest and most enigmatic piece in my collection. It is a ring, a small thing meant to be worn by a girl or young woman. It's not made of precious metal, has no jewels. It's made of a simple alloy. Affixed to the ring is a long, slender

spike about the length of a man's hand. Even though it is a piece of jewelry, this spike has a purpose, and it is not merely adornment.

"This is curious," he says, leaning in for a closer look. "I've never seen anything like it."

"It's very old." I decide to test him. I lift my veil, the better to see him. "It belonged to a clan that's long dead. The Damji. Have you ever heard of them?"

He strokes his chin. "Would you be surprised to hear that I *have*?"

That's impossible.

Who is this man?

His hand hovers over the ring. He looks at me imploringly. "May I?"

I nod, curious to see if, at last, he will reveal himself.

He picks up the artifact, not without reverence. He turns it over, appraising it from every angle. "What is this?"

"What do *you* think?"

He runs a finger down the long end of the spike. "I suppose this could be used as a weapon at close quarters, like a stiletto. You could plunge this end into an assailant's neck . . . or drive it through an eye into the brain."

We reveal ourselves in our choices. "What a violent turn of mind you have," I tell him. I nod at the object in his hand. "It's exactly what it appears to be: a ring."

He frowns at the piece before returning it to the shelf. "Why the long spike? It seems rather strange for something you'd wear for adornment . . ."

"It serves a second purpose specific to the Damji. The might of their magic came from community. They worked only as a group, and the rod on that ring acted like a lightning rod, attenuating their power."

His eyebrows rise in surprise.

"It was really something to witness—or so I've heard. They were a powerful group for their time. And now lost forever. It only goes to show that time swallows us all: the great, the small, the strong, the weak."

He appears to regard the ring with greater appreciation now. "A group with a unique perspective on magic and how to wield it . . . A pity that there are no more Damji."

"Yes," I answer, doing my best to give away nothing. "They are all gone."

Except one.



I remember the first time I saw Badaal. I had just passed my Day of Attainment. As a Damji, I was now considered an adult. But by nearly any measure, I was not an adult. I was only starting to grow the long, sturdy legs of my people and beginning to gain my ability to see in the dark, which I needed to join the night hunts (hunting being best after the sun went down to lessen the possibility of heat stroke in our sun-blessed land).

I was home with members of my clan. Every Damji was considered to be part of one family. These women were my sisters, aunts, cousins, the men my brothers and uncles. My mother, the matriarch of our clan, was in consultation with the elders, her custom at this hour of the day. Several of the older children were preparing the evening meal, while the younger ones had been put to work in the form of a game: cutting dried leather into strips to braid into rope and netting. Everyone was working—except me.

I was being petulant, hiding up on the veranda where I could spy down on everyone else. I was afraid my life would soon be over, rather than just beginning. I would no longer be allowed to do as I pleased. A primary role would be selected for me soon, and then my life's direction would be set. I knew what the role would be: I was expected to be a leader of my people, like my mother. I wasn't sure if that was what I wanted—truthfully, if it was something I had in me. I had yet to be tested. Too, they would find a partner for me now among the others my age. Within a few years' time, I would marry. Everything would change soon, whether I wanted it to or not.

The only thing that would not change was our family's spiritual practice. Everyone in my clan was expected to be part of it. That was one thing I'd still be able to participate in: the magic of the Damji was shared equally by each member. It was specific and individual, yes, but here was the interesting thing about it, the *unique* thing: it was meant to be a shared experience. The more of us who practiced at the same time, the stronger the magic. That meant everyone in the family was encouraged to learn the magical art.

You can see why this would make other clans suspicious of us. Some were downright fearful. I'd overheard my father and uncles at night, gathered around

the bonfire, talking about rival clans' jealousies. They envied our peacefulness. Our unity. Our magic, which could transmute one material into another. Other clans were frequently torn apart by jealousy and greed, the aspiration of the individual, the eternal hunger of the ego. Not so the Damji. As long as we stayed together, I figured, we were safe. We were strong.

I was on the veranda, hiding under a voluminous awning, when I heard a commotion. It came from the courtyard in the direction of the stables where the livestock were kept. It sounded like a fight had broken out among the group—which seemed unlikely. They were herding the livestock to make sure they were under cover for the hottest part of the day. There was little shade out on the savannah, and the intense sun could dehydrate a camel or ox in a few hours. No one wanted to be out in the midday heat even a minute longer than was necessary. Someone might get cranky, true, but they would work together in order to get the task done swiftly.

That was when I saw the flash of an explosion and heard the thunderclap.

It happened quickly after that. From the vantage point of the veranda, I saw men in unfamiliar garb, coats of many colors, emerge from around the barns, spell staffs raised high. They all wore red scarves to obscure their faces. A thick black plume of smoke was rising over the buildings, smelling of havoc and destruction. Then more explosions, more flashes of light, the smell of brimstone and hellfire and other impossible, profane ingredients. The young ones running, shouting. The clap of explosions at their backs, the cry of people dying.

Not just anyone: my brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins. My father.

The people in the kitchen heard the explosions too and flew into a panic. But my mother, my calm, intelligent mother, a natural-born leader, began to organize them quickly. Outside, our kin did not have weapons with them, she knew. There was no reason to carry weapons with them to tend the livestock at midday. There were no predators in our valley.

We didn't think of the predators coming from outside. We didn't know how jealousy and fear could drive a person—or another clan—to do the unthinkable.

Why didn't my mother summon the clan to magic? A reasonable question. She was not wearing her ring. None of us were. It seemed unnecessary in the safety of our home, just as you wouldn't carry a crossbow to the dining table or bring vials of poison with you to bed.

My mother was rushing for her ring now, and urging the others to fetch theirs too. They didn't get far before the front door flew open.

The men in those multicolored coats burst in, their staffs raised and pointed at the members of my family. I expected they would order them to kneel on the floor or stand against the wall. I thought they'd come for young women. Bride-stealing was not uncommon, though usually it was done by one man, maybe with a friend or two for courage. I'd never heard of them coming for brides en masse like this.

But then they raised their staffs.

At first, I recoiled at the bloody, violent sight before my eyes, scrambling farther beneath the awning. Then, I wanted to try to rush to save them. I knew, though, there was nothing I could do. I should've remained hidden on the veranda, hoping to be mistaken for a pile of wash. But I knew I could not remain hidden. Better to die with the rest of my family than spend the rest of my days knowing that I was all alone in the universe because of my cowardice.

I threw off the awning and came out charging. I ran down the stairs and, with a mighty roar, threw myself at one of the attackers. It was a young man, no older than me. He seemed surprised. Their plan had gone so well. My family would never have expected to be attacked in their communal home like this. That's why we hadn't raised an aura of protection. We had been too trusting.

He almost fell backward at the sight of me. It was then I saw he had a staff. He was a mage too, then, but perhaps a neophyte, to go by his youth. He raised his staff and concentrated with all his might as he pointed it at me, reciting words I couldn't make out.

Centuries later, I still remember the pain that flooded through me. It was like I'd been set on fire, so intense that everything else—the screaming, the wailing, the smell of blood—disappeared. It was just me and a fire raging up the right side of my body.

I opened my eyes to find I was lying on the floor. I felt like I was floating. All around me a massacre was going on, but I could hear nothing, feel nothing. I couldn't move. I now know that I was in shock. The boy who had hurt me was leaning over me, wondering if I was dying.

My part of the pitched battle was over. I couldn't help anyone. I couldn't even help myself.

And then, over the boy's right shoulder, I saw Badaal. He made himself visible to me and only me. I would've been frightened, mistaking him for a demon or ghost, except for the look of extreme pity in his eyes. I can still picture him as I saw him that day. His bald head, so white that it looked bluish. His long black tunic sweeping down to his ankles. Those black, pinprick eyes. And that look of great, great sadness.

Pretend you are dead. I heard his words in my head though his lips didn't move. If you pretend you are dead, he will not hurt you again. He will believe you are dead too. I will make sure of it.

I did as he instructed.

The last thing I saw was my mother die. She had crawled over my youngest sister to shield her. The man confronting them was not moved to pity and ran a blade into my mother's chest before slitting my sister's throat. I focused on his eyes, his cruel eyes. Killers, I have discovered over the millennia, all have the same eyes.

I pretended to be dead for hours. I lay perfectly still as my family's attackers celebrated throughout our bloody house. They nudged bodies with their boots to make sure all were dead. They dipped fingers into my sisters' wounds and smeared red across the foreheads of their youngest to signify their first kill.

After they left, Badaal materialized in the flesh. He carried me to another part of the house. He applied salve to my wounds, using a scrap of my attacker's red scarf to bandage them up.

"Who are you?" I asked, when the ability to speak returned.

He spoke kindly and moved with exquisite gentleness. "I was sent to record the event that took place today."

"The massacre." Even at that age, I knew it for what it was.

"Yes, the massacre."

"They weren't bandits. They didn't come to rob us. They were mages." I felt that I had to tell someone. That this fact must be made clear.

"You must forget that part—"

"Forget?" The words choked. "How can I forget?"

He placed his hands on mine, and their touch loosened something inside. Again, I was floating, gently being detached from the horror surrounding me. "All will be clear . . . in time. In the meanwhile, I'm going to take you away from here. To someplace safe. Will you let me do this?"

Reluctantly, I nodded.

He bowed his head. "You may despise me for not acting, for doing nothing while . . ." Our thoughts went to the bodies cooling not thirty yards away. "But it was not in my power. It was not my role. You see, I am a Hedaji. We are forbidden from acting—even in the annihilation of an entire clan. Sadly, such events are not uncommon in the history of the universe. I was only there to do my job—to record. To witness."

I touched his hand as he tied the bandage. "And yet, you did act."

He smiled. "I saw you throw yourself at the attackers, and I knew in that moment that what I was witnessing was not Fate. It was not Destiny. At this instant, time presented itself in two ways, like a fork in the path of time. If you lived, you would do something great." I am not flattering myself: this was something Badaal had seen. I would not know until much later that Badaal was a seer of great power.

He couldn't ignore this feeling. He had to save me.

"It is beyond my power to save you, unless you become Hedaji. That is the only action we are allowed to take: we can intervene if we find a candidate suitable to join us." His eyes smiled as he looked on me. "And you would be an outstanding candidate.

"Besides, it would be safest. You will be hidden, for the most part. No one will be able to see you unless you let them. Given what has happened to your family, I think you will agree that no one *should* see you right now. No one should know that anyone from your clan survived this day. Not until you know who is behind it and why they wanted your family killed."

"But if you can see everything, you must know who these people are and why they did this," I told him.

Badaal turned away from me. "Part of the curse of being Hedaji is . . . knowledge. Life in the order is not easy, Tejal. Details will be shared with you . . . You will be Witness to the heartbreaking and the horrendous. The basic fabric of the universe is not kindness. The universe is blind to suffering. And you must stand witness to it all. You must obey your limitations. You must never act, and there is a reason for this."

"How do you handle it?" I asked. I would come to know Badaal well, for we were to spend much time together. I know him to be a decent, kind individual. But that day, I wondered if he was some kind of monster.

“You learn to accept what you cannot control. If you have faith in the importance of the mission, you understand that it must be done. We cannot all be great heroes. However, without the Hedaji, without scribes, there would be no perfectly complete record of many of humanity’s heroic deeds. It would be as though those heroic feats never happened.”

But that day—breaking his oath to rescue me—Badaal had dared to be a hero.

I listened to Badaal. I accepted his offer and dedicated myself to the Hedaji. At first, I did it because it was a solution to my conundrum. Too, I felt I owed it to Badaal for saving me. It was only in the fullness of time that I came to truly embrace my duty. My obligation. To come to see it as my calling.

Which is not to say that the restrictions never chafed. Under the hood and ink, I was still human. I had a heart and was still capable of emotion.



Giaran is making me nervous. It is the first time I can remember feeling this way in a long, long time. After all, I am protected.

I push back from the table. “You came here because you are looking for something. Why don’t you tell me, and we can stop playing games?”

He’ll be angered by my words, I think. Or maybe I misunderstood him. He might not have known what he wanted—some people hide their deepest desires from even themselves. Sometimes they are too shy or embarrassed to ask for it.

But then I follow his gaze and know exactly what he is looking for.

He is staring at the space between my breasts.

This has nothing to do with lust, however. Nestled between my breasts is an artifact, worn like a pendant on a leather thong. It is a heavy, shaped piece of iron.

A key. A common key, the kind that looks like it could open a simply made door at a tavern somewhere. A key so ordinary that there is no reason for the stranger to gape at it.

Unless Giaran knows what it is, knows which door it opens.

I wager he does.

He hasn’t come for the ring. The ring was merely a test. It proved I knew about



GIARAN'S INTENSE
FASCINATION WITH THE KEY
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the Damji—intimately. No, he has come for the key.

The key unlocks the vault that holds my most important secret. It was hidden by a witch from Hawezar who performed a spell for me. I had argued with the witch that I would keep my secret hidden, but she insisted it would be safer if it was hidden by a second party. If I didn't know where it was hidden, I would never be able to reveal it under the pain of torture, would I?

The compromise was that the witch gave me the key. Now anyone who wanted me dead would need to go through two steps: find out where this secret talisman had been hidden, and then wrest the key away from me—and not necessarily in that order.

It had seemed a good plan. It has managed to keep me immortal all these centuries.

What I hadn't counted on then, being much younger and less experienced when the spell was cast, is that witches can be—and are—bribed. On a frighteningly regular basis.

Giaran's intense fascination with the key could only mean one thing: he was sent to kill me.

As I look into his blue eyes, it falls into place. I have seen his type before. He is an assassin, a mercenary killer. Those killer's eyes have given him away. Someone saw the Damji ring in my collection and figured out that not all Damji had been wiped out that terrible day. One had escaped through extraordinary, unforeseen measures.

Why now? Why would anyone send a paid assassin to scour the universe to find me? Assassins of this caliber do not come cheaply. I can imagine a number of reasons someone would want me dead. Perhaps I stood by and let someone's loved one die, someone's mother or father or infant daughter.

Though it is unlikely they would be able to pin me to their deaths. No one can see a Hedaji while they are scribing.

No, this grudge comes from the time before I joined the Hedaji.

Which leads back to the slaughter of the Damji.

I never learned who was behind the attack on my family. Badaal insisted that I let it go, that I refuse to retain such a damaging memory in my consciousness. If I didn't let it go, he warned, I would never heal. He knew he was asking a lot, but it would prove I had the self-control and discipline to be a Hedaji, maybe to be the best Hedaji of them all.

It was hard, but I closed the door on that one curiosity. After all, satisfying that curiosity would not bring them back. I would not be any less alone.

Now, centuries later, I see that whatever feud brought about my family's massacre was not over. It would not be over until the last Damji was dead.

Or perhaps the point was to eliminate the ability to tell what had happened. To bear witness. To give testimony.

Could Giaran have been sent to kill me so that the slaughter of my family will remain in the past? Someone—possibly a clan or family—wanting their guilt to remain hidden? My father had argued with several powerful clans. Any of them could be responsible. Jealous, or greedy to learn about our techniques, our special abilities that could do things like turn metal into gold.

All these thoughts come to me in a rush, maybe because I've carried them in the back of my mind. Badaal understood from the very beginning: I must remain hidden. Someone might come looking for me. It's safer this way, hidden as a Hedaji.

He was right—but it seems my attraction for artifacts has been my undoing.

But there is also a weakness of the Hedaji: we are solitary creatures. We live alone.

And living alone, there is no one there to hear your screams as you die.



Giaran sees my eye on him. He knows that I am on to him.

My options flash by in a moment. I could fight for my life. We are in my home. I have the advantage. He doesn't know if someone might come by, if another customer might appear in a swirl of mist. He doesn't know what deadly artifacts hang on my walls, weapons I could call to my hand in an instant.

Whatever he may know of me is undoubtedly limited.

I don't deceive myself, though: he is a paid assassin.

He's seen my missing finger and drawn the correct conclusion: I am protected by a spell of immortality.

He is in possession of all *his* digits, so unless he's protected by some other spell or amulet, he is vulnerable—provided I can get close enough to kill him. But that seems unlikely.

None of my options look good. The most likely outcome is that he'll take me prisoner until he's able to break the spell. At which point, he'll kill me. There's the chance that I'll simply dissolve into dust once the spell is broken, returning to my organic state and surrendering to the strictures of time.

I understand now this feeling I've had since he materialized in my parlor: Giaran came with bad intent. It may be the beginning of my end. My heart speeds up. Sweat breaks out on my upper lip, even though I know that I'm not going to die just yet.

And then: cool detachment crashes over me like an ocean wave. It's the Hedaji's gift, the ability to simply observe without judging or feeling the need to come up with a solution. I see this moment for what it is, part of a chain that started when my family was killed and Badaal decided to intervene. It was inevitable that, one day, the circle would come around and I would be back at this spot. The events of that day would one day either lead to my death or the ability to avenge my family.

The Hedaji do not recognize vengeance, however.

I was Damji once, a very long time ago.

But I am Hedaji *now*.

It as though time is frozen. Giaran continues to study me, trying to discern what I am thinking. I am calculating what my next move *must* be, because there will be no second chances.

I could kill him. The urge to preserve oneself is strong. It feels foreign because I have not had such a thought in a long time. Being protected, it simply wasn't needed. This is different. If I kill this man, my future is secured. At least until the next assassin finds me.

I can picture how to take this man's life. I can hurl myself at him, shove him against the wall. Affixed in a display on the wall is a dagger that once belonged to a rogue necromancer. The bone blade may no longer be razor sharp, but with

enough force applied behind it, it could punch through a man's ribs. The stranger has a sword and who knows what else hidden on his person, but I would have the element of surprise, and the protection spell would slow his hand, make him fumble with the sword's sheath, delay him enough to give me time to strike.

Blood thrums in my ears. *I could kill him, but is it permitted?* His death could change the course of time.

Before I can address this question, however, the decision is taken out of my hands.

He moves more quickly than I imagined possible. Before I can bat an eye, he has leapt on me, vaulting over the table with the litheness of a jungle cat. We tumble to the floor, his weight pinning me down. For such a slender man, he's surprisingly heavy. He's all muscle and bone.

I try to engage his hands to keep him from reaching for his sword or a hidden dagger. He might not be able to kill me outright, but he can wound me, make it impossible for me to defend myself. I don't want to end up bound and gagged.

We wrestle but it will only be a matter of time before I tire, and I know I will tire before he does. I can see now how strong he is. I underestimated him earlier, put too much faith in the protection spell.

He grips my bodice and shakes me. Every yank makes the tight straps dig into my ribs and spine. I weaken fast as the last of my oxygen is squeezed out of my lungs. I grapple frantically with his hands, trying to break his hold, but to no avail.

He is staring at the key. His fixation is total, practically burning my flesh.

It's only then I remember and realize: *let him take the key.*

I lessen my grip on his wrists and he breaks free, thinking I've made a mistake or I'm exhausted. He grabs the key, snapping the thong with one forceful jerk.

With the last bit of my strength, I cast a spell that impels me away from him. It gives me only a few feet of separation but at the same time envelops me in a protective aura. It won't last long, but I pray it will be deterrent enough.

He rises woozily from the floor. He stares at the key in his hand, not believing his good luck. Then he looks up at me. I'm visible behind the fog. I cringe on the floor, as though I'm helpless.

I need to convince him that I'm not a threat.

He curls a lip and shoves the key inside his coat. I'm sure he would prefer to bring me with him. It would be the most prudent thing to do. But right now, I'm



I AM A HEDAJI. THERE ARE
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behind a shield he cannot pierce, and he knows that he doesn't need to bring me with him. My life may end when the spell is lifted, or he can simply track me down again and finish the job. So, at this moment, he'll take the less sure way because it's easier and he wants to get this damn job over with and move on to the next.

He disappears in a cloud of mist.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

What he doesn't know—what I only just remembered—is that the key is cursed. I wrapped it in a spell that will destroy whoever tries to use it. It's risky . . . By doing so, I condemned myself to immortality. It wasn't because I wanted to live forever—I feared it, actually, having spoken once to a wizard who had done the same thing and lived to regret it, wizened and more resembling a turtle than a man.

He, too, had been alone in the universe, everyone he knew dead.

Unlike the old wizard, however, I had something to live for. I am a Hedaji. There are stories I have yet to capture, down to the exacting details.

I rise from the floor, testing my aching joints, readjusting the straps of my bodice. The urge to follow Giaran is strong—but pointless. There is no need. When he tries to use the key, he will be destroyed, and I can retrieve the key. I am safe . . . but it's hard to believe it, especially after grappling with the man for my life. It takes a long time for my breathing to return to normal, for my mind to stop racing and to turn the facts over slowly and precisely.

Someone from my deep past, my Damji past, wants me dead. They will not succeed this time. Will they try again? I walk to the shelves and pick up that scrap of fabric Badaal cleverly left with me hundreds of years ago. The means to find them has always been with me. It's been my choice not to pursue them. If that situation should ever change, well . . . I am in a good position to watch. Hedaji are spies, the best spies in all the worlds. Now that I know the peril I am in, I will watch.

The air begins to shimmer. Another visitor is coming.

I hurry to set right the furniture that was knocked aside, to conjure an air of calm onto the room. It's hard to force an air of calm upon myself, however.

The fog swirls, then parts, and another visitor stands in the center of my parlor. I arrange a smile on my face.

“Welcome, stranger! Shall we see what destiny has in store for you today?”



About the Author

ALMA KATSU has been writing novels since 2011. The majority of Alma Katsu's books combine historical fiction with supernatural or horror elements. Her work has received starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly*, *Booklist*, and *Library Journal*; been featured in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*; been nominated and won awards in the US and internationally; and appeared on numerous Best Books lists, including NPR, Apple Books, Goodreads, and Amazon. *The Hunger* (2018), a reimagining of the story of the Donner Party, was named one of NPR's 100 favorite horror stories and continues to be honored as a new classic in horror. Her most recent horror novel, *The Fervor*, has been nominated for the Stoker and Locus awards for best horror and for best hardcover by International Thriller Writers. She also writes spy thrillers, the logical marriage of her love of storytelling with her thirty-plus-year career in intelligence. *Red Widow* (2021), her first spy novel, was a *New York Times* Editor's Choice and nominated for International Thriller Writers' Best Novel. The second book in the series, *Red London*, was published March 2023 to excellent reviews and has been optioned for a TV series.



TEJAL HAS MANY
TALES TO TELL.
MORE SHORT STORIES
FROM THE HEDAJI
ARE COMING SOON . . .