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# MARTHA WELLS

From the *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *The Murderbot Diaries*

# WITCH KING

*M a r t h a W e l l s*

# WITCH KING

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*To Felicia*



# DRAMATIS PERSONAE

KAIISTERON: Prince of the Fourth House of the underworld (called Witch King)

ZIEDE DAIYAHAAH: High Teacher in the Mountain Cloisters of the Khalin Islands  
(called the Scourge of the Temple Halls)

TAHREN STARGARD: an Immortal Marshall of the Blessed Lands (called the  
Fallen)

DAHIN: Tahren's Lesser Blessed sibling

GRANDMOTHER: An ancestor of the Saredi of the grassplains, once a Captain of  
scouts, who negotiated a treaty with the forces of the underworld and married a  
demon prince

## *The Present*

SANJA: a street child of the Mouth of Flowers

TENES: a Witch of unknown origin, captured as a familiar by Aclines

BASHAT BAR CALIS: Current Prince-heir of Benais-arik, foremost of the Rising  
World Coalition Council, soon to be Emperor

RAMAD: personal vanguard to Prince-heir Bashat

ASHEM: a cohort leader for the Rising World, stationed in the Arkai

MENLAS: an unfortunately ambitious expositor

ACLINES: an expositor of great power

SAFRESES AND KINLAT: lords of the court of Nient-arik

SAADRIN: an Immortal Marshall of the Stargard line, estranged from Tahren

FAHARIN: an Immortal Blessed

NARREIN AND SHIREN: Lesser Blessed of Faharin's House

KAVINEN: Lesser Blessed of the Stargard line

TANIS: eldest daughter of Ziede Daiyahah

*The Past*

BASHASA CALIS: the Prince-heir of Benais-arik, sent to the Summer Halls as a hostage for his city's good behavior (called the Great)

ADENI, VARRA, AND ILUDI: cousins to Enna, of the Kentdessa Saredi

CANTENIOS: an expositor of the Hierarchs' court at the Summer Halls

ARN-NEFA: a demon of the Kanavesi Saredi

TALAMINES: a High Expositor of the Hierarchs' court at the Summer Halls, originally conscripted from Irekan

HIERARCH'S VOICE RAIHANKANA: the servant-noble charged with speaking the Hierarchs' will to those too low to listen to the Sacred Voice

ARSHA, TELARE, NIRANA, HARTEL, CERALA: Ariki soldiers who followed Bashasa to the Hostage Courts of the Summer Halls, later seconded to Kaiisteron Fourth Prince

ARAVA, VASHAR, TRENAL: Ariki soldiers of Bashasa Calis' personal cadre

SALATEL: Second Shield Bearer to Prince-heir Bashasa, later leader of the cadre assigned to the Fourth Prince

THE TESCAI-LIN: Great Sage of Enalin and Light of the Hundred Coronels

LAHSHAR CALIS: maternal cousin to Prince-heir Bashasa of Benais-arik

DASARA: the son and heir of Lahshar Calis

HIRANAN: First Daughter of the Prince-heir of Seidel-arik

VRIM: Second Son of the Prince-heir of Descar-arik

ASARA: Second Daughter of the Prince-heir of Bardes-arik

STAMASH: maternal uncle of the Prince-heir of Renitl-arik

KARANIS CALIS: paternal cousin to Prince-heir Bashasa, who was selected by the Hierarchs to usurp the rule of Benais-arik



# ONE

Waking was floating to the surface of a soft world of water, not what Kai had expected. Reaching out in that darkness, he found a cold, black sea ebbing and flowing, dropping away like a tide rolling out. Something was wrong with his body, everything was impossibly distant. He stretched out a thought and called, *Ziede?*

She was slow to answer, her voice low and strange. He couldn't see her. She whispered, *I'm sleeping, Kai.*

*You're not sleeping, you're talking to me.* He should know where she was, he always knew where she was, she had a drop of his blood hardened into a red pearl buried in her heart.

*I told you not to wake ...* She stopped. Her languid voice turned alert and urgent. *Kai. Where am I? I can't move.*

None of this made sense. He reached out as far as he could stretch, searching for something, anything solid. He made his inner voice sound calm, though a sinking sensation told him he wouldn't like the answers to any of his questions. *I'm not sure where I am, either,* he told Ziede. Some terrible revelation loomed but he kept it at bay; better to just focus on finding her. He pulled in the parts of himself that drifted in the dark water that perhaps wasn't water, to concentrate his being back into his own body. Except his body wasn't there.

Kai squelched a spike of panic. Panic had to be postponed.

Her mental voice astringent, Ziede said, *Take your time, Kai. Wherever I am, I can't see, I can't move. I'm breathing, but I can't feel ... I can't feel my chest move.*

He could hear the suppressed fear as she added, *I can't find Tahren, she doesn't answer.*

Something had cut them off from the outside world. He told her, *Don't try to move. Just wait.* If Kai could think, he wasn't helpless.

He pulled all his focus in until the black sea yielded and resolved into dark stone walls, a large circular chamber, water running down from the upper shadows. Mossy weeds furred the gaps between the stones, light crept in from somewhere behind him. He needed to move, but swimming around in the air as an amorphous cloud was new and deeply disconcerting. He imagined his body around him, pulled his arms in, and spun himself to look down.

At his own body.

It lay on a raised plinth in a glass coffin box. His face was visible, the rest wrapped in dark fabric. His cheeks, the flesh below his eyes, were drawn and sunken but still recognizable. *It's been months ... maybe a year?* If someone had done this to him, what had they done to Ziede?

*Ziede, you said you can't move, can't see.* In this terrifying, unfamiliar place, there was no other box, nothing large enough to conceal her. The water drained away through diagonal vents in the floor. Water. It must have filled the chamber to keep Kai inside his inert body. When the level dropped he had been able to drift out and wake. Insubstantial, he had no sense of motion, so was the chamber lifting up out of the water? And what did it matter when Ziede might be entombed alive and he had no way to release her. He groped for some way to get more information. *What do you smell?*

*Nothing but fabric ... Like old silk?* She added, *Kai, what is this? Where are we?*

*I don't know.* She was sealed inside something, possibly a silk-lined casket. He would have closed his eyes in despair if his eyes hadn't been rotting in the glass coffin below. *Ziede, I'm afraid we're ...* He hesitated. Something had caused the water to run out of this bizarre burial chamber.

Something was coming.

Soundless, the curved wall across from the plinth split, allowing in a narrow column of muted blue light. Figures spilled through, dim and distant. It was hard to focus in this insubstantial form. Five human shapes, who dragged two bundles—bodies—behind them.

They dumped their burdens on the floor near the curved wall. The smaller body kicked, struggled, was kicked back, and subsided to huddle against the wall. The other lay in a still heap.

Kai scented death on that limp form. He thought of Ziede, trapped and helpless unless he could find her, and the pain of it gave him a spark of power.

The body was empty, the occupant flown, but warmth still radiated from the flesh. Just enough. Kai spun again, concentrated his whole being inward, and fell through the void toward that warmth.

Sound, color, and sensation roared back in a wave, aching joints, the grind of a bone in the wrong place, raw and burning throat, damp fabric clinging to long awkward limbs. But the pain generated a restorative well of power that burst through this new flesh.

Kai pushed himself up on his hands and lifted his head, dragged in a stabbing breath. Dark curls hung past his shoulders, tangled in a heavy veil of metal and fabric. The skin on his hands was a familiar warm brown. He wore a long dark skirt and tunic, a common variation on traditional eastern clothing. But there was nothing under it, and it was stained with blood and worse. He gasped in another lungful of air, damp, stale with mold and rot. He had lost his sense of Ziede, but that should be temporary. He hoped it was temporary, but the way this day was going so far he wouldn't count on it.

The mortals examined the glass coffin. One prodded at the lid. Kai hadn't completely settled into his new brain yet and he couldn't understand their speech.

Four wore clothing like the mariners along the southeastern archipelagoes, wide cotton pants gathered at the ankles, short open jackets, and broad leather belts. Two also wore the long knee-length shirts more common to women of that area. Their skin was pale under the weathering and their light-colored hair was straight and long, pinned or tied back. The fifth person had the same looks but was older, and wore richer garments, a red knee-length coat over a long dark tunic and skirt, the glitter of silver chains and onyx ornaments hanging from his belt. Kai smelled an expositor, and the man's complacent and predatory demeanor confirmed it.

Words started to make sense again. The person huddled next to Kai was whispering, "You were dead."

His new body's memories were patchy and staccato, fading fast, but one whispered, *A little girl, too young to be here.* With the painful weight of the metal veil tugging at his head, Kai had to crane his neck to see her. She was small, dressed in a ragged filthy shirt and pants cropped at the knee, too light for the dank chill in the room. Tight curls were hacked off close to her head, and her skin was a dark brown. Eastern coast, maybe. She had spoken in Imperial Arike, which as the dominant trade language didn't narrow it down, and he didn't recognize her accent.

The temporary power well created by Kai's own pain restored his new body: bones knit and shifted back into place, a burst organ pulled itself together, the broken nose clicked into alignment, splintered pieces of jawbone grew into new teeth with a jabbing burst of pain that almost collapsed him to the floor. He breathed through it until his blood stopped bubbling, then shoved his jaw back until it clicked and held. He whispered, "Do we know each other?"

She flinched like she would have recoiled, if she wasn't more afraid of attracting attention. Wide-eyed, she shook her head. "Not ... Not really. Your eyes..."

Kai dragged the veil forward, just enough to conceal the top half of his face. "It's for the best. He's—She? They? Aren't here anymore."

The girl's breath hitched. She understood, but she didn't want to. "I thought ... but they beat you ... him to death."

From the other side of the room, the expositor said, "Get the girl."

A mariner turned and strode toward them. He leaned down to grab for the girl, saying, "Guess you get to go first."

Kai lunged. The man grabbed him instead and dragged him to his feet. Once he was holding Kai up he stared, startled. A woman mariner protested, "No, not that one! The other."

"I thought he was dead," someone else said.

They were speaking Imperial Arike, too; the expositor correctly and the mariners with a thick accent and slurred vowels. Kai said, "Oh, please, take me! I want to go first." He wrenched out of the man's grip and staggered on unsteady legs toward his coffin. Catching himself on the corner of the plinth, he leaned back against it, facing this very unlucky group of tomb-pillagers. "To bring him back, right?" He jerked his head toward his old body, wincing as the heavy veil yanked at his scalp. "I don't have a lot of time, so let's just get this over with."

Another mariner laughed and drew a long knife. He said, "He'll be dead enough now." He had a shallow prettiness that didn't reach past his tawny skin. A name came to Kai, a fragment of memory engraved into this brain in agony, reluctant to fade. This mariner was Tarrow, who had pretended to be kind at first so his betrayal would hurt more.

Between the shadowy room and the veil, the mortals couldn't see Kai's face clearly. But the expositor stared, his gaze sharpening into the edge of horrified realization. He said, "Wait."

But Tarrow was eager to cause more hurt. He stepped forward and stabbed Kai through the chest. Kai fell back against the plinth. The pain blacked out his vision,

the steel cleaving already abused flesh.

As Tarrow moved away, Kai grabbed the blade. The edge cut into his fingers as he pulled it out. He tossed it aside, ignoring the brief gush of blood down his chest as his flesh wove itself back together. The new power well blossoming under his skin pulsed like a second heart. “Now,” Kai said, grinning as he shoved the veil aside. “Which one of you wants to go first?”

No one was laughing now. The chamber was utterly still except for the drip and gurgle of draining water.

“Come here, Tarrow,” Kai said, focusing his will, his smile pulling at tendon and bone that was still tender after its restoration. Caught like a petal in amber, Tarrow took stiff steps toward him, resisting with all his mental strength, which sadly for him was not nearly adequate. Kai brought him close enough that he could easily grip his throat. He said, “Tell me, did you know his name? This one’s name, that you brought here to die?”

Tarrow made a choking noise. The expositor tried to cast an intention, something to bind Kai’s new body. But the pain of being stabbed had filled Kai with terrible power and he caught the intention as it formed. He turned it back, spending most of his temporary strength to trap the expositor and the other mariners where they stood. They struggled uselessly, unable to move their feet or draw weapons. One whimpered, which almost made Kai crush Tarrow’s throat in reflex before he was ready, which would have been a waste. With an edge of panic, another said, “Menlas, you said you could master him—”

“Shut up!” Fighting to move, his voice rough with shock and desperation, the expositor Menlas said, “We brought you offerings! We appeal to—”

“You brought me a child and a youth so close to death he didn’t last a heartbeat past the threshold of this room. Did you think to coax me into a weak, helpless body so I’d be your slave?” Kai laughed, a raspy sound hampered by his still regrowing lung tissue. From the expression on Menlas’ face, Kai knew he was close to the truth. “That isn’t how this works, expositor.” Then he peeled Tarrow’s soul from his body and ate his life.

A heartbeat later Kai let the withered husk drop to the floor.

The others broke like twigs. The screaming and pleading was noisy and irritating, more so from mortals who had not bothered to listen to the screaming and pleading of their own captives. Kai took the first two quickly, to replenish the power he had spent to trap them. Then he let the expositor and the last mariner loose to try to run, just because Kai found himself still surprisingly angry and he

wanted to let it all out before he had to be rational again. The heavy veil, still stuck in his hair and torturing his scalp, wasn't helping.

When the last mariner was a dry heap of desiccated flesh and Kai was sitting on the expositor's chest, he asked, "Who put me here?"

Menlas shook his head wildly, gasping.

Maybe Kai had phrased the question badly. "Who did this to me? Who put me in this tomb? And how did you know I was here?"

"I can't—The stories said—I—" And then the idiot's heart started to seize up.

Exasperated, Kai drained his life before the man expired and wasted it.

He pushed to his feet, briskly shaking out his skirt. "All done," he told the girl. She was shivering, still huddled against the wall, but she had watched every moment. He kicked the nearest woman's body over and stripped the long shirt off it. He tossed it to her. "Put that on and get up. I'm not going to eat you, we're friends."

She caught the shirt, then dragged it on over her head. She stumbled to her feet, which were bare, dirty, and marked with cuts and mottled bruises. "What ... What are you going to—"

"I have to find someone." Kai leaned over another desiccated body, tore open the laces of its wrap boots and dragged them off, then tossed them to the girl. His sense of Ziede's presence grew at the edge of his awareness. But it was still hard to tell her direction. "Was there another coffin? Did you see one?"

The girl picked up the boots, trailing after him to the doorway, unsteady and still trembling. She answered, "No. I just saw the stairwell."

Kai stepped through the opening in the wall. It led to a passage, blue light coming from polished stones set in the rounded ceiling. The powerful web of intentions that had gone into constructing this place was written into every handspan of rock. Someone had taken an already existing structure and modified it for their purpose. The passage curved around a solid column and turned into a set of upward stairs, water still running down over worn white stone. The girl said, "Do you have to do that to people to live?"

"No," Kai told her. "I did it because I wanted to. And bad people taste better than good ones." He held out his hand.

She looked up at him, brown eyes wide in the dim light, bruised and sunken from hunger. Then she took his hand. Her skin was cold with shock.

Tugging her along after him, he climbed the spiral of steps up until the well opened into a broad hall, the high ceiling dotted with more of the blue glowstones.

At the end was a clear curved bubble of crystal, looking out into dull gray-green water.

From the fish swimming by, this place stood in a large body of water, and now that Kai had a working nose, he could smell salt, as if over years it had seeped into the seals between the stones. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to make certain he wouldn't wake enough to escape his corpse. The other walls were set with large square carvings, like decorative frames around doorways, but the plaques in the center were empty. He led the girl around the central pillar to see the stairs curved up the far side. "What is this place?" he asked.

"An island, but like a tower, all made of stone," the girl said. She rubbed at her bloody nose and winced. "They brought us in through the top. What are—"

Kai held up a finger for silence. His sense of Ziede was stronger here, on this end of the hall. He focused on the slender thread that tied him to the pearl in her heart. *Ziede?*

*Still here.* Her voice was bleak, under tight control.

He let go of the girl's hand and went methodically along the wall. Each carved panel was part of the intention woven through this place. Nothing lived behind them, but there was a sensation of a cavity or hidden chamber in the stone. Empty cavities, with nothing stored inside, not even decaying bodies. *She has to be here.*

Then on the far side of the chamber, he felt an occupied void, the weight of something large and heavy filling the space. He could get through the thin layer of polished stone with a heavy tool if he could find one, but first he tried the easy way. He felt along the carvings of shellfish and water snakes for a catch or a seam. Crouching to run his fingers along the lower edge, Kai found a small depression; when he pushed it, a dull thump sounded from inside.

Kai stood and backed away, almost stepping on the girl, who had been hovering close behind him. It said interesting things about her character, or maybe her recent past, that she found him less terrifying than anything else that might be in this place.

The panel cracked and crumbled and the plaster clattered to the floor. Resting inside the cavity was a dark marbled coffin box on a smooth stone bed. Kai grabbed the curved end and pulled. A clanking counterweight caught and the whole slid out of the sepulcher. There was no glass lid, the top was rounded carved stone. Kai found the seam and shoved with almost all his strength. The lid flew off and hit the floor with an ear-shattering crack.

Ziede lay inside.

Her eyes were closed. He put his hand on her forehead. She was alive, warm and alive. She hadn't aged or altered in any way he could see; she had the same deep brown skin, high forehead, and long straight nose, her dark hair drawn back in dozens of braided rows the way she preferred to wear it. She was dressed for a ceremony or a celebration, in red the color of arterial blood, a draped tunic of close-fitting silk. Kai found the shape of the intention that held her life in suspension; a gentle twist snapped it.

Her chest moved as she drew a sharp breath. He slid his arms under her and lifted her free of the box. Her eyes fluttered open and she grabbed his shoulders, nails digging into his neck. He was almost choking with relief and it made his voice thick. "You're safe, Ziede."

She blinked, startled to be looking at an unfamiliar face. As awareness came into her gaze, Kai slowly set her on her feet, keeping hold of her arms to steady her.

They were the same height now. His old body had been shorter, and he was used to tilting his head to look up at her. She touched his cheek. "Is that you in there?" Then she answered her own question. "Yes, that's you. Did they kill you?"

"Somebody did." He was still so relieved it was hard to think. He tapped the edge of Ziede's stone bier. "They put me into one of these."

Ziede looked at the niche where she had been entombed alive and her shoulders hunched. "I don't remember how we got here." She frowned down at herself. "I don't remember owning these clothes."

"I don't remember how we got here either." Kai rubbed her arms. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." She steadied herself and took a deep breath. "So we have no idea how long...?"

"I looked like I'd been dead around a year." He turned to the girl. He and Ziede had been speaking in Saredi, the first mortal tongue Kai had ever learned, and he switched to Imperial Arike so the girl could understand. "Is Bashat bar Calis of Benais-arik still leader of the Rising World?"

"I guess?" she said. She had seated herself on the floor to pull the boots on, biting her lip as she wrapped the leather flaps over bruises and broken toes. "That's the name on the coins?"

Not helpful. Kai persisted, "Do you know the month in Imperial reckoning?"

Her forehead furrowed in thought. "It was the end of the third solar month. Almost the end. They hadn't changed the marker on the calendar tower. And it took about five days to get here."



“Close enough.” Reassured, Kai turned back to Ziede. “Can you get this out of my head?” He pointed to the tangle of fabric and gem-bedecked chains stuck in his hair. Giving her something constructive to do would help ground her, and also he really needed to get rid of the awful thing.

Ziede turned him around and prodded the lump where the veil was wound up. “Is it embedded in your skull?” She had followed his lead, speaking in Imperial Arike.

“It feels like it.” The pull on his scalp made him want to kill at least ten more mariners and expositors together, possibly by skinning them alive, if he couldn’t think of anything worse.

“It’s just a chain veil,” the girl said, pulling at her boot laces to make them fit.

“Who is this?” Ziede asked him, exasperated as her fingernails picked at the tiny tangled chains.

“She’s new.” He wanted to relax into Ziede’s careful touch as she unwound his hair from the decorative torture device, but there was still no time.

“I’m Sanja,” the girl said, getting to her feet. “I don’t want to be here.”

“She’s Sanja,” he explained to Ziede. “They brought her as a sacrifice.” Probably Menlas had meant to kill her to power whatever intention he planned to use to bind Kai. Menlas had apparently known just enough to be dangerous, mostly to himself.

“Hello, Sanja. Do either of us look like we want to be here?” Ziede asked her.

“No.” Sanja lifted her chin defiantly, but there was a little tremble in her voice. “Did you bring me for her? If she needed a new body?”

Ziede’s laugh was harsh. “I can’t step into a new body, alive or dead. That’s Kai’s trick.”

Kai told her, “That’s why we had to find Ziede while she was still breathing.” Sanja still seemed too much in shock to look relieved, she just breathed out a little and fiddled with the sleeve of her new shirt. Kai continued, “You said you couldn’t reach Tahren.”

“I’ve been trying this whole time.” Ziede’s voice sounded calm and sure, unless you knew her well enough to hear the emotion underneath. Tahren had a heart pearl from Ziede, and even if they were too far apart to use them to speak, she should have some sense of her presence.

If Tahren had also been attacked, their situation was even worse than it looked. Kai said, “Tahren’s not here, no one else is here.”

Her hands stilled for a moment, then continued to unwind the chains. “If Tahren was free, she would have come for us. She would tear the world apart to find us.

Dahin ... Dahin wouldn't just leave us either."

Kai's throat went tight. Dahin might be estranged from Tahren, but he wasn't from Kai and Ziede. And no matter how much he and Tahren might argue, Dahin would still protect her, and Tahren would still destroy anything that tried to hurt him. But that didn't mean they were dead. "All we know is that they aren't here. Something could be obscuring Tahren's pearl. She could be looking for us, she could be protecting the others at home. We won't know until we can get some idea of what happened."

With that false calm, Ziede said, "If they've touched one hair on Tahren's stubborn head, I will slaughter them." With one more tug, the chain veil came free. Ziede tossed it to the floor and ran her fingers through Kai's loose curls, shaking the tangles out.

"We'll slaughter them." Kai rubbed his aching head, already feeling the tension in his back and neck ease. "Where do you come from, Sanja?"

"The Mouth of the Sea of Flowers. They bought us both." She hesitated. She was hugging herself, but her trembling had eased. "Why didn't you ask me my name before?"

"I didn't want it until you were ready to give it to me." At least Kai knew where the Sea of Flowers was, just not in relation to where they were now. The Mouth was a free city outside the Rising World's reach, the last surviving fragment of the lands of the Nehush. It had been resettled by sea raiders after the war had left it nearly deserted, but now it was a well-traveled port again. It was still an ideal place for an expositor to hide. "They came here from the Mouth in a boat?"

"In a shell-whale." Sanja shrugged thin shoulders. "I'd never seen one close-up before."

"Huh. So Menlas the expositor must have been a powerful sorcerer."

"I guess he thought he was," Sanja said, a trace of dryness in her tone.

Scratching his liberated scalp vigorously, Kai said, "You two wait here. I'm going back to search the bodies. Ziede, I'll get you some clothes."

As he started away, Ziede said, "Kai. You should check your heart for a pearl."

He hesitated and shook his head. "It's not there, Ziede."

"Prove that to me, Kai," she persisted as he walked away. "Prove it."