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READER ASSESSMENT

Title: Devil's Assistant, Book 2

Author: Heather Smith

Breakdown:

This letter will focus on large-scale revisions for you to do. It is not practical for me to go scene-by-scene and tell you what to change, since many of these changes may be negated by the choices you make for larger revision. What I want you to do is read my letter over carefully, think of the examples I've given, make a checklist for revision, then go through your manuscript and hammer it.

Don't leave track changes on – it will be a mess. I will then take when you deliver me, using my notes and familiarity with your story and my suggestions, and will go line-by-line and make further suggestions for revision (with a focus on developmental editing.)

OVERVIEW:

This story moves very fast and is consistent with Dark Hope in this way. However, as a reader I feel very overwhelmed with how much information comes at me. You spend a great deal of time involved with plot, either through Claire's reasoning or through dialogue between Claire and others involved in it (i.e. Mace, Ronin, Kane, Death, the Royals). My biggest concern is that readers are going to find it hard to follow and will be frustrated where you offer to advance the plot yet often throw in further mysteries. There is even one spot where you say "this is all too confusing" (that's Claire, in the end scene where she is confronting the Royals), and as a reader I'm nodding.

That said, you do tie your plot up nicely. Even Cinnamon's were-rabbit bite, which initiates the whole Russian doll of quests Claire is sent upon, comes back at the end, and I like the reversal how initially Claire is a pawn to the Quads and at the end they are in her control. So I don't think the complexity is a problem at all. In fact, given the precedent you've set up from book one, it's fine. However, in book one you have more set-up and your exposition is better paced. My suggestions (below, and in-line, to follow after your rewrites) will focus on ways you can modify / cut back and add scenes to address this.

Of related importance is the plot structure itself. I felt as I went along that you were introducing new plots as we went, and had little sense of an original, over-arching purpose. Now, that's not necessarily bad. Claire's initial problem is she is stuck in Purgatory. Then she has to get the Quads' blood from the museum to break them free of the castle if she wants to be freed of the poison from Cinnamon's bite, then she has to stop Raven (her dark twin) when she's been let loose, in order to gain Mab's favor by saving her son, then she has to find Gizelle, then she has to find Kane, then she has to find the Prince of Time (who we find out is Ronin), then she gets killed and comes back, destroys Raven and all the other pieces pop into place.

Very well done, but I really had a hard time connecting all that as I was reading, and had to go back a lot to get my bearings. What I suggest is lots of set-up and more concrete revelation to anchor the reader in these critical elements. I'd like to see the over-arching plot (the fact that Mab didn't kill the fourth child and that this means very bad things for the world) come in sooner. This also works great with the end when the royals mention the candidates (by the way, EXCELLENT ending!)

The focus of this letter will be on the larger rewrites, but I want you to be aware that I have made detailed notes as I read, and will further address issues on a scene-by-scene basis during the next revision.

Lengthening Scenes for plot

To address the above considerations, I think you will want to place the bulk of your weight at the beginning of the novel (see below). The rest of the novel is well fleshed out and I don't recommend you add anything new.

However, I think you can definitely go to scenes where you develop your plot and make sure its clearer. Whatever you miss, I will catch when I do my in-line edit. (Since I'm already familiar with your story, going over a second time and pointing out things in-line will be more effective since I am aware of exactly where your story is going).

Now, you may think it's clear when you read it, but that's because you've written it and it makes more sense to you than a reader who's never read it before, so what I want you to do is look at all the scenes where Claire learns more of her mission, her role, the prophecy, and where you see things like "I don't know," or, "this theory isn't working," understand that the reader is going to be frustrated. This is an opportunity for you to cut back on Claire's analysis and decide exactly what you can reveal that will give the reader a puzzle piece to fit in place. There are many particular spots where I was lost: the carry-on with the bounty hunter about binding rites in Purgatory, Mab's explanation of why "Raven" is dangerous, Omar's explanations, Kane's explanations, Death's explanations. Essentially, you reveal enough information for me at the end to piece the story together, however I think there is so much vagueness in it I really have to shake my head as I'm reading. See what you can do to address this by fleshing out some of the explanations some more, particularly where someone is cut off or where a conversation comes to a halt, and I will go over and zoom-in when I do the next revision.

Adding scenes to the beginning, for plot and character arc

For your beginning, I think it would be strongest for you to pick up exactly where you left off in book one. In fact, this is the biggest discontinuity I've noted in your novel and my reason for suggesting more content in the beginning: book one ends with Claire meeting someone on the elevator, but we never find out who! Here, the story begins as though that never happened. At first I thought you were rewinding the tape a little, but when she got on the elevator guess what? She went to Purgatory. Only when I went back and re-read did I realize this must be Death who comforted her, because you make reference to him comforting her after she found out about Jack. I really think it will be much more visceral and grounding to the reader if you show them this.

My suggestion for your opening scene(s):

-Start on a hook, even repeat the final line of book one. "Can you give me a ride home?" Who was this? If you don't want to repeat this line, then maybe refer to it. One possibility I see is this could be Death. He could tell Claire more is coming, perhaps foreshadow something about Jayne, and how he hopes Claire will fulfill her role. This way, when we meet Death later, after Cinnamon stabs Claire, there is an opportunity to pick up on what he mentioned. I really think it is a great technique because it will allow you some foreshadowing, as well as reduction of how much plot-heavy information is dumped on the reader at the end

-I think a scene before Claire's argument with Conrad would be helpful, particularly if there is a surprise visit from Mab and Harry. I'm thinking of the scene where Claire projects herself to overhear the Royals discussing the other girls and she learns she's not the only one. I think you want to establish very early on that there is "someone else", so that when Claire heads on her mission and is trapped in Purgatory, the reader is very curious about what this is all about. That way, you don't have the reader wondering where the plot is going and if anything significant is going to happen.

-I think your current opening scene, the argument with the boss, can be developed, with the two opening scenes I mentioned, so that Claire is also confronting him on what she's just heard; you can decide if you want her to pretend she heard nothing (since she'd be spying with her presence), or if she's going to hint at it. You have her pissed off and quitting, which would fit, I think, given if she's heard that he's conspiring with the other Royals to use her. He's killed Jack, Claire is alone, pissed...with the threat of conspiracy hovering over her, what a great way to drop her in the predicament we find her in the next chapter

-I think Claire should dwell more on Jack, especially with her new romance with Thanos; I think you can expand a lot on her feelings for Thanos when they are together, with regard to how Jack made her feel

-I'm wondering if Ronin can play more of a role in the story, given he is a key element. You have him enter at key times, but I'm wondering if he can explain more to Claire, perhaps give her insights that she lacks. This will make him seem more mysterious to the reader, but will have the reader looking forward to times with Ronin. Given he is the Prince of Time, and Claire's new ability involves placing herself in new space-times, I think one element you might want to add is Claire seeking him out to "find some

answers". See what you can do and have fun with it. (I very much think of Ronin like a "Hagrid" type character, so if you want to expand on this archetype, making him a strong male lead to comfort Claire would be very helpful especially with all the plot development you do

-Somehow, I think it would be good to bring Omar in earlier. In particular, I'd like to hear about the prophecies sooner, to ground the reader in this important element sooner rather than waiting until the last quarter of your book. Look at Claire's exchanges with Omar and see what you can put in earlier. Think about how you'll be working in earlier details with Claire overhearing the Royals, with her visits and possible hints from Death, and see how adding something from Omar can add further foreshadowing. My suggestion would be to look at when Claire first comes to Callum and enters the fallen realm – can we meet Omar here? Can he be taken away and have Claire wondering where he went? Keep in mind: Claire is about to unleash Raven on the world. So to have a warning here...

-I'm wondering if you want to bring the Blacksmith in earlier? She makes an appearance at the very end, and she took Claire's blood in book one. I was wondering about her throughout the book. Given that Claire's trip to the museum involves collecting blood samples, I'm wondering if the blacksmith can be linked in here? I think you would do well to reveal a bit more about why she took Claire's blood earlier, and to use it to hint at Claire's importance in the plot. Blood is clearly a very important element of your plot, and I think more explanation is needed. I think the Blacksmith can be a great one to reveal more, as well as an intriguing character to develop if we see more of her

Reworking scenes to counter reader disbelief

You are writing an imaginative work, so your reader enters immediately by suspending disbelief. Because you are writing about a world where the Devil is a major character and Claire is close to him, your reader will give you much more licence than normal.

However, there are some times when I think the elements you introduce are so far-fetched they become comical. For example, the scene where Cinnamon morphed into a were-bunny made me laugh out loud. Follow that with a talking vine. (I made some notes at that point.) I had to think about this and reserve my judgement for the end, and have spent some time thinking about this. Here's what I've come up with:

I want you to ask yourself what impression you want to convey to your reader. At present, your story animates a lot like a cartoon. I'm reminded a bit of anime. Claire flares with power all too often, there are colourful energy fights and spells, transformations, and pretty much anything is possible.

I don't mean that at all as an insult, because anime is an excellent art form. I only bring this up because this consideration involves knowing who your audience is. If you don't want to come across as anime, then that will involve some major revision. If you still want to keep the magical element but want this to be a bit more real-life, then I recommend you show more shock and slow your transitions. You'll also want to cut back on how much you spell out Claire's pain and how much you describe the energy spells

and her inner experiences. In realism, a lot more goes to the senses and the immediacy of experience, which often focus a lot on the what is happening and our reaction to it (in the case of your story, it is some bizarre stuff from a “realism” point of view, so the reaction would be shock, surprise, fear).

Personally, I like the effect you have and think it would take a lot of work to create more realism. So, if we stick with what we have, then I’d like to focus on doing the reverse: making the unexpected more expected, since magic is essentially common-place. I think this will be easy to do with Claire’s attitude. For example, when Cinnamon transforms into a were-rabbit, something like, “What. The. Fuck.” Monologue like, “Okay, there’s just a little something wrong here.” Get it? You already do this well in many spots with Claire, so I’d like to focus on making this more consistent. See what you can do: go to the early spot in East Hareington, go to the talking vine, or the dragon that wakes up during Claire’s visit to Kane. Iron out these spots, and things like the granny panties will contribute to another laugh and an excited page flip (loved that, by the way).

(And, as with the above, I will be going in-line and pointing to spots where I feel you can still do more, so I’m only telling you this now so you can pre-empt me and do some of the work yourself.)

Making Claire’s character consistent

Claire gets knocked out a lot. Claire gets tortured a lot. Claire has a lot of marks on her body, and they all mean so many things it’s a lot to keep track of. Claire describes complex pain and internal experiences that are so vivid they take me out of her experience because I feel more like I’m being told. Essentially, with a lot of this characterization, Claire comes across like a robot.

But Claire is not a robot. She’s an excellent character. She’s got attitude. She’s a pawn, she’s stuck in this mess and what’s to be free. She’s driven. She’s determined to get to the heart of things. She’s a survivor. When you focus on her mission, her investigative prowess, her bravery, you show this and Claire comes across like a person I want to find out more about.

Presently, you have a mix of these two, and because overall you connect us to Claire, I think this tale drives a reader forward. I’d like to see you tone these extreme parts down. Look at the spots where Claire is being tortured, where Mab is making her mark burn. You elaborate on her pain, but it’s enough just to have her acknowledge it yet to grit her teeth and tell the bitch to fuck off. That, to me is Claire – she’s not a baby torn apart by pain and torture – she’s a fighter, and when you show me that Claire, it’s consistent.

Claire’s powers

Claire is inheriting incredible power. I like how she has transitioned from being able to project her presence to being able to project her body with it, and now through time too. I’m wondering, though, given that she becomes so powerful she can destroy the world, what ways can you limit her? One

though I've had is when she is first discovering her power and is going through time to get to Gizelle in the Deeps, she is with Omar. So when she "transports", would she have to pop back to her present time-space? That kind of limitation would give some regularity. Kane also adds that she can't change the past, which is another great limitation. If she can go back in time, it would be a fitting limitation to place on her that this is just a glimpse, where she can interact with the past, but it is always counterbalanced with her need to return to the present.

Given that her abilities build and build, this limitation can serve as a landing pad. You have her training with Kane and getting stronger, breaking the mold. If she has to return to the present, then pushing deeper away from this can make logical sense as something that can potentially destroy the world. You mention in her training that she must not run into herself when she travels through time, so I think adding in this limitation would make for a natural transition to make her progression to an unstoppable menace more plausible.

You also have Jayne's pendant that Mab gave to Claire. She's not supposed to remove it, but she does. Yet another way to show progression. This pushes her beyond her limitation. Further, you have her die, then sent back by Death to become the Revenant. She returns from the dead.

I'm wondering if this is somewhere you might work in what the Blacksmith did. Taking her blood – what did that achieve? Coming back from the dead should give Claire added power, something she didn't have before. Raven said "Jayne", thinking she could control Claire, but there was a complication, because Claire has Jayne's blood, but not all of it; she's Jayne, but she's not.

I'm throwing all these thoughts at you in the hope it will get your creative juices stirring, but also get you thinking about a way to develop this thread with more consistency.

Creating a masterpage

I asked you to make a plot notes sheet, and this is very helpful for both of us. One thing I notice for many of your characters is you don't know their motives or you'll say, "hasn't been revealed yet."

That's fine if your plot sheet is meant to only refer to the state-of-affairs at the end of book 2. However, as an author you should know at the very least character motives. You can't guess at these, or else you will end up with contradictions. It's fine if you don't know everything that's going to happen to them, but you must, must, must know what they are after.

One thing that helps during large-scale revision such as the one you're about to undertake is to create a masterpage. Take a very large sheet of paper (the bigger, the better) and make a table. Make columns for each of your major characters who factor into this book. The vertical rows, would correspond to a timeline. For example:

Mab	Claire	Death	Conrad IV
Hides Raven because...(why?)	Born to ... (?)	Begins to collect prophecies	Loves Jayne, makes a secret pact with her Protects Claire's true identity at all costs

This example is very simplified. The earlier you rewind the tape, the better, and the most characters you create columns for (all the major players who factor into the plot). Keep your entries to things they did, and don't leave any mysteries in there. Try not to make this too complicated – as you're filling in motives and events, pay particular attention to how they interrelate with the events / motives of other characters. They should all sync.

This is your behind-the-scenes guide to knowing exactly what's going on, then when you revise and plan future books, you know what you've hung everything on and you don't end up with contradictions. I hope you can do this for your story and use it as you go over your scenes to decide how you're going to reveal the plot to the reader and give clearer glimpses with less confusion.

Going forward

You will see my projected directions for editing in the email I am attaching this to. What I'd like you to focus on is the issues outlined here. Don't worry about the strength of sentences or typos (fix them if you want to, just don't let that utilize too much of your time). There will be a revision to follow where I will address developmental concerns in-line and will make smaller-scale within-the-scene suggestions.

Just do your best and approach this with as much creativity as you did drafting.

By the way, I love the term, "Shit-kickers".