

# DAEMON TALES: ENDLESS NIGHT

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*Eight strangers find themselves locked in an unfamiliar room, unwitting participants in the ritual called the “daemon-calling.” Legend says that whoever can survive the ritual will have the power to summon daemons and fulfill a wish. But something worse than the supernatural lurks in the shadows.*

In ancient times, when indigenous people inhabited the island of Taiwan, human beings lived alongside both spirits and daemons. When modernity destroyed that world completely, the old daemons of Taiwan retreated into the dark corners, their memories still fresh and their eyes still sharp.

Eight total strangers find themselves together in a locked and unfamiliar room. They are required to participate in a ritual called “the daemon-calling,” in which a terrible price will buy the most steadfast member a chance to command a daemon and fulfill a wish.

Each of the eight participants carries their own ardent wish, along with a dark secret. As the ritual continues – the price growing ever steeper – they all discover that something even more sinister than the occult is hiding in the shadows.

### Taipei Legend Studio 臺北地方異聞工作室

Taipei Legend Studio is a group of local creatives, authors, and fantasy lovers. They mine Taiwan’s rich indigenous legends and local histories for stories and characters to remake in words and illustrations. *The Daemon Tales* series, which retells ancient stories in contemporary scenes, now includes a board game as well as the novel series.



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Ridiculous.

Daemons simply don't exist.

Taimu Hayun was sure this is what the other seven would, until a moment ago, have been thinking. Even here, in this unworldly place where the night outside the windows never lifted, where according to their mysterious host a story-telling session might summon just such a daemon, they had not really believed. Yet now, as if restored to their senses, they knew to be scared. Not that you could blame them: the sight had shocked even Taimu, and made his entire body crawl with goosebumps.

The terror had appeared in mid-air, as if caught in the beam of a roving flashlight: a small girl, clad in tattered red clothes and a red hat. The group stared up at it, hearts and lungs seizing in their chests. The girl looked the eight of them over, a smile on her face. Not a kindly smile. The smile of finding a new plaything. A cat's smile when it has found a mouse.

The girl vanished. But she had been too real, too vivid, to be a hologram or other trick, and her image had burned itself into the mind of each observer. The cramped room held eight people yet fell as silent as a midnight forest, the only sound panicked gasps for breath.

The candle on the table flickered, painting dark shadows across their faces.

"What...what was that?"

Nobody could answer. They looked at each other, as fear crept out from behind their forcibly restrained expressions and spread like fog throughout the room. The woman sitting to Taimu's right clasped a hand over her mouth and inhaled sharply; another girl in a high school uniform was shaking uncontrollably. Her book slipped to the floor. Only one person stood, a man wearing spectacles, who asked hesitantly: "Was that a magic trick? A hologram?"

"There's no projector!" the high school girl shouted, trying to mask her terror.

"Then how did it just disappear like that? Unless...it was a ghost?"

The man fell silent before shuffling backwards, tripping over his own chair, and falling to the ground with a crash. He scabbled further back until he reached the wall. Though he looked ridiculous, nobody was laughing.

Taimu felt only sympathy for the man. He wanted to try and comfort him, but couldn't summon the words.

"Ghosts? Don't be stupid."

This dismissive reply came from another man. He seemed to be enjoying the confusion, and his tone was scornful, as if Spectacles had shown himself ignorant of even the most basic facts. "That was a daemon. Don't confuse them with the ghosts of the dead!"

He knew?

Taimu looked the man over. He wore a blue shirt, unbuttoned, and seemed remarkably flippant. Taimu recalled his name: Chen Hao-Ping. A civil servant in the Forestry Bureau, he'd been told. Although with that attitude, you had to wonder how he'd managed to avoid being fired over public complaints.

Taimu had always thought his own knowledge of these matters was rare, but Chen's unfazed demeanor forced him to reconsider. Perhaps he had more in common with these people than he knew?

Perhaps that was why they'd all been brought here?

Taimu set that aside and started to consider that thing they'd all seen. If, as their invisible host had said, daemons appeared when you told stories...think of the stories they'd told...the girl's red clothes and red hat...Yes, he remembered, there were stories about such a creature told in Pingxi and Yilan.

"It was a *moxina*. A kind of daemon that lures people off into the woods," Taimu announced.

Chen looked over at him: "Correct. A *moxina*. How'd you know?" Chen asked.

"I've done a little research."

Chen nodded, looking pleased. "Well, at least someone knows what's going on."

"Does it matter?" the high school girl cried. "Never mind what it's called, that's not important. So our stories summoned a daemon – what's next? And where did it go? What if we can't stop them, what if they come for us? Aren't we all dead?"

The girl's voice grew shrill. Taimu could see she was trying to vent her fear outwards. But she'd asked the question everyone else was thinking.

Were they about to die?

Even if the daemons could be controlled, they could still cause harm. Taimu recalled the line in the rules about "the last person standing" – were they to be slaughtered until only one remained? He'd have to keep an eye on Mr. Chen. Taimu sensed danger there; Chen seemed the least likely to care if everyone else died. And after all, it had been Chen's story that summoned that first daemon.

Chen's mouth curled upwards in a smile of anticipation. "You want to know where the *moxina* is? If it's under control?"

What was he up to? Taimu tensed as Chen cast an eye over the group, savoring their fear. He paused and pointed a finger straight at Spectacles.

"What? Why are you pointing at me?" the man said, cringing.

"That's where the *moxina* is."

The man leapt up and turned to look at the wall behind him. There was nothing there. "It's...it's not. Stop joking!"

The man's voice shook. His eyes remained fixed on the wall as he edged backwards, as if away from some fearful sight. Then he turned – just as the *moxina* appeared by the table! Spectacles screamed like a stuck pig and jumped backwards, slamming back into the wall. "Stay away!" he cried. His back was against the wall, and he had nowhere else to go. He panted so hard it seemed he might faint. The *moxina* stretched out a hand, perhaps to comfort him, or perhaps

to twist off his head. Taimu couldn't help but stand up as he considered how to stop the moxina, but Chen was looking on the scene with pleasure. It seemed nothing could shock him.

Two hours earlier Taimu could not have imagined the strange ritual he would end up in.

He had been at the center of a wild storm – an actual, physical storm – and fighting to survive.

He had set off on a hiking trail up Eight-mile Bend Mountain, not expecting the weather to take such a serious turn. Admittedly, it hadn't been the best hiking weather from the start: a thin layer of grey cloud hung over everything and spoiled the views. Greens, whites, and blues all merged into one dirty and depressing grey.

So Taimu walked through the grey fog with heavy steps, as if he carried a great weight.

The Amis people called Eight-mile Bend Mountain *Cilangasan*. This was their homeland, a sacred place. Taimu, a student of religion at National Chengchi University, had claimed this was a research trip, but no one knew what he was really here for.

He was in search of evil spirits.

Taimu was no superstitious fool, nor some novelty-seeking adventurer. He was fulfilling his greatest wish. What his entire life had been building up to. Take this away from him and there would be nothing left.

It had all started the summer of his eighth year.

Though well over a decade had passed since then, but he remembered vividly the constant heat of that summer's day. The sun shone in bright daggers through the foliage, falling hot upon Taimu and his older brother. How big and tall his brother had seemed; how dark the sun had turned his skin; how warm the scent of the soil as it wafted upwards. He remembered running with his brother across mountain streams and through waterfalls, and deep into the parts of the forest forbidden by their tribe.

They were just playing.

But his brother never came back.

He knew they'd broken taboos and so his brother had been seized by some evil spirit. But why had he been spared? He had dedicated himself to answering that question. He visited elders of various tribes to try and find ways to communicate with the spirits. He'd sought any method, even outside of tribal traditions. Eventually he became a graduate student at the Institute of Religious Studies. But his research provided no results. Not once did he encounter any evil spirit.

But he never gave up, never relinquished even the slimmest of hopes.

Rain started to pelt down. The thin grey layer of cloud had grown dark and thick. A storm was coming. Taimu had seen no other walkers on this muddy mountain track, and he knew why: a typhoon was forecast to make landfall near Hualian later. No sensible hiker would choose to go into the mountains today.

Yet Taimu had done so deliberately.

He had planned to come here, where any kind of evil spirit could manifest itself. Because even if the spirit he encountered was not the one who had taken his brother he would know, on

the evidence of his own eyes, that these ten and more years had not been wasted and that a sliver of hope still existed.

But this was no suicide mission. He had all the necessary equipment, including food and water. He planned to spend a night on the mountain and return the following day, once the typhoon had passed. But the skies had other ideas: the sudden storm caused the rivers to flood and while crossing a bridge he was swept off his feet, into the torrent.

His backpack filled with water and dragged him down. Forced to choose between his luggage and his life, Taimu had no option but to slip from its straps and let the current carry it off. When he finally scrambled onto the bank he was carrying nothing but a useless, waterlogged cellphone. The river had carried him kilometers downstream and he had no idea where he was. With night falling he had no choice but to find shelter from the rain and wait for dawn.

The storm continued. His sodden clothes clung to him and sucked away the heat of his body. As consciousness faded, so did his resolve.

Why do all this, he thought, for a memory of a brother probably long dead?

But in his heart, he knew this was no longer about his brother. He was doing this for himself.

Not that he didn't hope to save his brother. If his brother was still alive, held captive by that evil spirit, he wanted to rescue him. But if not...

The only evidence of his brother's existence remained within Taimu's memories.

If his brother was merely a figment of his imagination, then wasn't every choice he had made in his life meaningless? What was the point?

But if supernatural beings existed – not necessarily the one who had taken his brother – then that meant it was more likely his brother had existed. And this was the real reason he was here.

But now, facing death, he was less sure.

Perhaps he needn't have gone to these lengths? Perhaps he should just have accepted that his brother was a fantasy, a young boy's way of coping with a violent father. He could have just lived an ordinary life. So what if he had to abandon what he believed in. Plenty of other people took wrong turns in life. At least he had a chance to turn back.

And in the midst of this self-doubt, just as he was about to lose consciousness, his cell phone rang.

He was too dazed to realize that his phone, which hadn't powered on since it was soaked, should not be ringing. He picked it up and read the line of characters on the otherwise dark screen, not realizing he hadn't unlocked the phone, or that this wasn't his usual interface.

WANT TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR BROTHER?

A surge of adrenaline returned Taimu to his senses. What was going on?

The words on the screen changed:

JOIN THE DAEMON TALES RITUAL, AND YOUR DREAMS COULD COME TRUE.

ARE YOU WILLING?

Y/N

The noise of the storm made it impossible to think; the rain flowing over the screen caused the white light of the message to flicker and fade. Taimu panted for breath, his fingers numb with cold. Was he hallucinating? Already unconscious?

But he delayed no longer. He chose yes.

The rain kept falling.

He was lost in the rain and dark. He clutched the phone, his last hope, in both hands. He felt himself stand up – had he intended to do that? He seemed to be watching himself from afar, watching himself disappear in the blackness. The blackness that now took him.