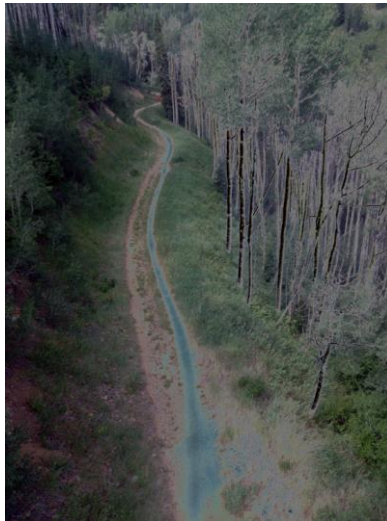


Lu and her Daemons

MY NAME IS LUANDA, Lu for short. My true last name is anyone's guess. I never learned the identity of my birth father, only that he killed himself after being driven insane by the daemon Black Claw. My mother married Duane Jakes while pregnant with me and died when I was five. Duane remarried right away, and his new wife, Norlene, never got tired of beating on me. It was like she felt driven to be the archetypal evil stepmother. I was fifteen and sinking fast when Talion came into my life.

I had the flu the first time I saw him, a beautiful spirit with hypnotic eyes, golden skin, and flowing black and silver hair. He felt real whether he was or not. He made my pain go away and gave me advice, courage, and strength. Because of him, I stood up to the bullies at school. When he possessed me, it was like being filled with light, and he moved through me like blood through my heart. He warned me that a monster was coming. I wasn't sure what he meant until Rad Sanders, the serial killer known as the Professor of Death, kidnapped me and my friend Lisa.



Rad brought us to a place high in the mountains. He tortured Lisa in ways I try not to think about. But he didn't torture me. He had this crazy idea about making me his slave. Deep down, Rad was a lonely monster. I escaped and ran into the trees. He tracked me to the mouth of a snowmelt

gully. We struggled and fell and went sliding over the edge of a cliff. Rad fell hundreds of feet, but Talion caught me and laid me in the gully with my foot wedged in a crevice.

Soon afterward, Talion left me. Rad had killed my abusive parents—partly to impress me but mostly because he liked killing people—so I went to live with Lisa's aunt and uncle, Hank and Debbie Darlington. For the first time, I had something like a normal life. My memories of Talion started to seem crazy. Maybe he hadn't saved me that night. My foot caught in the crevice and stopped my slide over the edge—maybe it was as simple as that.

I tried to explain him away.

How could my teenage mind invent something like Talion? His name, for instance. The word *talion* means retribution equal to the crime, like an eye for an eye. It comes from medieval times. I read lots of library books, but I couldn't remember seeing the word anywhere. I had no clue what it meant when Talion told me his name. Sometimes other spirits attended him, Black Claw and Delatar. They never spoke their names. I just knew, out of nowhere, the way you do when you make things up.

But sometimes a blaze of certainty erased my doubts. Talion was real. That night on the mountain, I fell. One memory never faded—the heart-stopping moment of weightlessness before he caught me in his arms.

What are daemons? How are they different from demons?

THANKS TO MY FOSTER mother, I went to college, a dream that once seemed out of reach. But instead of leaving Talion behind with my childhood, I thought about him more than ever. What was he? He looked like an angel without wings, but no angel would have Black Claw as a follower.

Black Claw is a cross between a vampire and a ravenous bird. She whispered in my ear, step-by-step instructions for how to kill my stepmother. Talion didn't try to stop her. If we hadn't been interrupted, I would have become a killer at age fifteen. (I became a killer anyway, ten years later, and Black Claw played a key role in that.)

It seemed more likely Talion was a demon. He did demon-like things. Possessed me. Warned me that if I offered my soul three times, he would be compelled to take it. But a demon is an evil spirit, a devil, and in those days I didn't think of Talion as evil. A daemon—pronounced the same and coming from the same Greek root—is a god or divine spirit. Talion seemed more like a daemon. I began thinking of him as a daemon, and later he accepted the name in a formal kind of way, as if it mattered. And it did. Later I understood why.

My sophomore year, I took a mythology course from Dr. Harper. Her hair flowed in chestnut waves halfway down her back. When she turned around to aim her laser pointer at something on the screen, I wished for hair like hers. From Dr. Harper I learned that every culture has believed in demons of one kind or another. Sometimes the line between them and gods get pretty blurred. In Indian mythology you can hardly tell the difference. Dr. Harper stressed that demons aren't real. As she put

it, “They’re real only in the sense of expressing truths about the human psyche.” She spent a lot of the class prodding us to discuss those truths.

I almost trusted her enough ask about Talion. Almost. Maybe it was Rad who made me wary. He was a college professor, too, and he killed one of his students.



Dr. Harper's course helped me understand what daemons are. I met the daemons Akka and Susano during the Knot ceremony binding me to Talion. I wondered what their names meant, so I did some research. Akka is a Finnish fertility goddess, which came as a shock. The Akka I met was ugly and asexual, and nothing about her seemed Finnish. Susano, or Susano'ò, is a Japanese god of the sea and storms. His appearance fit his name—greenish and slimy—and staring at him made me seasick. But nothing marked him as Japanese.

Talion told me that daemons have no form, being spirits, and a seer's gift is to apprehend a daemon's nature and shape it into something the human mind can understand. But everyone sees things in their own way, and culture has a big influence on ways of seeing. To a daemon seer in Finland 1500 years ago, pie-faced Akka could have appeared as a sexy fertility goddess. Maybe she accepted the name Akka because whoever gave it to her thought she was beautiful. But I'm pretty sure other seers all over the world have given her different names.

Does it matter what you call a daemon?

SHAKESPEARE SAID A ROSE by any other name smells as sweet. That's true if we're talking about the same person smelling the same rose. To someone else it might smell like decay. That other person might give it a different name like—I don't know—corpse flower. Seers give names that describe the spirits they see, and the spirits choose whichever name they want.

The point is people all over the world see the same spirits, the same demons. Or daemons.

These spirits care a lot about names. They call one another by the names they've accepted. Some, like Black Claw, remain unnamed. Talion calls her "that one," which seems impersonal for their close

relationship. She serves as his protector and enforcer—in other words, guards him and does his dirty work. The daemon Chama refers to Black Claw as the hawk.



Chama means flame in Portuguese. Her name isn't associated with any god or demon. It's just descriptive. It leaves her free of history and ties to humankind, which is how she wants it.

About three thousand years ago, Talion accepted the name of a demon. After he put me through the hell of the Knot ceremony, I would have had no problem calling him one, but I'd already given him the other name, daemon. He accepted it with a mocking smile as if he was pulling a fast one. And he was.

Daemon may be the most accurate description of Talion and the others, but it has a big disadvantage. A spirit carries the baggage of whatever name it accepts—the summoning and binding spells, the rituals of worship, the sacrifices. The name defines the spirit's relationship with human beings, especially its daemon seer. I gave up a lot of potential power by bestowing the name of daemon on Talion before fully understanding what he was. I've been trying ever since to get that power back.