

THE DEMON INSIDE

by Peter Oxley

Excerpt

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PART ONE

Augustus

Chapter 1

It was the tallest and most imposing-looking door in the street, but it still collapsed as though it were a paper screen as N'yotsu put his fingers through it. With scarcely a grunt he wrenched it from its hinges, throwing it to the ground behind us.

Kate shook her head as she drew her LeMat pistol, a weapon that had been specifically modified by Maxwell to target demons. "Mate," she said, "how many times do we have to tell you? People prefer it when you knock..."

"No time," he said, charging inside. "I am picking up some strong resonances from within. I fear he may be conducting a summoning."

A shadow fell across us and I spun round with my sword held ready to attack, then relaxed as I realised it was just another gas lamp in the street flickering and dying prematurely: yet another sign of the world failing around us. Leaves swirled in the half-light, moulded into a dirty vortex by the wind that seemed to follow us wherever we went.

I shuddered and turned back to Kate and the house. “Shall we?” I asked, unsheathing my sword and stepping ahead of her into the hallway.

She cocked her pistol. “And here was me thinking we were just here to collect a boy.”

“A young man who could also be a sorcerer,” I said. “You know as well as I do that things are rarely straightforward these days.”

We dashed down the hallway, senses alert for any threats. By the standards I was used to back in London it was a relatively humble house, its furnishings providing scant clues as to the owner’s status as one of the most prominent foundry owners in Sheffield. I cast a critical eye over the decor, comparing it to how I would bedeck my own mansion if I ever fell into my fortune. The artwork displayed on the walls was perfunctory to say the least, as though the inhabitants knew that they should present something but had no idea exactly what would fit. As a result, grimy industrial vistas clashed with gentle watercolours and serene seascapes, with the odd battle scene thrown in for good measure. I frowned, downgrading my views of our unwitting hosts with every step I took.

N’yotsu pulled open a door to reveal a set of stone steps leading down into darkness; he nodded to us then stepped through. Kate had managed to sneak ahead of me while I had been casting my eye over the decor and I cast aside chivalry to push my way back in front of her. I ignored her bemused glare as I focused my attention on the stone steps and the gloom into which N’yotsu was leading us.

As we reached the bottom, it took a second or two for my eyes to adjust to the flickering candlelight that barely illuminated the cellar, although when they did so I found myself yearning for the blissful ignorance of the dark. The centre of the room was filled with a pentagram that had been drawn on the stone floor in red, sticky splashes. There was little doubt that the substance in question was blood, for the air had that peculiar metallic tang to it and a pair of butchered goat carcasses lay discarded to one side of the room. The pentagram was in turn contained within a circle drawn neatly in chalk. A stocky young man stood a few feet outside this circle, glaring at us in surprise and irritation, his long dark hair buffeted by a brisk wind that was as strong as it was impossible. As we approached, the candles around the room were suddenly extinguished by the wind, and the sudden darkness was lit by a terrible glow that emanated from a vortex starting to grow in the centre of the pentagram.

It was a whirlpool of colours, an insane mass of pain and loathing given a semblance of physical form. I was reminded of the portals that Maxwell and N'yotsu had created all those years ago, although this one was different: more primal and raw. Were it not for the pentagram's controlling influence, I feared that this swirling maelstrom would happily consume the whole world.

We shielded our eyes as the vortex grew in volume and intent, watching as N'yotsu fought against the gale to try and reach the young man, shouting at him to end the spell. Whatever the answer, it was rendered academic by a sharp explosion from the centre of the room. The vortex blinked out of existence, plunging the room into darkness.

My ears rang as I fumbled for a match in my coat pocket with my spare hand, keeping my sword poised for any attack while my eyes and ears strained to pick up signs of anything awry. As my hearing started to return to normal I could make out a low growl, accompanied by the sounds of something large prowling and straining at unseen bonds. Not the best of signs.

I closed my fingers around a matchbook at the same time as the young man on the other side of the room lit a gas lamp, revealing a huge, muscular demon standing in the centre of the pentagram. The man stared at the creature he had summoned in awe, as though he had only expected a kitten to appear instead of a beast from the pits of Hades.

"Oh, good," I muttered, raising my sword.

Kate put a hand on my shoulder. "It's all right," she said. "The demon's still inside the summoning circle. There're protective charms around it. The demon can't get out or hurt us unless the circle's broken."

I blinked at her. "How do you...?"

"The amount of time I've spent around Max and N'yotsu, some of it was bound to rub off eventually." She scowled at me. "What, you think I spend my days thinking about cleaning, cooking and wearing pretty dresses?"

I muttered an apology and turned my attention back to the scene in the cellar before us. The demon tried to lunge at N'yotsu and the young man, but instead collided with the invisible barrier of the summoning circle, flashes of green energy flying off in all directions as a result of the impact. After a minute or so of fruitless and frantic effort it slumped back into the centre of

the chalk circle, a rippling mass of frustration as it glared at us with glowing red eyes. Slick black wings unfurled and flapped behind its back, wafting the smell of sulphur around the room. The creature's face bore a passing resemblance to a human one but was much more angular with sharp edges in all the wrong places. Its body was a mass of muscle, but again it were as though it had been designed by someone who had had the concept of the human body explained to them, but without having understood the relative proportions, like a painting done by a blind man. I was painfully aware of where I had seen such an image before: Andras.

N'yotsu had managed to position himself so that he could glare at the young man while also keeping an eye on the demon. "Would you mind telling us exactly what you are doing?" he asked the man.

The man straightened himself up and smoothed down his hair, attempting to portray the air of an outraged homeowner. "I might ask the same of you. Exactly who are you to barge in here unannounced and uninvited?"

N'yotsu looked as though he were about to tear the young man's head off, so I took a step forward and cleared my throat. "Joshua Bradshaw I presume? Allow me to introduce ourselves. This is N'yotsu, over there is Kate Thatcher and my name is Augustus Potts."

"Gus!" N'yotsu and Kate shouted at me in unison. I winced and glanced at the demon, which grinned back at me triumphantly.

"How many times do I have to remind you not to state your name within the hearing of a demon?" N'yotsu scolded. I held up my hands apologetically. A person's real name was a gift to

certain demons, who could cause a lot of trouble with the power that it gave them. I spent most of my time battling non-magical beasts such as Berserkers and so rarely needed to watch out for such considerations.

The young man, Joshua, did not seem to have noticed my slip of the tongue. He stared at us, his mouth fixed in a perfect 'O'. "I cannot believe it: it is really you?"

"It is," I said. "My brother Maxwell has taken an interest in your letters and he sent us to bring you to him."

His affront forgotten, Joshua grabbed N'yotsu's hand and shook it vigorously. "It is such a pleasure to meet you," he exclaimed. "All of you!" He darted round to shake my hand.

"No!" shouted N'yotsu and Kate together, but it was too late: in his haste to reach me, Joshua put his foot through the summoning circle, breaking the demon's containment. With a victorious snarl, the creature grabbed him and held him in front of itself like a shield.

"Make one move and I kill this whelp," snarled the creature.

N'yotsu shrugged. "Do it. I don't care."

The demon frowned at him, but before it could react any further, a gunshot rang out in the confined space. The demon staggered forward and involuntarily released Joshua, who fell to the floor, covered in the black sticky slime that served as the creature's blood. I grabbed the young man and pushed him behind me, pointing my sword at the demon.

It turned and snarled at Kate, who had the pistol aimed at its head. "Forgot about me, didn't you handsome?" Kate grinned.

The beast took a step toward her but was checked when N'yotsu launched himself at it, throwing it to the floor and aiming a series of blows to its skull and torso.

"Bloody idiot," shouted Kate. "I had a clean shot to the head!" She ran to me, glancing at Joshua. "He all right?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Hopefully that gave him enough of a scare to think twice about summoning any more demons in the future." I was watching the fight in front of us intently; I itched to join in but N'yotsu and the demon were fighting at close quarters, which ruled out the effective use of my sword.

After freeing itself from N'yotsu's embrace, the demon aimed a kick at our friend's head, its clawed feet flashing menacingly in the candlelight. N'yotsu dodged aside and punched at the demon's gunshot wound with a hard jab, causing it to scream in pain as it scrambled away to the far wall. As N'yotsu advanced, the demon used its muscular legs to thrust itself like a missile past him and up the stairs. A series of crashes signalled its escape from the house.

N'yotsu followed without a word and I moved towards the stairs before turning back to look at Kate and Joshua. "Go," she said. "I'll keep an eye on the village idiot here." I thought to check whether she would be all right alone with him but then stopped myself; her grim expression told me all I needed to know.

I ran up the steps and out of the house, pausing to check from the trail of slick dark blood for the direction in which the others had gone. I turned left and ran, my soul exulting with the pull of my sword as it strained to engage in battle. I felt the runic symbols move beneath my skin and

suppressed my instinctive resistance to those changes: at that moment I needed all of the strength and speed that my altered state afforded me. In the heat of action it was so much easier to forget my fears and revulsion at what the changes meant, focusing instead on what they did for me, the advantages they gave me.

The wind whistled past my ears as I picked up the pace from a sprint to something altogether more preternatural. I grinned and let out a low growl, leaping into the air and clearing a hundred yards in one stride. The unrestrained joy of my condition at times like this were the main reason I managed to stay sane in the midst of the madness that had enveloped the world. It also had the added benefit of making me useful in our unending battles against the creatures from the Aether. This was fast becoming the new drug in my life, for I had no need of the numbness of alcohol or euphoria of laudanum when I could stand toe-to-toe with gods and devils and fight them on my own terms.

The sound of fighting grew ahead of me and I burst into a park to find N'yotsu and the demon once more confronting each other in a clearing. A dim part of me noted the similarity between this and the corner of Hyde Park in which Maxwell and I had first met N'yotsu, all those years ago when he had confronted yet another demon.

The creature squaring up to N'yotsu was clearly suffering from the wound caused by Kate's pistol; but even with that handicap it was still more than equal to its foe, dodging N'yotsu's blows and landing a number of its own. It moved so that its back was to me and instinctively lashed out, my blade missing by inches but the hilt landing a ringing blow to the side of its head.

It staggered and stepped back so that it faced both of us, leering from one to the other with malicious intent. I gritted my teeth against the urge to run away and hide, instead standing firm in front of this creature from the depths of Hell. We stood this way for some moments, feinting forwards and dropping back defensively in turn. I noted that N'yotsu was breathing heavily, clearly exhausted by the battle and pursuit.

"Who are you?" I asked. "What is your purpose here?"

"I am impressed," the demon said. "I thought humans were all weak and helpless. But then— ah! I had heard that they had recruited demons to their cause; I did not expect to meet you so soon."

"Answer my question," I said, pointing my sword at the creature's neck. "You are already wounded, we can do far worse."

The demon leered at N'yotsu. "You don't recognise me, old friend? Has it really been that long? Or maybe the rumours of your deteriorating mental state are true after all..."

I gaped at them; while it was entirely possible, nay plausible, that N'yotsu knew most of the demons that we encountered, he spoke so little about his past life that it was easy to forget that he was not of our world.

"I remember you all too well," N'yotsu growled. "And certainly well enough to know that you were never a friend of mine. That is why I plan to rip off your head as soon as I have found out what you are doing here."

“Why, I was summoned here by your friend the human sorcerer back in that cellar, ripped unawares from where I was innocently abiding. You know how these things are.”

“I do. And I also know that you never willingly stray far from Almadel. To be summoned here you needed to have been in the Aether.” My friend’s face twisted into a mirthless grin. “Have you been exiled too?”

The demon sneered. “That would make you happy, would it not? To know that I have finally suffered the same fate as you. Maybe I have come to be your salvation, to save you from the slow decline into oblivion that you are forcing on yourself. Tell me, do you hate your past so much that you would die rather than face it again? Or is it fear that motivates you?”

N’yotsu flinched as though he had been slapped as the demon continued.

“I wonder how much of that famed pride you still have, whether you would let me help you to live anew? Maybe we could join forces and conquer this world together, in the name of the Four Kings?”

N’yotsu grunted. “So the usurpers still rule. But they did not exile you, did they? You are far too canny for that. Even if you had fallen out of favour, they would not let you live. So I would wager that you still act for them. Which could only mean one thing: that you are acting as some form of scouting party, here in advance of an invasion.”

The very thought chilled me, even though it was a threat that had hung over us for many years now. N’yotsu had shared precious little of his background, but what he had told us was enough to populate our most desolate nightmares. Creatures forged in the crucibles of hellish

worlds stalked the void of the Aether, hungry to devour the riches of our realm like a hideous swarm of demonic locusts. N'yotsu had always painted a picture of an amorphous mass of evil creatures hell-bent on a single goal, but what he had just said hinted at something else: the existence of a demonic society subject to a form of government. Which meant in turn that these creatures were possibly even as sophisticated as us.

"Care to fill me in?" I asked. "Who are you, demon?"

"I am Gaap," the demon replied. "A key member of the Almadite Supreme Council, to be feared and dreaded by the likes of you."

"He is a schemer and a petty functionary," snapped N'yotsu. "A toady for a group of demons that now rule my home realm. Someone who I used to trust until he stabbed me in the back and who is no doubt obeying their wishes even now."

"Why so untrusting?" asked Gaap. "What makes you think I follow anyone's plans?"

"Solomon said it the best when he described you: 'He goes before Four Great and Mighty Kings, as if he were a Guide to conduct them along on their way'. Or do you want to tell me that you have changed your ways so much in only a few short millennia?"

"So bitter, even after all this time," tutted Gaap as demonic figures emerged from the shadows around us. "I just have a knack for picking the winning side, that's all."

"Desist," said a demon from behind us, "and we will let you live."

"No, you won't," said N'yotsu slowly, turning with wary intent.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Gaap batted aside my sword and thrust a clawed fist at N'yotsu, sending him staggering backwards and leaving us exposed inside the circle of demons. I turned slowly with my sword raised and counted eight of the fiends, including Gaap, who raised a fist and shouted: "Hail the Four Kings!" The chant was taken up by the others as they advanced on us.

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