

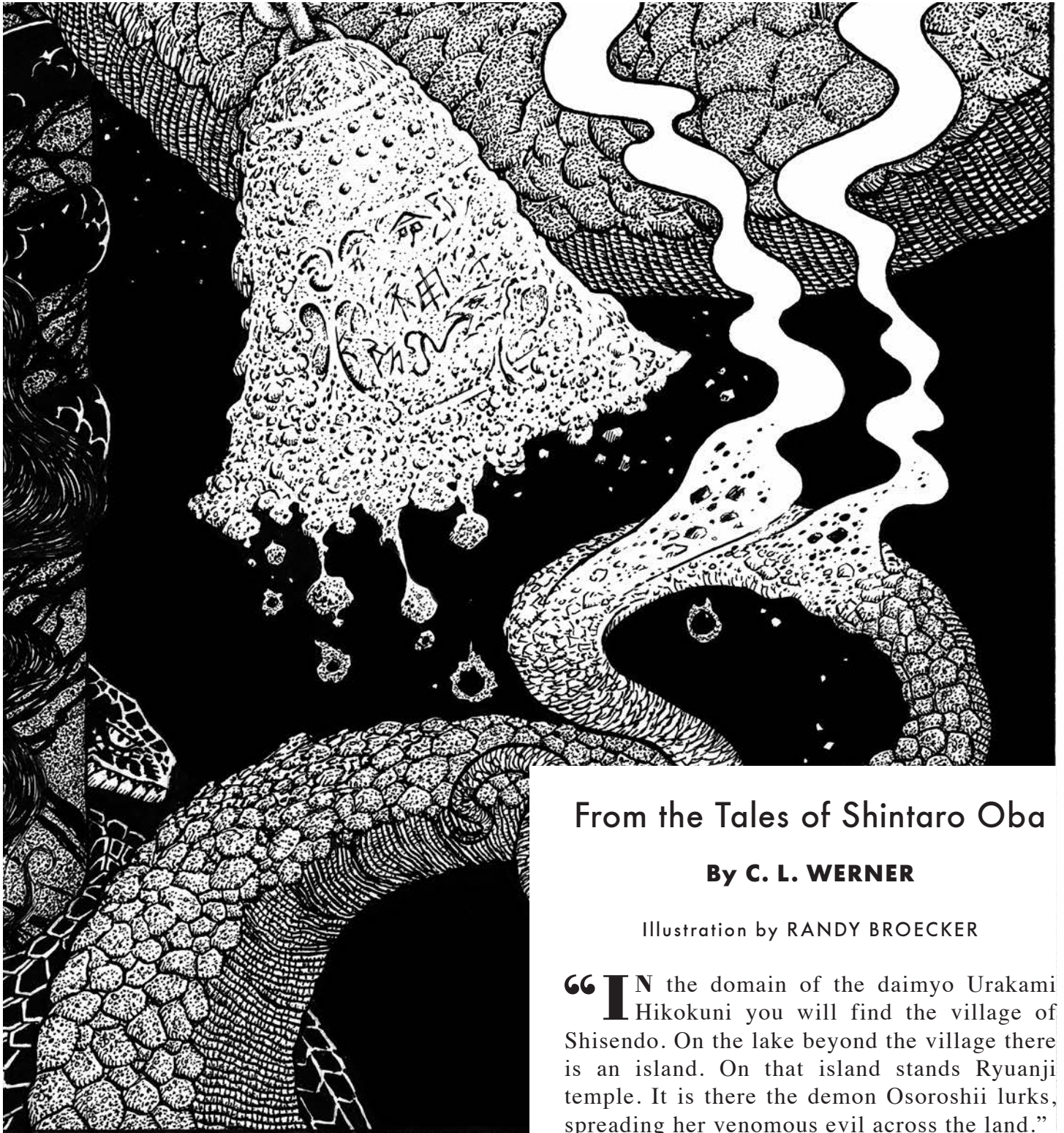
THE SNAKE



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IN THE FOLD



From the Tales of Shintaro Oba

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“**I**N the domain of the daimyo Urakami Hikokuni you will find the village of Shisendo. On the lake beyond the village there is an island. On that island stands Ryllandaze temple. It is there the demon Osoroshii lurks, spreading her venomous evil across the land.”

Shintaro Oba read the scroll once more. It had been given to him by Kambei-kai, the mummified priest who had transcended death itself to return as a living sokushinbutso. He'd promised to help Oba in his search for the demon that had enslaved the soul of his late lord, Sekigahara Katakura. Kambei-kai's researches had yet to discover the fiend for which the samurai was searching but he had, sometimes, uncovered other monsters plaguing the people of Mu-Thulan. Evils it would need a hero like Oba to end.

There was one glimmer of hope in Kambei-kai's message. Though Osoroshii wasn't the demon Oba was looking for, she might know the name of the one he was seeking. The undead priest left it to Oba to decide what bargain to strike with the monster to learn what he needed to know. If the words of a demon could be trusted.

The samurai rolled up the scroll again and stuffed it beneath the sash that circled his waist. From the wooded hill he had a vantage of the village below and the castle of the Urakami Clan in the distance. Nearby was the lake and out across its waters was a small, rocky island. It was a wild, forbidding spot, girt by high cliffs overgrown with foliage and rising to a central plateau thick with trees. The temple was visible, but even from a distance there was an impression of decay and abandonment. Oba expected nothing less from a shrine that had become so defiled that a demon could take residence within its walls.

Oba studied the shoreline, his gaze finally settling on a few fishing boats drawn up on the beach. It seemed the fishermen were finished for the day. He observed a half dozen men and women walking across the sand towards Shisendo bearing baskets with the day's catch to their homes. He studied them for a moment, then looked back at the boats. He'd need one to get across to the island, but was too cautious to reveal himself and tell them his purpose. No village enjoyed having a demon in its vicinity, but people were often too afraid of provoking its wrath to allow someone to liberate them from its evil. It would be better for all concerned if Oba struck out for the temple and confronted Osoroshii without anyone knowing.

The samurai started down the hill toward the shore. With the demon's lair so near, he'd donned his armour while in the woods and was soon sweating as the summer sun beat down on the plated steel. Trained to wear armour as soon as he was old enough to swing a wooden sword, its weight was a familiar burden Oba rarely noticed, but the heat was something he'd never be accustomed to. It made his climb down the hill more taxing than it ordinarily should have been, draining his stamina and distracting his mind.

So it was that when Oba reached the shore and the boats, he failed to notice that one of the fishermen had returned. The youth started in surprise to see him. Oba could see the uneasiness on the man's face, could tell he was trying to decide if he recognized him as one of the Urakami samurai. Oddly, it struck Oba that the man's trepidation lessened rather than increased when he failed to number him among Lord Hikokuni's retainers.

"What are you doing near our boats?" the fisherman challenged.

"I need to borrow one of them," Oba replied. He nodded his head to the youth. "I will return it when I am finished."

The fisherman took a few steps towards him. There was a wariness in his attitude, but not, Oba thought, one provoked by fear. It was almost as though the youth were trying to suppress the last embers of a fading hope. His eyes fixated on Koumakiri's bone hilt and the weathered scabbard that held the sword. "There is only the island... and the temple. No one goes to Ryuanji except that Lord Hikokuni sends them there."

Oba heard the tremor in the man's voice when he spoke of the temple. "I will go to Ryuanji," he told the fisherman. "I know of the demon that has preyed on Shisendo these many years. Lord Hikokuni might tolerate its presence. I will not."

The fisherman dropped to his knees and bowed to the samurai. There was a sob in his voice when he spoke. "We dared not hope for this day! You can only be Shintaro Oba, the hero who wields Demon Killer!" He raised his face and there were tears in his eyes. "How long we've prayed to the gods that you would come!"

Clasping the youth by the shoulder, Oba drew him back onto his feet. "I am unworthy of your veneration," he said. "Had my purpose been merely to free your village of the demon, then you might have cause to cheer me. I have my own reasons for seeking the fiend, but I promise you that she will not menace Shisendo once I've finished with her."

"Whatever your reasons, if you free my people from Osoroshii, you have the undying gratitude of Teijiro." The fisherman slapped his chest as he gave his name. His gaze turned to the lake and there was a cold fury in his eyes when they turned towards the island. "The demon has preyed on my people for generations now. She takes the form of a great snake and slithers through the waters to drag men from their boats and snatch children from the shore." His hands curled into fists as he continued. "My brother was taken by her when he was only eight. I can still hear his screams as she wrapped him in her coils and pulled him into the lake to drown." He kicked his foot in the sand. "The wolf and the tiger hunt prey when they are hungry, but Osoroshii kills simply to inflict suffering. She is a wicked, vile horror."

"The manner of demons is ever dominated by malice and evil," Oba said. "But your story troubles me. Kiyohime are usually a cautious and subtle sort of demon. They aren't so brazen as the oni in their methods. How is it that Osoroshii has become so bold?"

Teijiro turned and pointed inland. Just visible in the distance were the tiled rooftops of Danjiki Castle, stronghold of the Urakami clan. "In my grandfather's time, the samurai would hunt Osoroshii, but the demon always eluded them and would sneak inside the castle to wreck her vengeance on the clan. Try as they might, they could never catch her, but at least there was an effort to protect the common people from her evil." The youth's face contorted with bitterness. "It was Lord Hikokuni's father who changed everything. He made an agreement with Osoroshii, giving her Ryuanji and allowing her to claim a certain number of his vassals each year."

"A shameful compact for any man to enter," Oba declared, disgusted that a daimyo would stoop to such measures. He scratched his chin as he pondered the situation. "It may be that good will come from such villainy. From what you say, the kiyohime has grown arrogant and proud. She will be unlikely to flee." His hand dropped to Koumakiri's grip. "Osoroshii will rue such a mistake."

“Let me row you to the island, master,” Tejiro said. He hurried to one of the boats and started to push it back into the lake.

Oba stepped into the boat but waved the fisherman away. “It may be that Osoroshii will come out before I ever set foot on the island. You are a brave man, Tejiro, but I have fought demons before. You can best help me by remaining here and offering prayers that I succeed.”

Tejiro accepted the rebuff with a bow. “I will pray for your victory,” he declared. “Everyone in Shisendo will.”

The samurai frowned at the remark. “It would be best if you told no one about me or what I intend to do. It is possible that I might fail. To have their hopes dashed would be cruel. Tell them nothing. When I am triumphant, the deed will speak for itself.”

Oba used the oar to push out onto the lake. He felt guilty that he hadn't told the fisherman the entire truth. He was setting out for Ryuanji to confront the demon, but to achieve his own goal he might be forced to compromise with Osoroshii. If the kiyohime told him what he wanted to know then he would be obligated to any agreement he made with her. He rationalized with himself that he'd enter no compact so shameful as that of the Urakami clan, that he wouldn't leave the demon free to prey on Shisendo.

As he rowed across the lake, Oba wondered if even that much was true. To learn the identity of the demon that had captured Lord Katakura's soul was there any limit to what he was willing to do? A samurai's obligation was to fulfil his duty to his lord above all other concerns. Death and suffering were expected of a samurai to maintain his honour. Even when that death and suffering must be inflicted upon others.

A flicker of fear grew inside Oba's mind, becoming stronger the nearer he came to the forsaken island. Not fear of the demon, but rather of himself and what he might be forced to do in the name of duty. As though to echo his fears, a doleful note rang out across the waves.

A bell was sounding from Ryuanji temple.

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THE island was as forbidding a site as Oba had ever seen. There was an atmosphere that surrounded it, an air of menace that exuded from the bleak grey rocks and the wind-racked trees. The bell was silent now and no other sound greeted his approach. The lack of birds about the island lent a sinister aspect to the quiet.

A stone pier projected from the rocks, offering the only access to the interior. Oba tied the boat to one of the pilings and started towards the ancient steps that ascended up through the grey rocks. He noticed that the stairway was greatly decayed, rubbed smooth in places so that he was forced to stretch to bypass a step that simply was no longer there. A pattern emerged as he continued upwards. The worn patches on the stairway suggested a heavy mass dragged across it. Not merely once, but repeatedly, up and down year after year. The effaced sections shifted from one edge of the stairs to the other in a winding fashion that set a chill through the samurai. It was more than merely imagination, a slithering thing had been using these stairs. From the width of the worn patches, he judged the kiyohime's coils must be three

feet in diameter. The breadth of the serpent was only a suggestion of the demon's size, but it was an ominous hint to the nature of the enemy awaiting Oba.

After a few hundred yards, the steps reached the top of the rocks and opened onto the plateau that formed the centre of the island. Trees abounded in profusion, and the ground was overgrown with bamboo and a yellow wild flower unknown to Oba. A path had been cut through the vegetation, plunging deeper into the interior. The tracks of the kiyohime were here as well, dominating the trail to such a degree that they were more easily noticed by the few spots unmarked by the demon's passing than the confused swirl of her slithering travels.

Now the samurai noticed the heavy, musky reek that clung to the island. Below, with wind and wave to counteract it, the reptilian stench hadn't been noticeable, but in the stillness of the interior it engulfed everything like a miasma. The riddle of why birds shunned Ryuanji was explained. No creature would thrive in this ophidian fug.

Oba kept his hand on Koumakiri and started down the trail. His flesh was revolted by the overwhelming snake smell, but his determination drove him onward. He'd come here to confront the demon and he'd not leave until his purpose had been accomplished.

Into the oppressive silence there now came a disturbance. For either side of the path, in the weeds and grass, came faint rustling. The sound was suggestive of serpents crawling through the undergrowth. Oba paused in his step and stared into the vegetation, trying to spot whatever was making the noise. All he could determine was that it came from multiple sources on both sides of the trail. The horrible thought came to him that Osoroshii might not be alone, but like the jorogumo Tsubasa-no-Kumonosu have an entire brood of half-demon monsters lurking nearby. With each step he took, he expected to see a fanged head dart out of the grass and set its venom rushing through his veins.

No viper appeared, however, and at last Oba saw an end to the serpent-haunted trail. Ahead was an area of cleared ground with a temple at its centre. The first glance told him it was a very old building, its stone walls deeply pitted by the attentions of wind and rain. The tiles of its roof were of more recent manufacture, coated in shiny black lacquer and their projecting edges painted a vibrant crimson. Statues of snakes coiled around pedestals lined the brick pathway leading up to the broad stairway at the fore of the structure. Oba recognized the symbols of the Snake God, an entity neither benevolent or malevolent towards humans, but simply coldly indifferent to the Yamajin. Places such as this had been built in an effort to placate the reptilian deity and move it to restrain the activities of the animals over which it held dominion. The samurai felt a strange relief to see such a place, for it meant the serpents he'd heard might be of natural rather than demonic provenance.

At the base of the stairs, Oba paused to remove his boots. Again, there came the image of a viper sinking its fangs in his flesh, but the samurai deemed it still more dangerous to offend the Snake God in its own temple. That the roof had been maintained convinced him the place wasn't so abandoned as he'd imagined and it was possible the god's presence yet lingered in the shrine. A samurai knew it was folly to depend on the gods for deliverance, but it was also folly to show them disrespect.