

OBSIDIAN WRAITH

NATHAN WILSON & S. E. NIN

Obsidian Wraith is a product of the author's imagination and or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright 2021 Nathan Wilson and S. E. Nin

All rights reserved.

Cover art: Photography by Yulia Koltyrina, Tom Tom, and Imagenavi

1180 HEIAN PERIOD

NARA, JAPAN

I am an entity of darkness.

Only the shadows keep me company, whispering their strange songs in my head. I feel them floating over me like the caress of a demon. It grips me tight until I cannot breathe. I am drowning in a sea of ice and shadow. It is much more than just an ocean of death—it is a living creature that overwhelms me like a god.

A scream washes up my throat as black flames leap from my flesh. I claw at the inferno creeping over my body. The most primal part of my being knows that I have precious few seconds left to live. I am drowning and burning at the same moment. I look toward the surface shimmering under a colossal black sun. A woman's voice cries out sharply in this murky void.

She screams my name over and over as my soul turns to dust.

Shindara awoke with a start, staring wildly into the depths of the forest. The senseless void from his nightmares was replaced by the brilliant canopy of trees. A grey thrush whispered in the low hanging boughs. Sunlight splashed across his face from his perch in the knotted branches. His back rested comfortably against the trunk. He vaguely recalled climbing the tallest tree in the forest and drifting off

to a restless sleep.

A low breeze ruffled his hair, stirring sensations in his heart that he feared he would never feel again. He stroked his face to ensure it was intact, running his fingers along his jawline and feeling a shadow of a beard. He held his hand in front of his eyes as if he could seize the gold-tinted mist. Everything was as he left it when he fell asleep.

He had dreamt of the Yomi realm again. It was never far from his waking thoughts and now it had established a foothold in his nightmares.

As a scribe at the Buddhist temple of Tōdai-ji, it was unthinkable that he entertained these secret fantasies. Perhaps his servitude was the reason that he was drawn so deeply to the darkness of the Yomi. Part of his sacred duties included overseeing the countless treasures in the temple storehouse. One such item was the Hell Scrolls of Nara. If only he didn't unfurl the scrolls and read about the Yomi, "kami" spirits, and demonic creatures known as "yōkai."

It was enough to test the faith of Nara's most devout monks, let alone a man on the beginning of his path to enlightenment.

Shindara's faith oscillated between hope and despair ever since he considered the possibility of a shadow realm congealed of souls. Perhaps it was the fear of the unknown that kept him awake at night and didn't let him close his eyes.

The Hollow Land. The Land of Roots. The World of Darkness.

It ran counter to the teachings of Buddhism and ideas of reincarnation. With a sigh, Shindara tried to shake the haze of the nightmare from his mind.

He reached into his pocket, feeling the scrap that he tore from the Hell Scrolls. The breath held tight in his chest as he

lifted the aged silk to his eyes. Perhaps one more glimpse at the illustrations of the Yomi would be enough to satisfy his morbid curiosity.

Suddenly, his ears were assaulted by a sound like no other. Gone was the wind rustling through the leaves or the birds calling out in the mist. This deranged noise whirled around his head as if it had been there all along. He bolted up from his seat as the branches rattled and the earth groaned.

For an irrational moment, Shindara pictured a tide of darkness sluicing out from between the trees, a veritable entrance to the Yomi.

Thundering hooves tore through the ground.

He froze when he saw armored samurai on horseback bursting through darkened boughs below him. The earth bucked and broke beneath the beasts, flinging clots of dirt across the forest path.

“They’re heading toward the city,” he breathed.

Shindara gripped the tachi sword hanging from the sash around his waist. His knuckles whitened to the bone as he watched their traversing.

There it was. Golden flecks of sunlight caught the crest of the Taira clan gleaming atop their helmets. A sea of red-laced armor clanked and rattled below him. Nearly two hundred battle ready warriors passed and left a path of destruction in their wake.

Shindara never considered fleeing deeper into the forest and away from the charge of the samurai. With precision born from many years of treading the wilderness, he sprang down from his perch. Shindara’s horse was nowhere to be found, spooked by the arrival of the invaders.

He would run to the city of Nara on foot if necessary to protect what he cherished most. His thoughts jumped to his wife and her fate if the Taira laid siege. Was their arrival

somehow connected to the Battle of Uji?

He knew little of the conflict aside from the two warring factions. The Taira and Minamoto clans had been locked in a vicious rivalry for decades and it was finally spilling over into open skirmish and rebellion. Supposedly, it was sparked by the removal of the emperor and the appointment of the two-year old boy now sitting on the throne. Emperor Antoku, half-Taira by blood, was merely a figurehead while his clan reigned from the shadows. Child or not, one would be insane to rise against the Emperor and his Taira puppet masters.

Shindara's heels ached by the time the gates of Nara were within sight. Curiosity turned to fear and fear turned to horror in those few seconds. His heart seized up. A cool wind began to curl its way through the fields and carry the screams of the wounded and the dying.

Naginata's, poles armed with curved blades, gleamed red in the sunlight before descending again and hacking men to pieces. Amid the sea of swinging blades, arrows hissed through the air and found soft purchase in muddy earth or flesh.

The samurai were locked in battle with the warrior monks of Nara. Shindara was stunned by how well the monks were faring. That is, until he realized the Taira samurai were unarmed.

They couldn't raise a sword or bow in their defense, otherwise they surely would have. Shindara's masters were butchering the Emperor's messengers at their doorstep. Those who weren't quick enough to flee were forced to their knees and beheaded.

Once more, Shindara's hand drifted to his sword. He could handle a blade as deftly as his peers, given his own history of battle. When he wasn't attending to his scribe duties, he trained monk soldiers in the temple courtyard. He

would have gladly joined his companions in the battle raging outside the gates of Nara if his heart called him to do so—except his heart screamed at him to stay hidden in the tall grass.

There was no glory to be found in the massacre outside the gates. This was the death and destruction that his teachers often said shouldn't exist in the mortal realm.

“Why?” he growled. When the last of the samurai were dragged into Nara, he crawled through the field. There was no telling if a vigilant archer would flick an arrow in his direction as he peered above the grass. It wasn't hard to manage the journey on his hands and knees, despite the numbness in his bones.

As he prepared to break free from cover, a figure reared up from the side. A blade swung at Shindara's head. He tore his tachi free and batted it aside. His posture was weak and his footing was uneven as a curved blade thrust at his knees. Shindara raked his sword across and kicked him in the chest, flattening his opponent for the killing blow.

“Shindara!”

The pitiful cry stopped Shindara before he could throw his weight behind the blade. Astonished, he stumbled back from his opponent. Instead of a Taira soldier, he was facing down a monk from the temple.

“Priest Kobo!” Shindara said, helping him to his feet. “I saw the samurai advancing on Nara under the cover of the forest. I would have come sooner, but my horse fled—”

“Why is a scribe crouching in the fields while we're under attack?!”

Shindara bit his lip as he scoured the battlefield and the growing pile of bodies. He couldn't possibly fathom the chain of events that had been set in motion by his teachers.

“I'll escort you past the gates and see you as far as

Tōdai-ji Temple,” Kobo said, catching his breath. “Don’t think of leaving Nara again.”

Those ominous words rang in his head once the city gates shut behind him. He was immediately enclosed by armed guards and archers returning from battle. He was jostled forward as the crowd swelled behind him in a surge of adrenaline and barely constrained rage.

Shindara wavered in his path when he heard wails of agony rising above the turmoil. He saw the last of the samurai being dragged through the streets toward the temple of Kōfuku-ji. Several priests followed the procession as they carried the severed heads of the executed Taira.

For a speck in time, Shindara’s mind was void of all emotions except one. Betrayal. He felt sickness in his stomach as he considered how their heads would be displayed around the temple grounds.

Hastened on by that thought, he fled toward Tōdai-ji with the monk by his side. The temple was located past the Great Southern Gate, a colossal wooden structure overlooking the courtyard.

The temple complex was an enclosure of pagodas, storehouses, ornate halls, and colonnades. Shindara spent more time in the imperial treasure house than any other building in the complex. On any given day, he would have been archiving the contents of the repository and recording artifacts dedicated to the Great Buddha.

Perhaps he spent too much time consumed in his private study of the Hell Scrolls. If he bothered to visit the lecture halls, he might have learned more about the politics and schemes that led to this catastrophic day.

The thousands of monks who lived at Tōdai-ji would be on high alert and seeking counsel over the arrival of Japan’s most powerful clan.

“Why have they come for us?”

Kobo fingered the wooden prayer beads around his neck as they approached the southern gate. Despite his priestly robes and cowl, a tachi sword similar to Shindara’s hung from his waist.

“The temples sent monks to the Battle of Uji. We hoped to bolster the Minamoto clan’s claim to the throne, but they didn’t return. Instead, a messenger of the Taira arrived with offerings of peace.”

“What happened to him?”

“The High Priest had him shaved, stripped, and sent back to the enemy.”

Shindara scoffed.

“This time they send unarmed samurai and we cut them down to the last man. How will the Taira clan respond to this massacre? How many times can we humiliate and kill their messengers before they take more aggressive action?”

“You forget your place, Shindara. Tonight our decisions will hinge on the will of the Great Buddha. No one is asking for the counsel of a common scribe.”

Shindara knew better than to question authority, but the time for neutrality had passed. Nara stood on the dangerous precipice of war from which there was no return.

Kobo sighed loudly, sensing the storm stirring in Shindara.

“The Taira have used their prestige to sow chaos in the capital. They’ve plundered the lands, imprisoned public officials, and tarnished the spirit of the empire. Their clan rivalry has weakened the ruling family. Lord Taira no Kiyomori forced the Emperor to abdicate and put an infant child on the throne. Nothing will satisfy their greed until all of Japan falls under their influence. Do you understand now why we’re taking a stand against them?”

Shindara begrudgingly nodded.

“Who will rule over Japan instead if you had your way?”

“The third son of the Minamoto clan.”

“Minamoto Yoritomo? He was banished for his role in the Heiji Rebellion. You expect him to return from exile?”

“I don’t know. By the time word reaches him, we may be overrun by the enemy.”

Shindara shook his head in disbelief. He wasn’t concerned with his own safety so much as he thought of his wife, Aya. She had been the love of his life for as long as he could remember. He felt desperate to return home and hear her voice. She had been complaining of piercing aches in her side for several days now. They knew the moment of their firstborn child’s arrival was almost upon them. Now Shindara’s excitement was dampened by visions of citywide destruction and reprisal.

“I can’t stay here,” he said. “I need to be with my wife.”

“Shindara! Where are you going?!” Kobo grabbed him by the shoulders as he pivoted away. “You are needed at the temple. We stand on the brink of war and you think you can turn your back on us?!”

“Then what of my wife? You would have me abandon her before the city falls? What do you expect me to do when the samurai come to annihilate us?”

“You will be at my side to defend the temple.”

“My wife is expecting a child and she needs me!”

Kobo’s expression turned dour and his eyes glazed over.

“Your attachment to her is weakness. She will only bring you suffering.”

Shindara was at a loss for words. What could Kobo possibly hope to understand of his heart? The monk believed in discarding anything that connected him to earth and resulted in pain. For a man who was intent on dying

sanctimoniously for a cause, it struck Shindara as pathetic—to flee from love and family because it might cause future pain. His hands shook and balled into fists.

“In other words, you *are* telling me to abandon her.” Before Shindara could control himself, he turned to the priest with wide eyes. “Bring her to me, Kobo. Or you will have one less man standing by your side when you die.”

Shindara was jerked from his sleep to the sound of the great temple bell. He spun to his left to reach out for Aya but he was alone in his chamber. His wife hadn't arrived at the temple yet, despite the numerous inquiries he made with the monks.

Screams were pouring in from outside his sleeping quarters. The Taira wasted no time responding to the brutal massacre of their messengers. Shindara gripped his sword and emerged into the courtyard. Chaos greeted him as hundreds of monks streamed toward the Great Southern Gate to meet the advance of the enemy invaders.

Their monastic garb was replaced by simple armor and they clenched naginatas with exquisitely curved blades.

The gently sloping roof of the western pagoda was limned in flames that singed and crawled with primal hunger. Heavily armed cavalry thundered outside the walls of Tōdai-ji as the Taira swept through the streets, trampling and impaling anyone in their path.

Shindara couldn't comprehend how the samurai reached the city as quickly as they did. He ran through the temple compound, calling out for Aya. His love had to be somewhere among the refugees seeking shelter. Damn Priest Kobo for not bringing her soon enough. If they outlasted the siege, he vowed to kill the monk himself.

"Aya!" he screamed. Arrows arched over the walls and the monks before Shindara writhed and crumpled to the ground. He tumbled down the stairs as a second and third volley followed, blanketing the steps outside Nigatsu-Hall. Shindara flinched as an arrow seared through his skin and

came close to grazing bone.

He ignored the pain and scrambled to his feet, desperate to head off the samurai at the southern gate. He halted when he saw the assembly at the “Nandai-mon” entrance. Monk archers were huddled behind wooden shields and countering the Taira with their own ranged attacks.

Others furiously tried to quench the flames consuming the pagoda, but their efforts were futile. Shindara’s eyes widened as mounted samurai hacked through the wooden palisades erected outside the gates. They pierced the temple defenses and charged the monks on horseback, tearing through flesh and splitting their skulls. Their blades gleamed in the firelight before they were oiled in blood. The monks flailed with their polearms and speared the horses, but the Taira’s tactics were far more brutal in comparison.

The silhouettes of armored samurai soon blotted out the diminishing number of priests as flames feasted on the pagoda.

Shindara twisted to his left as an arrow flung past him. He quickly doubled back toward the center of the complex. The priests would have brought any refugees to the Imperial Storehouse or the Great Buddha Hall. The storehouse was arguably the most secure structure in the compound, but the temple would have allowed safe passage beyond the city.

Shindara knew of a secret tunnel inside Buddha’s Hall that delved underground and led to the surrounding forests. It was the only foreseeable way he could usher his wife to safety.

The temple inferno was all-encompassing, reaching higher and choking the air with smog. Flames rippled across the storehouses and crept from one tiled roof to the next.

Shindara was goaded on by the never-ending screams of the monk-soldiers. He could hear the blades ripping and

cleaving through their rudimentary armor before they were crushed under hooves.

If the Taira had advanced this far, the temple of Kōfuku-ji was already overrun. Tōdai-ji was to be the city's last stand before they were completely swarmed by the bloodthirsty clan.

He ducked against the lecture hall as a mob of footmen emerged from the West, chasing down servants and scribes. Shindara peered around the corner to see the Taira hacking at their corpses.

Shindara darted past and kept close to the shadows. As soon as the Great Buddha Hall was within sight, he screamed his wife's name again.

“Aya!”

Amid the downpour of embers, he was rewarded with a sight that put the worst of his fears at ease. He saw a gently shaped and beautiful face with dark hair that trailed down her back. Horrified by the bloodshed, Aya scanned the courtyard before she spotted Shindara.

All of the tension in Shindara's chest unraveled when he met her eyes. It felt like he could breathe again for the first time in ages. At last, he knew that Aya and his child were safe.

Before he could take her in his arms, a sound like hissing serpents filled the air. Aya immediately jerked to a stop and looked helplessly at Shindara. An arrow protruded from her chest where there had been none moments ago.

Shindara screamed as she collapsed to her knees and spilled sideways. He rushed to her side, unconcerned with the samurai surrounding the temple. His shaking hands cradled her stomach to say hello to his unborn child. Unfortunately, his touch was just as much a “good-bye” because he or she would never have a chance to enter this

world now.

There were no words to describe his mourning so he screamed instead.

He couldn't hold back his tears as he dragged Aya closer.

“No, no... Aya! Not like this! Please don't leave me!”

When he lifted his face out of her perfumed hair, he was startled by the expression in Aya's eyes. Mingled with her pain and sorrow was a sense of acceptance, bordering on anticipation. He could feel her reaching out to him and yet withdrawing at the same time. Aya's hand trembled as it slipped through his.

“Take me home, Shindara.”

He kissed her fingers as tears spilled down his face.

“Yes. Just stay with me a bit longer. I'll take you anywhere you want to go. Just don't let this be the end. Not like this.”

He tried to ignore the dampness of the blood spreading through her clothes. He could hardly breathe. He never even had a chance to love and cherish his future family with her. Before this night, he was excited to see the baby they made together.

It couldn't be possible to lose Aya. A soul as vibrant as hers shouldn't be plucked from this world and sent hurtling into the afterlife.

There were so many things Shindara wanted to say to her. She had always been by his side, a soothing presence that reminded him that the days weren't as bleak as he feared, that there was always hope and light when the night lifted. When everything around him seemed uncertain, he could always count on her.

There were too many experiences in life that he wanted to share with Aya. She was only days away from becoming a

mother and giving him the gift of a daughter or a son. How was this supposed to be the will of the universe or any god?

Shindara couldn't hear the sounds of war around him as he focused solely on Aya.

Her breathing became more shallow and Shindara pressed his forehead against hers.

"Aya, don't go. You always said you would wait for me on the other side. Is it true? Will you be there? Will you be waiting?"

His voice cracked.

"Aya! Please don't leave me!"

He felt her hand brush against his face and he almost fell apart. He didn't want this to be the last time he felt her fingers running through his hair or stroking his cheek. The warmth of her body pressed into his embrace.

"I love you," Shindara choked between tears. "This isn't the end of us. I will see you and our child, somehow, some way. Nothing will keep me apart from you. Aya..."

Her eyes had already closed. He kissed her cheek and buried his face against hers. Shindara didn't know if she heard his parting words or not. The notion that she left without understanding how much he cherished her made him weep harder.

His tears pelted her garb as he gasped for air.

He gazed at her face and the hint of relief imposed on her features. He hoped his presence eased her passing from this world. As intensely as the love he felt for her, the grief that followed consumed him entirely. How quickly love fell into pain and desperation. If he ever felt sane before, he never would again.

Shindara heard the clamor of armor behind him. There was a weakness in his knees as he struggled to his feet. He tore the sword from his sash.