



DOMINANCE

The bird flew across the darkening sky, silhouetted against the moon, already fat and full and hung low. Looking down on the twinkling lights of the houses below, as it crosses the narrow mountain valley. It swoops down, alighting on the slender white branch of a tree half way up the mountain, soft powdery snow falls to the forest floor on its arrival. It sits preening its full breast readying itself for a nightly song whilst watching as the last of the curious people below scurry back from their fields.

Night comes on fast in the hamlets, at the base of the mountains, faster than ever before. Farmers can be seen rushing home trying to beat dusk. Their days have been spent trying their hardest at tilling the land during this, the cycle of the Stubborn Earth, the frozen ground rebuffing any attempt to work it. Hating to lose any available light but torn by the desire to be in before night's shroud covers the paths and walkways home. The usual pleasantries shared between such close neighbours as they trudge back from an honest day's work have been forgone in recent cycles, as each man no longer had the courage to look the next in the eye. One such man was harder to acknowledge than others; Goji, a humble man, who would never have been described as brave, if truth be known Goji would never have really needed to be described at all. Through the years he had toiled hard but no harder than anyone else in their attempts to provide what they could for their families.

When the first of the livestock had begun to go missing people blamed many different things, most blamed wolves venturing down from the hills, some claiming to have heard them at night. When too many were taken to attribute to wolves, Goji had been one of those that had advocated banding together to confront whatever was menacing them. Not enough people agreed and they

watched frustrated and scared as the number of goats in their flocks dwindled. Whispers sprang up amidst the villagers of the old tales. Men too far into their cups invoked the name of the Nian, although where before they would be confidently laughed down by their companions for such outrageous assertions they were now only met with disapproving shakes of the head. Fear had swept across the populace, berries used to stain clothes red had begun to command a premium price in the market. People began to question the rule of the Takashi family and some even confided to their loved ones that things had been better under the Shiho.

And then it happened, the night when Goji had burst into the small inn that had doubled up as the local yoriki's office. The mood had been dark



before he had arrived but now as the inhabitants took in the man before them any remaining happiness had fled the scene, out into the cold embrace of night. His arms had trembled and then given up, dropping the body of his broken and mutilated child to the floor. Without a word he had stood and looked across the room, each man there felt himself being weighed, measured and found wanting, he had turned slowly and walked away, head down, a broken man. In the cycles since, no one had been able to find the words to broach the subject with Goji nor had the opportunity if they could. He had continued to tend the fields but he was a shadow of his former self, his shoulders grew stooped and where others rushed to get home, he simply ambled along lost to his thoughts.

Tilting his head to the side the bird watched the slow moving Goji tonight. As if inspired the bird began to sing releasing a mournful tune out into the night. As the bird waited for a response from the surrounding trees, none came. It hopped on its branch turning away from the lonely figure to the forest, finding itself face to face with a bat that dwarfed it. Heart fluttering it turned again, away from the bat to the relative safety of the sky. Its heart stopped instantaneously as the claw of Tra-Peng plucked it out of the sky with the ease a farmer on the valley floor below may pull an apple from the tree. Tra-Peng grinned wickedly to his companion, and then flung the lifeless body into the air, it launched itself rapidly and for the second time that night the bird cruelly had its flight halted. Nodding, satisfied, it was important to take any opportunity to reassert himself as the leader of their little pack, he now watched the paths below. Uninterested in the meaningless trials and tribulations of the people, tonight he had a different prey.

It prowled through the undergrowth, a powerful beast, bulging neck supporting its head scanning the dark from side to side. The hind legs looked small and made its gait look slightly off balance. It was approaching its target for tonight, the smell of goat carried on the wind and got its maw frothing with spittle, dripping between its razor sharp teeth. It readied itself and then burst out, surging across the gap, strong muscular forelegs eating up the ground before it bowled into the goat, dead before they had even stopped rolling.

Tra-Peng smiled again, the bigger they are the easier they are to trap, he thought. Watching on as the beast devoured the goat, oblivious to the horde of Bakemono and the Oni emerging into the clearing. The beast looked up now, one large

central eye taking in the newcomers, coming to rest on the Oni. The living, breathing, mass of deep crimson gave it a moment's pause before its guttural growl rumbled deep through the night air, Tra-Peng felt a sense of pride as his brethren held their ranks. Then the clearing erupted into action as Oni and beast launched themselves at one another. The world seemed to shudder as the two colossal beings collided, jaws snapping and ripping flesh, whilst crunching blows rained down to head and body. They continued to roll on the ground trading what would be grievous wounds in any other clash, muscles stretched and taut as each tried to gain advantage, the ferocity of both undiminished. The Oni had been prepared by Tra-Peng though, he allowed the beast to get its jaws round his forearm, roaring with the delight of combat with a worthy opponent and the pain of nearly having his arm ripped off. Then he pulled his other arm back and punched straight and true at that big yellow eye. The result drew a small chuckle from Tra-Peng as the beast yelped and fell to the floor. There it rolled onto its back showing its belly and the Oni's ascendancy to domination over it. The Oni patted its underside roughly and began to tie a huge metal linked chain around its neck. Tra-Peng's delight at another successful hunt changed instantaneously as he watched the Oni push one of his fellow Bakemono across the clearing bellowing at it to run. The Bakemono stood unsure what to do as the rest of his companions skittered and laughed at his predicament, no doubt relieved it wasn't them. Tra-Peng sat stone still as the Oni un-wrapped coil after coil of the chain from his arm. Finally the Bakemono ran, away towards the forest edge.

Tra-Peng turned away, his blood running through his veins as cold as ice, he looked towards his own companion, the irony was not lost on him. He already knew what the council of elders would say about his report.

