

STARFISH

by Steve Parker

Petr bowed once to the ugly little man on the screen and hung up, glad to wipe that disgusting face from his sight. Even on the tiny display, the man's facial melanomas had turned Petr's stomach—nubs of dark flesh like erect nipples. Petr wondered what it would be like to cut them off. He looked over at Katya fixing her hair in the mirror. Her reflection ignored him. On the other side of the room, the strange undulating infant in the fish tank continued its incessant, muted wailing.

"That was Takeda-san," said Petr. "He wants to put the handover back an extra hour tonight."

Katya stopped preening, and leaned forward against the old dresser. Her head sank to her chest.

"Call it off, Petr, for God's sake. These men are *mafia*. *Yakuza*. Do you think they'll let you walk away with all that money? Let's leave that thing outside a police station. Please, Petr. In another two years we'll have enough anyway."

She sounded so tired, her voice weak and scratchy with all the recent tension.

It's your job that's eating you, Katya, thought Petr. *You won't last another two years.*

It was his fault, of course, and he knew it. It had been *his* idea to come to Japan. Just like it had been *his* idea that she work as a 'hostess'. She'd been selling her body and her pride away piece by piece for the last two years, all for Petr's big dream. After all that time in the seedy underbelly of Tokyo, Petr still couldn't switch off his guilt entirely, but he was getting pretty good at ignoring it.

"You should've brought someone in to back you up," said Katya.

"And split the money? No!"

If not with Yvgeny, not with anyone.

Gazing down at the dust and crumbs on the floor by his feet, Petr dismissed her fears. Nothing could be allowed to get in the way. This was the big one, their big ticket to California. Yvgeny had always talked about living there.

Katya nodded her head toward the fish tank in the far corner. When she spoke, he could hear the desperation, the fear in her. Some of the words snagged in her throat, like she was fighting back tears. Again, Petr worried over the speed with which life here had eroded her.

"I want that monster gone, Petr! I can't stand its crying anymore, and I can't stand its eyes." Her tears broke and spilled over her cheeks. She'd have to do her make-up all over again. "It never closes its fucking eyes! I can't live like this anymore."

"It wasn't me who took the cloth off it," said Petr.

"I wanted you to *see* it, Petr. What we're doing is wrong."

"No! *You're* wrong!" he snapped. "This is the best chance we've ever had to get the money we need and I *won't* miss it."

She pressed her hands to her face; glossy red fingernails on skin as white as porcelain. Her shoulders shook with sobs under her ash-blonde hair.

Not again, Katya. They'd been fighting so much recently--even before the arrival of Petr's little prisoner. "Be strong," he said as he rose from the bed. "One more night, just one more." He moved behind her and kissed her bare shoulder softly. Then he folded his arms around her tiny waist and drew her to him, taking in the scent of her hair. In their stuffy little room, her cheap perfume smelled like wilting flowers.

Petr pressed his cheek to hers. He kissed her ear, but she flinched and twisted away from his embrace. He moved with her, craning his head forward, eyes half-closed, pressing his lips against her. She flew into a panic then and thrashed her way free of him.

"Not before work, Petr!" she snapped.

Embarrassed and angry, he pulled away from her. Then he looked down at the fish tank, sitting on the dusty floor.

His bizarre little captive stared up at him through the clear plastic walls of its prison. Great lidless brown eyes seemed to plead with him, begging him for mercy. For a moment, Petr almost felt ashamed. Almost. Dispassion came so easily these days. It was better to think instead of the life they'd lead when this was over. California awaited them.

I'm the one taking all the risks tonight, Katya! Don't forget that. And I've made sacrifices too. I was the one...

And then shame did come on him, heavy and exhausting—the shame of what he'd done to his cousin, how he'd tricked him. "Yvgeny," he whispered and leaned against the wall. *I'm tired too, Katya*, he thought. *Do you think I want us to live like this?*

He felt a hand on his shoulder.

She came to him, wrapping her slender arms around his neck, and told him it would be all right and how sorry she was about poor, dear Yvgeny. Something had to be made of his cousin's sacrifice. Some good had to come from his death. Katya said she understood that.

"I'm sorry, Petr. Sorry I snapped at you. I know you're doing this for us. But you know I can't be touched before work. Never before work, Petr. You know that."

He said nothing for a while, choosing to turn his eyes back to the tank. Inside, the little monster still gazed up at him, calling out to him in its pathetic way.

Tell her, Petr, he thought to himself. *Tell her you lied about Yvgeny. Tell her it wasn't the Fish Police that killed him. He wasn't shot. Tell her how you broke his head open when his back was turned. And how you buried his body in a back-alley under a ton of stinking trash bags. Tell her that!*

But he would never tell her. For all his promises, Petr needed Katya much more than she needed him. Sometimes, her faith alone kept his dream alive. Besides, it was she who made the real money. If the *Fish-baby* deal fell through, Katya would be paying both their airfares out of there. And that shamed him too.

He almost kicked out at the fish-tank, but, looking down at the wailing creature, his rage bled out of him as quickly as it had risen. He could never really be angry with his puffy little prisoner.

Fish-baby was his big ticket out.

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“I’ll meet you outside the club at three. It’ll all be over by then,” said Petr.

Katya nodded, but he saw the doubt in her eyes. He’d be late again, if he arrived at all. And if one of her clients made her an offer, which they always did, she wouldn’t be able to turn it down. The club was owned by yakuza. There was a lot of pressure on the girls to please high-profile clients. Petr knew how much Katya hated going with them, checking into backstreet hotels, doing all those degrading and sometimes painful things he had never asked her to do. On the rare occasions when he *had* been there to pick her up from the club, she’d been so grateful, so glad. He’d watched her bow to her waiting clients and apologize, promising to go with them next time. Walking home together, he’d seen tears of relief shining in the corners of her eyes.

I won’t be late tonight, Katya. And after tonight, you won’t have to do those things again. I promise.

On any other night, he’d have walked Katya to work, but not this time. There were preparations to be made before the handover. She left for her shift at *High-Class Gentleman’s Club Sakura* two full hours before Petr poked his head through their bedroom door and into the hallway of the guest house. The place was silent. All of the residents—every last one a ‘visa overstay’ like he and Katya—had rushed off to their bar or touting jobs on the main strip.

Petr hefted a great black case out into the hallway and struggled down the stairs with it. In the kitchen, someone had left the dilapidated television on with the sound muted. As Petr moved past it, he wasn’t surprised to see a report on the hunt for the missing Sylurian babies. He stopped and turned up the volume.

A Pacific Union spokesman told reporters that three Sylurian infants had strayed from the safety of the undersea nurseries and had been picked up in the North Pacific by illegal Russian trawlers. The Office for Interspecies Relations had tracked the mafiya boats from the region of the disappearances, some 300 miles west-southwest of the Aleutian Islands, to the

Japanese ports of Yokohama and Kobe. The Japanese government had grudgingly given permission for Union agents to pursue the case inside Japanese borders.

Petr felt a thrill of fear. His own little prisoner had come in through Yokohama. Were the Fish Police watching him even now? They had probably interrogated the crew of Yvgeny's boat. Had they already found his body in the alley?

As Petr watched, the report cut to a press conference in Washington D.C. A somber-looking U.S. Secretary for Interspecies Integration stood beside a fat, clumsy-looking figure in a big white spacesuit. It wasn't really a spacesuit, Petr knew, but it sure looked like one. The media had dubbed them 'drysuits'. Sylurians, being water-breathers, needed the suits to function on land. They weren't really fat beings, either. Not beyond infancy, anyway. The water cycling through the suit just made them look that way. Through the bubble of the helmet, Petr saw familiar lidless brown eyes—eyes without whites. They seemed to stare right out of the TV and into Petr's own.

The Secretary officially offered support and sympathy to his 'far-traveled friends of the New Pacific Colonies', and once again urged people across the globe to adhere to the fishing bans. He reiterated the Sylurians' policy of non-negotiation with kidnappers. Then, turning to the drysuited alien ambassador on his left, the Secretary promised that the agents of the Office of Interspecies Relations would see justice done.

The broadcast segued to a petite Japanese anchorwoman in a Tokyo studio. Petr caught the Japanese for 'offer their sincere gratitude to anyone with information' before the show moved on to another story. Cursing at the TV, he hefted the case through the front door of the guesthouse and stepped out into the cloying humidity of a Tokyo summer night. A moment later, he burst back into the kitchen, grabbed the biggest knife he could find, stuffed it down the back of his jeans and departed.

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The sky overhead was murky and starless. A light drizzle began to fall, slicking and dampening Petr's tatty old bomber-jacket. He found the cool moisture refreshing. It made struggling with the case a little easier to bear. Taxis were hard to come by on the narrow backstreets around the guesthouse.

The sidewalks were quiet, the rain having discouraged casual strollers, but, even from ten blocks away, the hum and bustle of the main strip was audible—an almost tidal white noise. Petr hurried past seedy clubs with blackened windows that nestled among a slew of niche shops: antique books, art, overpriced import furniture—ego masturbation for the privileged. He passed restaurants where miserable men sat on wooden benches, shoveling mouthfuls of grilled beef into their jaws. The cooked meat smelled wonderful to Petr, but the men ate as if every fishless bite were some kind of punishment for being Japanese.

Petr checked a couple of times to see if he was being followed, but, out on the rain-slick streets, he neither saw nor heard anything unusual.

Twice the ubiquitous Chinese girls—passports confiscated by their covetous *mama-sans*—emerged from shadowy doorways to offer him a 'special massage'. Petr barely looked up as he passed them. The handle of the heavy case dug into his fingers, and the sloshing of its contents made it difficult to carry. His slow, awkward gait irritated him. He felt out of breath and his heart was racing.

Then, with an explosion of light and sound, his surroundings changed. He emerged from the dank backstreets into the neon glare and bee-hive chaos of Roppongi Crossing—the swarming center of multicultural Tokyo nightlife.

Everywhere around him, groups of foreign men—most of them white—shoved and barged like pigs at a trough, trying to sniff out the hottest spots for meeting local women or the best places to enjoy the cream of the foreign crop. The crowds spilled over onto the road, slowing the traffic, and taxi-drivers honked their horns in frustration.

The hum rose to a crescendo here. Petr's senses were battered with a hundred different accents and languages and dialects. The bars and clubs, filled to bursting, vomited swaying, shouting patrons out onto the over-crowded street. Petr held the case tightly, gritted his teeth and elbowed his way through.

The bar touts—mostly Russian, Eastern European and South American on that part of the strip—added their own bad English to the cacophony. They called out over the noise, trying to tempt well-paid ex-pats into their rat-trap clubs and bars with promises of beautiful naked girls and more if the price was right.

Petr was remorselessly rammed from the path of some English rugby players, charging their way to the 'all-nude cabaret' at *Show-Pub Heaven-Sent*. He swore at them in

Russian as the sea of bodies closed around him again. At least they weren't heading in the direction of Katya's club.

Club Sakura didn't admit foreign men.

Petr couldn't decide how he felt about that.

Once he'd broken free of the tumult at the crossing, he made his way east along *Roppongi-dori*. He lugged the case past a string of clubs guarded lazily by tall, grim African men with skin the color of burned toast. The clubs belched deafening beats out over the booze-lubed, sexually-charged masses. The sonic assault made him wince.

This was the most dangerous part of the strip—controlled by the Nigerians and, to a lesser extent, the Iranians, who moved a lot of drugs for the yakuza. Petr prayed that no one would stop him. Eager to disguise the weight of the case, he tried for nonchalance as he passed a pair of short, bespectacled Japanese policemen. But the cops swerved toward a group of leggy Filipino girls, and either didn't notice him or just didn't care. That suited Petr fine.

A few yards past *Hop-Up Club* and *Mos-Burger* he turned left into what the dealers called *Fish Can Alley*.

It was busy that night. Jholt, the Hungarian, was hawking old tins of Russian and Norwegian tuna. Enrique, the Colombian—a fixture in the alley for over three years—sold sardines, trout, cod and occasionally rare salmon smuggled over from Scotland and Canada. The other dealers were transient talent—an ever-changing roster of foreign swindlers and fast-buck-merchants with smuggled fish to sell and the costly approval of the local crime boss. Around them, as always, were groups of nervous and excited Japanese businessmen.

A haze of sweat, piss, fish and *saké* permeated the very stone of the street. Unpleasant though it was, in Petr's mind the stink had become synonymous with money. On a busy night, the alley saw more action than the Tokyo Stock Exchange.

Shogo, the alley's minder, nodded at Petr and eyed the case. He was *chimpiira*—a teenage yakuza street punk with a penchant for stabbings. His boss had outfitted him in a sharp suit that disguised neither his youth nor his utter lack of brains. Shogo was in charge of the alley and he made sure everyone knew it. He hated the foreign workers he shepherded—he had said so many times—but his boss wanted the alley run tightly and Shogo was a proud kid, eager to please his *oyabun*.

As Petr moved past Shogo and up to the far end of the alley, the scowling gangster flipped open his phone like it was a butterfly-knife and made a call. Petr turned the far corner, out of sight of the others, and pressed his back against cool, damp stone. He breathed deeply. From here, the jabbering of the salarymen was muted. He lowered the case to the pavement, praying Fish-baby was still alive in there. Then he sank down beside it, adjusted the big kitchen-knife in his waistband, and tried to relax.

It wasn't easy. His mind was wired; it wanted to run. It leapt from thought to thought, and Petr couldn't rein it in. Yvgeny's face—twisted, hurt, and so full of surprise. Other faces, too. Petr's father and uncles—all ex-fishermen—slowly killing themselves, wrecking their families with vodka after the global fishing bans had destroyed their livelihoods.

Who had voted for that? Who had signed over the seas? No one had asked Petr. He didn't remember a vote being taken. How could the fish-people ask so much? Buying off governments with new technology. Pressing for the bans. Demanding the return of their snagged or stolen babies, but never willing to pay up, never offering any reward. Petr wished there *were* a reward; he'd rather be a well-paid hero than just another low-life cashing in on a food-culture that had gone underground. Then again, if all you ate was fish.... What was the English phrase? Don't put your eggs in a basket? How many babies did Sylurians have anyway? Maybe they spawned thousands at a time, like native Earth fish.

It could be millions, thought Petr. *Maybe they'll outnumber us one day*. He remembered footage of the glowing submarine cities the aliens had built on the continental shelves—all those weird, bioluminescent domes of living tissue and jelly and God-knew-what-else. The aliens had played the U.S. government like a fiddle. All that medical and environmental tech. Cures for cancer. Cures for AIDS and HIV. Who could refuse? The fish-people wanted ocean territories? Sure. No problem. A global cessation of fishing? All it took was the right kind of economic pressure from a certain friendly superpower. What was the Pacific Union, anyway, but another name for U.S. supremacy over Asia?

None of that stopped Petr from wanting to live there, of course. It actually added to the allure of the place. He'd live in California with his beautiful Katya. Sure, she was hurting now, but it would all be worth it when they got there. She'd see that.

He fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette, hoping a smoke might take the edge off his nerves. He lit up and inhaled deeply. As he sat on the damp curb, nicotine ghosts curling through the air, he realized too late that he had let his guard down. A hulking shadow fell

across him from the right. He instinctively reached for the handle of the black case with one hand and the hilt of his kitchen-knife with the other, but there was little he could do from a sitting position. He looked up into the face of a tall muscular African. The man flashed Petr a wide grin—teeth as bright as tic-tacs under big yellowing eyes—and said:

"Whatchu got der den, ma frien'?"

An overpowering cloud of cheap aftershave and minty breath made Petr's eyes smart. *What's a Nigerian tout doing down here?* He tried to stand, but the African gently checked him with one massive hand. Petr was suddenly sure this man didn't work for any nightclub. Panic coursed through him like high voltage. "Shogo," he shouted. "Shogo!"

Before Petr could call out again there was a sound of ripping cloth. The African's eyes bulged until they looked ready to pop. His breath stuck in his throat, then came out in a bubbling, wheezing rush. He tottered on his feet, fell forward, and trapped Petr under his bulk. Panicking, Petr drew the kitchen-knife from his waistband and shoved the blade upwards into the man's abdomen. For a moment, just a moment, Petr caught a familiar look on the dying man's face. *Yvgeny. Why do the dying always look so surprised?*

The African slumped, his full weight pushing down on Petr. As Petr struggled to get out from underneath, the man's final croaking breath washed over his face, and hot blood spilled over his knees. It seeped into his clothes, sticking his black jeans to his legs. He heaved the body off and scrambled to his feet.

Shogo was smirking. It was the first smile Petr had seen on the street-punk's face. As Shogo bent to wipe his knife on the African's suit, Petr gaped at the profusion of stab-wounds that peppered the dead man's broad back.

He felt sick, and his whole body was shaking. All he wanted to do was lie down and go to sleep right there on the street. Maybe he'd wake up in a world where none of this was happening. He felt his life spinning wildly out of control, felt the terrible absence of order and direction. Even as he wished it all away, however, he bent and picked up the heavy black case. Shogo was rifling through the dead man's pockets, shoving anything of value into his own. When he found the man's badge, he proudly held it up to Petr's face:

Detective Dennis Aaron Culver, Interspecies Crimes Division, Organization for Interspecies Integration.

Fish Police!

The man was no Nigerian, though he had played it well enough to fool Petr.

He was American.

Shogo found the fish-cop's pistol. Grinning like the fool he was, he raised the barrel and pointed it at Petr's chest. For a sickening moment, Petr was sure the yakuza punk was going to kill him. He saw him wrestling with the temptation. After a couple of tense seconds, however, the youth just laughed at Petr's terrified expression and lowered the gun.

He was stuffing the barrel into the waistband of his trousers when a big black Mercedes screeched to a halt at the far end of the alley. Petr spun, ready to drop the case and run if it was more Fish Police, but Shogo shoved him toward the car and barked at him in Japanese.

It was Petr's ride.

He walked forward on shaky legs. Soon, he was in the backseat, case beside him, heading west toward Shibuya, leaving Roppongi's sleaze and bustle to the insatiable foreign hordes.

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In truth, Shibuya wasn't much different from Roppongi. Whereas Roppongi was the multicultural center of Tokyo, however, Shibuya catered mostly for native revelers, and was the center of business for most of Tokyo's yakuza gangs. From his seat in the Mercedes, Petr gazed out at teeming sidewalks, still wishing it was all over and he was back with Katya in their dirty little guesthouse bedroom, safe and sound and very rich. When the car finally stopped at the mouth of an alley, he felt like kicking himself. He hadn't been paying attention to his surroundings. He had no idea exactly where in Shibuya he was.

The driver—a short, fat *yak* who wore sunglasses despite the late hour—barked at him to get out. Petr lifted his case from the trunk and followed the driver wordlessly past bags of spilled trash to a locked steel door covered in graffiti. After knocking some kind of code on the door—a series of bangs and pauses—the dumpy gangster turned and made his way back toward his car, leaving Petr to stand alone in the shadows.

Petr heard bolts being drawn back, then the click of a lock being turned. Orange light spilled out into the alleyway, forcing him to squint. As his eyes adjusted, Petr found himself looking into the cold, hard stare of Naoya Ishii, the yakuza lieutenant directly under Petr's contact, Mr. Takeda.

Ishii looked down at the case and nodded, then stepped aside so Petr could enter. Once Petr was inside, the gangster closed and bolted the door, then herded Petr up a narrow flight of stairs. To Petr's surprise, he emerged into the reception area of a very elegant Japanese restaurant. The expensive, minimalist decor was utterly at odds with the trash-strewn alleyway entrance.

This wasn't a restaurant open to the public. There were no smiling staff members in prim little outfits, no service questionnaires. A familiar sour odour said this restaurant had but a single purpose—the illegal consumption of fish. Petr could imagine Tokyo's gangster bosses meeting there: eating, drinking, negotiating, maybe even committing the odd murder. He shuddered at that last one. Following Ishii's example, he took off his shoes and placed them on a wooden rack. More than a dozen other pairs, all of shiny patent leather, already sat there.

Petr lugged his case through the reception and into the restaurant proper. Excited conversation emanated from a large sunken table in the center of the dining room where a dozen Japanese men sat bunched together like complicit schoolboys. They swilled drinks and fanned themselves, their slurred rush of conversation punctuated by bursts of high-pitched laughter. Not one of them was under forty years old.

The table was superbly laid with appetizers. The air was filled with the salty smell of salmon and tuna. Judging by the group's demeanor, they'd already consumed copious amounts of beer and saké.

An attractive young Japanese woman, surely no more than eighteen years of age and attired in a striking kimono, shuffled from the kitchen doorway to serve more drinks. The men grabbed at her bottom as she poured, but she was so deft that they invariably missed. She compensated them with pretty smiles, flattery and jokes. Petr watched her for a moment, but his attention was drawn away when one of the suits suddenly spoke in English.

“Dawson-san, can you eating sushi?”

A big man strolled past Petr, coming from the bathrooms on the left, and took his place at the head of the table. He was over six feet tall; a blond, sun-tanned, blue-eyed American in a very expensive-looking suit.

“Kurita-san,” replied the big westerner, gesturing at the table, “you can see for yourself how much I love Japanese food.”

So saying, the big American took up his chopsticks and popped a tuna roll into his mouth. Petr spluttered in disbelief. Here was an American openly flouting the fish ban! It was the first time since the televised US-coastal fishing riots that he'd seen a North American contravene the terms of the Sylurian Agreement. Although he knew he was being hypocritical, Petr felt a sudden surge of disappointment.

But why should I be surprised? he asked himself. *A western businessman wants to make an impression with high-profile Japanese clients. What better method to grease your way into a lucrative contract than with the oil of smuggled fish? No ordinary piece of fish, mind you. That wouldn't do it. But something truly rare—a genuine, live Sylurian baby?*

Whatever it was that the American wanted, the contracts were as good as signed.

A motion at the corner of his eye caught Petr's attention. Ishii was beckoning him toward the kitchen. Petr turned away from the crowded table, lifted his case, and dutifully hefted it through the doorway.

It's almost over, he thought. *Not long now. You're going to make me rich, Fish-baby.*

But the words had started to sound hollow now. Petr began to wonder how he'd escape if it all went wrong. In truth, it was *far* from over. The yakuza never played anything straight. He knew that much.

As he left the dining room, high peals of laughter rose from around the table. Apparently, the American was hilarious.

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Petr stepped into the kitchen to find Ishii talking excitedly with a tall, fat Japanese in a chef's apron. The men exchanged words so quickly that Petr could catch only the most common and least communicative of phrases. Then the chef, ignoring Petr completely, indicated to Ishii that he would like to see the merchandise.

Petr placed the black case down on the table and, with a wary glance at Ishii, began entering the digital lock code. When the case snapped open, he found himself unable to stifle a proud grin. There was a gasp from the gangster and murmurs of genuine appreciation from the chef.

There, lying cramped and sad in the fish-tank within the case, was Petr's little brown-eyed monster. Soft cries filled the kitchen. The gangster and the chef leaned over the tank,

poking and prodding the alien's fleshy back where it broke the surface of the water. Ishii jabbed the little creature particularly hard, prompting a yowl that was uncomfortably human to Petr's ears.

"Hey!" snapped Petr. "Go easy there."

"What do you care, Russian?" said the fat chef in Japanese. "You're selling it to us."

"It's yours when I get paid."

"You get paid when we get paid," said Ishii, using English. "You don't expect our clients to pay for their meal *before* they eat it, do you?"

"Fine," Petr muttered, "but show a little heart, for god's sake."

They laughed at him, their eyes full of mockery, and Petr wanted to smash their faces. Instead, he turned and marched out of the kitchen, red-faced and keen to avoid anything else that might enflame his guilt. Unheeded by the boisterous businessmen, he crossed to a shadowy corner of the dining room and sat at a small table there.

He wished the yaks would pay him in advance, but, deep down, he knew he'd be lucky if they paid at all.

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Petr was glad to be out of the kitchen. He could hear Fish-baby crying, even over the laughter of the excited diners. He wasn't sure what the chef's preparations would entail, but he knew he didn't want to see them.

He felt a strange kind of comfort in the presence of the American, as if, by their status as foreigners, they shared a bond. Perhaps, in the presence of the American, Ishii would be less inclined to cheat him. *Ha!* Now he was being weak and naïve. What would the American care? He was behind the whole damned feast. And the salarymen? They'd care even less. To them, Petr was a foreign leech, a mosquito, there to suck money from Japan and then leave it to rot. They'd step over his corpse on the way out and not bat an eyelid.

They were chattering much louder now, eagerly anticipating a very special main course. The blond American laughed and joked with them in fluent Japanese. Then, during the briefest lull in the laughter, Ishii clapped his hands and asked for their patient attention.

The gangster's speech was typically nationalistic and thankfully short. Petr had heard the same tireless bluster countless times from the notorious black buses of Japan's right-wing

groups. Their convoys crawled down the streets, deafening people with songs of national pride and tirades against the Sylurians and the Pacific Union. Ask a gangster like Ishii in private and they'd tell a very different story; the coming of the *water-breathers* and the global ban on all killing and consumption of fish—a terrible religious and cultural affront to the gentle piscine aliens—had given the world's gangsters a vast new source of income to rival that of the sex trade. But that wasn't a speech for this audience.

Petr wasn't mentioned once, of course—not that he had expected any thanks. These people didn't care that Yvgeny's trawler had netted the thing; that Yvgeny had risked his life smuggling the alien into Japan; or that Petr, consumed by his greed, had....

Why did you trust me, Yvgeny? Why did you turn your back to me?

Petr felt the blood rush to his face as they applauded Dawson—the clownish American—for financing and arranging the evening's epicurean adventure. The speech made it sound more like epicurean revenge.

He watched with a sinking sensation in his gut as the chef appeared in the doorway carrying a great wooden platter. Petr knew just how heavy it was. Its center of gravity shifted with the baby's motions so that carrying it became a balancing act.

Every pair of eyes in the room was glued to that platter. All except Petr's. His eyes were on the American. The big man's laughter had stopped. Suddenly, that shining smile looked painted on. Those blue eyes, so bright only a moment earlier, looked a little dead now. Maybe the big man's guilt had only just hit him. Or maybe Petr just needed someone else to share the blame.

Why should I care that some stupid American is pandering to these bastards? thought Petr. But the strange weight in his belly said he did care.

He remembered all the excitement when the Sylurians had made first contact. He'd been a kid back then. The TV coverage had been relentless, even in Russia. He remembered the U.S. President's statement after the first official meeting, all those promises of 'leading the way in inter-planetary relations.' What had happened to 'making a better world with our partners from across the gulf of space'? All that talk of co-operation and co-development. Then there were the cultural concessions and the friendship initiatives.

A lot of it was rhetoric. A lot of it was bullshit. But even while Petr tried to look down his nose at Dawson, he couldn't fool himself. Fifteen years ago, he'd believed in all of it.

Contact had seemed like the most exciting thing in the world. One of mankind's most enduring fantasies had become reality. Humankind was not alone.

But, in the years since, it hadn't done much for him or his family. All the Russians he knew were still poor, still struggling. *And now, look at me*, he thought. *Look at what I'm doing*.

He had always thought of himself as a good guy in a bad world, just doing what he had to in order to succeed. Somewhere along the way, though, he'd gotten lost, gotten desperate. In his scramble for something better, he'd torn Katya from her mother's arms and brought her to Japan, to this life that was no kind of life.

Is that what dreams do to you?

Familiar cries cut into Petr's thoughts. He looked across at Fish-baby in the center of the table. It was flapping its chubby little fin-arms and fin-legs. Around it, the eager diners leaned forward.

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Petr had little choice but to wait for the end of the meal. He tried to turn from the scene at the table but found his gaze fixed to it by a potent mixture of guilt, masochism and grim fascination.

The salarymen seemed unaffected by the infant Sylurian's similarities to a human baby. Its skin was a mottled grey-brown, and it looked fuller in the belly and face, but the proportions were roughly the same. Its arms and legs appeared almost human, save that each limb was lined by a fringe of flesh which rippled and waved in the manner of Earth's skates and rays. Five deep gills lined either side of the infant's torso, beginning at the armpit and ending at the waist, and the soft, salty, pink meat underneath winked in and out of eyesight with the creature's labored breathing. Fish-baby was slowly suffocating in the open air.

Despite sitting so far from the table, Petr could see the creature's brown eyes shining wetly, radiating all its fear and confusion. It lay straining against the long pins the chef had used to nail its limbs in place. The way the creature was restrained made the meat under the gills that much easier to reach.

The salarymen leaned in, obviously fascinated by their first close encounter. Petr heard them wonder aloud if the stories were true: was Sylurian meat the best raw fish in the world? They picked up their chopsticks.

Fish-baby's blood ebbed slowly from its pinned wrists and ankles—dark gray, star-flecked and thick like a rich sauce. A single thin, prehensile tentacle writhed weakly between its legs. This was creature's immature male sex organ. One of the salarymen arrested the tentacle between his chopsticks and offered it, still coiling and twisting, to a companion.

Amused titters ran round the table.

Petr looked from face to face. Each wore the same joyful expression—narrow eyes creased with delight, mouths twitching with anticipation. He felt sickening recognition. He'd seen such faces a thousand times before, and now the memories came swimming up from the depths of his conscience to jeer at him and taunt him.

These were faces shining with cruel and selfish glee, the faces of men who haunted the brothels, hostess-clubs and strip-joints in every major district of Tokyo. They weren't just Japanese faces. He'd seen the same leering look on the ravenous foreign men that descended on Roppongi every night, filled with predatory lust.

They were remorseless faces, and Katya knew them far better than he did.

Poor, dear Katya. She had sacrificed her soul for love and a dream—*his* dream—and he had thrown her to the wolves. He couldn't hide from it anymore, couldn't turn away from what he'd done. For the rest of her life, Katya would be haunted by such faces, and by the terrible things she had done for him.

Petr cried out in despair. But at that moment, and in unison, the salarymen called out *itadakimasu!*—the traditional cheer at the start of a meal. Their chopsticks stabbed forward like herons' beaks, plunging deep into the infant's gills to draw forth mouthful after mouthful of sumptuous, saline flesh. They reeled back in their seats, remarking on the delightful piquancy that soaked their palates, filled with pleasure that the rumors were indeed true.

The infant Sylurian's final bubbling cries filled the room and broke the spell on Petr. He jumped to his feet, tears stinging his eyes. A hundred emotions roiled inside him, all of them dark and heavy and corrosive.

As he fled to the kitchen, his eyes met the American's. That big painted-on smile was flaking rapidly. The man was knocking back as much saké as he could physically reach.

Abject horror and disgust had twisted his sun-tanned face. Just then, it seemed to Petr that their minds shared a single common thought:

What have I done?

There was no clock in the kitchen. In his eagerness to be away from the place, the minutes stretched out in front of Petr like days. Many times, the young Japanese woman in the kimono came and went, depositing plates and glasses on the steel counter beside him. It didn't matter that she was so pretty; Petr hated her. He scowled at the back of her head as she went to and fro. He hated all of them.

On the other side of the kitchen, the tall chef ignored him. Petr started to visualize what it would be like to kill the man. He was sure it wouldn't feel like a crime. And he wouldn't cry and vomit like he had after he'd killed Yvgeny. Killing the chef would be atonement. If there had been no one else in the building, Petr was sure he would have done it. *Maybe it's like they always say in movies, he thought. Maybe it gets easier each time.*

He was still glaring across at the chef when Ishii stepped into the room and crossed to the man's side.

With a shallow bow, Ishii said, "They were deeply appreciative of the meal. Very satisfied. Very grateful." Then, inclining his head towards Petr, Ishii asked the chef if he would assist the waitress in the dining room for a while.

The chef bowed and departed the kitchen, passing through the doorway with a big smirk on his fat, oily face. Petr was left alone with Ishii, and he didn't feel comfortable at all. Ishii was smiling at him, but there was nothing good or warm about the smile. It was a shark's smile. It chilled Petr.

"Wait here for a moment, Russia-jin," said Ishii. "We'll get the money sorted out shortly. And Takeda-san is driving here from Roppongi to have a little celebratory drink with you."

More yaks, thought Petr. And Takeda will have his bodyguards with him.

Petr realised he had to get out before they arrived. But his money... After all he'd been through, all he'd done to get this far, there was no way he would leave without his money.

He could almost hear Katya's voice in his head, pleading with him to forget the money and run, begging him to come back to her in one piece. Another two years, she had said back at the guest-house. Then they'd have enough anyway.

Another two years of these twisted fucks putting their hands all over his Katya.

No way.

He'd leave tonight with everything he was due. No one but he would ever touch her again.

Glasses and plates clinked in the next room as they were stacked on trays. The chatter of the patrons had faded completely. The salarymen were moving off to satisfy other hungers in other exclusive places. Petr was thankful that Shibuya had plenty of hostess clubs and brothels of its own. Roppongi was only a few miles away, but those men wouldn't be heading to Katya's club.

Had the American drunk enough to mask his horror at what he'd seen? Or would he make an excuse to leave his little party before they began their next round of excesses? Petr felt the American's absence from the place as an almost physical thing. He was the only outsider here now, the only *gaijin*. Fear rolled over him like ice-cold breakers. Now there was nothing to stop the yaks from doing whatever they wanted. Katya had been right; he should have brought someone else in on the deal.

He was going to be ripped off. He was sure of it now. He felt so tired and stupid, so sluggish. Numb legs moving on autopilot, he started walking toward the kitchen door. If he could get outside and find a taxi, find Katya....

He didn't get far. As if on cue, Ishii stepped into the kitchen just as Petr reached the door. "Where are you going, Russia-jin?" There was a definite theatrical pleasure in his voice. He looked smug, like a cat with a cornered mouse.

"To find you," Petr lied, his voice wavering.

"Money!" laughed the gangster, and placed two stacks of notes on the steel counter in front of Petr.

Two stacks, each of a hundred notes, each note worth roughly a hundred US dollars. Twenty thousand dollars in Japanese yen, just as Takeda-san had promised on the phone. Looking at all that money, Petr's head started to spin. Momentarily, he forgot his fear. He couldn't restrain the broad grin that broke across his face.

"The money!" he gasped. They were actually paying up. There it was, right in front of him. Tomorrow he'd buy two tickets out of this shithole, two tickets from Narita Airport to LAX.

Overcome with relief, he moved forward, hands outstretched toward all those beautiful notes. Ishii stepped back from the steel counter and out of Petr's way.

The notes were bound neatly with colored paper. Crisp and new, they must've been withdrawn from the bank that day. Stuffing so many notes into his pockets just wasn't an option. "Where's my case?" he asked the yakuza lieutenant.

"What?"

"My bag," said Petr. "I'll need to put the money in my bag."

"There's no rush, Russia-jin. Takeda-san will be here soon. We can find the bag later. The money will be safe enough here for now."

No fucking way, thought Petr. *The money might be safe, but I won't be.*

"Listen, Ishii-san," he said. "I'm sorry, but I really can't wait around. Please apologize to Takeda-san for me. I promised my girl I'd meet her after work and I'm already late."

Petr didn't like the wicked glint that came into Ishii's eyes.

"You don't have to worry about *that*, Russia-jin. You'll see when Takeda-san arrives."

"What the fucking hell do you mean by that?" snapped Petr, but he wasn't so sure he wanted to know. "Where's my fucking case? I want it now!"

Ishii grinned.

Petr realized he'd have to fight his way out while the odds could still be overcome.

Katya.

He had to get back to her, had to get them both the hell away from these people. He fumbled at his waistband, scrambling for his weapon.

There was a rustle of expensive fabric as Ishii drew his own wicked, shining blade.

Where is it? Where the hell is my knife? he thought. Then he remembered. He'd left it buried hilt-deep in the cold belly of the Pacific Union fish-cop, back there in stinking Fish Can Alley. He was about to pay dearly for that.

With no options left to him, he rushed at Ishii hoping to knock him off balance, but the smaller man stepped smoothly out of the way, and Petr slammed painfully into the steel counter. He turned as fast as he could, eager not to give his back to the gangster's knife, and saw the bright kitchen lights shimmer on the blade for a frozen moment. The moment broke

and the knife flashed downward, parting the fabric of Petr's old jacket like tissue paper. A searing wave of fire raced along his nerves as the blade bit into his left arm. He screamed. Blood began pouring from the gash, soaking his sleeve with alarming speed.

Panicked, Petr threw a punch at Ishii's head. The blow was wild, but it was lucky. It caught the gangster flush on the cheek and he stumbled.

Nerves screaming, Petr made a grab for the bundles of notes, catching one but spilling the other onto the tiled floor. No time to gather them up. One bundle would have to do. Then, with Ishii right behind him, he flew from the kitchen, pounding past the chef and the girl in the kimono.

"Stop that bastard gaijin!" roared Ishii. "Catch him!"

As Petr sped through the room, he saw the carcass of the alien child still in the center of the table. The big brown eyes had lost their sheen. They were dull and black now, expressing no sadness, no pain, no accusation. They were just dead.

Ishii was screaming obscenities as he ran. The chef stood gaping like a goldfish. The girl in the kimono, however, dashed in front of Petr, as he made for the stairway. Petr sunk his head into his shoulders and charged at her like a freight train. Hopelessly outweighed, she flew backwards, her delicate head striking a sharp corner. There was a sickening crack, and then she folded to the floor as limp as a paper doll.

Petr raced on, out of the dining room and into the reception. No time for shoes. He took the stairs three at a time, almost tripping. But, at the last minute, he turned his stumble into a leap and landed hard at the bottom. Needles of pain shot up his legs and surged through his wounded arm.

Swearing and cursing, Petr fumbled with the locks on the main door. Ishii was at the top of the stairs now, still screaming in Japanese. Then he was thundering down towards Petr, knife glinting in his hand. Petr's heart thundered in his chest as he fumbled with the bolts.

Come on. Come on, damn it!

Finally, he managed to work them free. He put his shoulder to the door and exploded into the street. Only a breath ahead of his pursuer, he made straight down the alleyway for the main road. He didn't need to look back. Pounding footsteps told him Ishii was gaining. Petr's long legs should have carried him much faster, but he couldn't seem to run straight. Weaving and stumbling, desperate to escape, he headed for the mouth of the alley.

Breathing in short bursts, barely able to stay upright, Petr reached the mouth of the alley, and the busy road beyond it, just as Ishii caught up to him. Petr dashed out from between the buildings. At that moment, the gangster kicked out at Petr's ankle, trying to trip him. But Petr didn't fall.

Instead, he stumbled.

Momentum carried him straight out into the roaring Tokyo traffic, right onto the path of a big, black Mercedes.

As the car hammered into him, time became confused, disjointed, a dizzying series of speed-ups and slow-downs. The impact was fast—a sudden, world-shattering explosion of pain. It broke right through the numbness of his blood-loss, more pain than Petr had thought possible. But, as his broken body tumbled through the air to slam down on the hood of a yellow taxi, the moments slowed to a crawl.

As Petr's body slid down onto the surface of the road, chaos erupted around him. The sound of car horns filled the air. Men began shouting in Japanese, a woman screamed. But to Petr everything sounded muted, almost as if he were underwater.

He tried to open his eyes. Only one of them worked. His whole body was shivering. *It's like a Russian winter*, he thought. *It's freezing.*

Russia?

Someone was screaming in Russian. A girl's voice. "Let go, you bastards! Let go of me!"

That can't be right.

He started to cry. That voice....

Please, no. Don't let it be her.

There it was again, jumping from English to Japanese to Russian and back. "Please! I want to see him. Let go! Let me go! I have to see him!"

Petr had never been one for praying, but he begged God not to let it be her. He could see a feminine shape struggling between two stocky men in suits. She was dressed in her most expensive gown. He had watched her put it on. Her cheeks were streaked with mascara. He strained to see her more clearly, but someone moved across his line of sight.

A little man squatted beside him, so close that his hot, stinking breath filled Petr's nose and mouth. The melanomas on his nose, chin and eyebrows were unmistakable.

Takeda.

The ugly little Japanese nodded his head. "She's a real beauty, Russia-jin. You must've made a lot of money from selling her ass. I should know," he chuckled. "Some of it was mine." He gestured at his underlings. "Bring her over. She can say goodbye to him."

Ishii was there, too, hovering behind a crowd of jabbering onlookers. Takeda barked something to his lieutenant that Petr couldn't quite catch, then the two moved out of his vision.

No one in the crowd came forward. No one lifted a finger to help. This was Shibuya. Not one person there wanted to cross the Yakuza on their home turf, especially not for a gaijin.

One of the bodyguards grabbed a handful of Katya's blonde hair and marched with her to Petr's side, never letting go of her. When they stopped, Katya fell to her knees.

Katya!

Petr wanted to speak to her so much. He wanted to say sorry. He wanted more than anything to tell her how much he loved her, how wrong he'd been about everything. But his lungs were filling with blood, and he couldn't breathe, let alone speak.

"Petr, don't you leave me here," she wailed. "You stay! Do you hear me? You fucking stay with me!"

He tried to make out her face but everything was becoming dark. Breathing in wet gasps, he raised his hand toward the blurry blonde shadow, praying she wouldn't disappear. His fingers felt like stone, but he tried to open them, to pass her the money he'd promised. The notes were soaked, glued together in a sticky red mass.

Go to America, Katya.

Ignoring the money, Katya grasped his hand. She leaned forward to kiss his head, but Takeda shouted something in Japanese and the bodyguard yanked her up by her hair and wrestled her, kicking and screaming, back to the black Mercedes.

California, Petr wanted to say. Yvgeny always talked about it. Life is so good there.

But Katya was gone.