

—THE RIVER CHILD

by R. Michael Burns

The stink roused him even before the sounds. It sluiced over him, a wave of raw decay, putrid, choking, overwhelming the stagnant odor of the river, the fetor of garbage...even his own unwashed stench.

Tomiji Fukushima pushed himself up on one elbow, gagging, momentarily baffled by the dark, the closeness of the space he found himself in, the crumpling of paper all around him. The fierce smell seemed to drive everything else from his mind--he felt it smothering him, thick as a mildewed blanket wrapped around his head.

He rolled over, tossing his newspaper bedding roughly aside, and pushed the blue tarp open, desperate not to contaminate his cardboard home by vomiting all over it. Hunger, his constant companion, abandoned him for a rare moment, but he scarcely noticed its absence. The reek from outside filled the whole world.

And then he heard the sounds.

Cries--a man, Fukushima thought, someone inarticulate with fear, muttering and cursing, shouting, Confused gibbering, whimpering and something that sounded almost like hysterical laughter.

Fukushima went glass-rigid. He'd heard sounds like those before, the soundtrack of a dozen waking nightmares during his short stay in the Prefectural Psychiatric Facility. The chorus of paranoid schizophrenics and delusional cases, the ones not knocked cold by their meds. Night terrors of the hopelessly insane.

But there were other sounds along with this one, a whole mad symphony of them: damp, sloshing noises, something thick slapping the concrete abutment under the wide bridge. A strangled, gurgling rasp--a feral creature laboring to breathe.

Now the rasping turned to screeching, the slapping into gnawing, and the confused laughing mutters into screams.

He had never heard death cries before, but even in his half-awake, befuddled state, Fukushima knew that only a brutal death could tear such sounds from a human throat. The noises pierced him, pinned him in place like a beetle under glass.

His eyes had adjusted to the deep gloom beneath the overpass now, enough at least to make out the ragged black shapes outlined by the glow of the distant city lights.

Not two meters away, a roughly human form lay twitching and spasming, inky liquid splashed and pooled all around. The thing that crouched over the dying man looked at first like a badly disfigured child--hands and feet splayed and webbed like the appendages of a toad, facial features scrunched and simian, absurdly punctuated by an almost duck-like bill. Hair as thick and bedraggled as kelp surrounded a

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circular hollow in the top of its elongated skull, a thick, phlegmy liquid sloshing around inside. A knotty, chitinous shell covered the creature's humped back like some grotesque parody of a samurai's armor.

Fukushima knew that creature, of course--virtually every Japanese child grew up with a healthy fear of it. *Kappa*--the water goblin, eater of entrails, devourer of cattle...and of children. His grandmother had always called it *kawa-ko*, the River Child, as if speaking its proper name might prove dangerous.

He held his breath and glared at the wild thing through the gap under the tarp, unable to react at all. Some part of his mind understood that this creature couldn't really be here, in the dark under one of the countless roads crisscrossing the Kanda River, in the pounding heart of Tokyo. It had to be some horrible manifestation of his own lingering instability, or a hideously vivid dream. Maybe it was *all* a dream--his illness, his poverty, the cardboard box with the blue tarp over it, the bridge and the river and everything. Maybe in an instant he would wake up nestled down on his futon in his family home, the sweet smell of the straw *tatami* mats replacing the unbearable stench choking him now.

The kappa flashed sickly yellow eyes at him, then sank a webbed claw into its victim and shambled away, dragging the human wreckage behind it like a child with a too-large doll. It slunk down the concrete slope and into the sluggish gray water of the Kanda-gawa. A straggling, trickling streak of black blood marked its path.

The terrible stink faded, and only the prosaic cacophony of Tokyo traffic, muted and distant here, disturbed the silence at all.

Shivering, Fukushima sank back into his box, drew the tarp tight, and slouched there alone in the dark, his thoughts scattered like leaves in a wind, his mind wiped blank with fear and doubt and confusion so deep, it didn't even occur to him to think he might never break its surface.

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Light blazed in his face.

Fukushima sat up, squinting, his stomach roiling. Faces, featureless in the dark behind the bobbing flashlight, floated at the opening of his box. He caught glints of insignia on dark caps. Police.

They were asking him questions and shining their lights all around the inside of his newspaper-stuffed box, but he couldn't quite seem to grasp what they said. The words had meaning by themselves, but strung together they crumbled into nonsense. It was something about the man who had lived in the box beside his. Something had happened to the man, something ugly. They wanted to know if Fukushima knew anything about it--or maybe they wanted to know if Fukushima had done it, whatever it was. He stared at their blank black heads and tried to untangle their questions.

It was strange. Their words, scrambling over him like the roaches that shared his box, did tickle some memory in him. Images, tumbled and twisted and confused, flopped around in his mind. That twitching body. That creature, hunkered down, saw-teeth showing in its ludicrous bill. Recollections of sounds, nasty sounds, gnashing and chewing. The stuff of nightmares and delusions.

He heard himself speaking, shaking his head violently and barking the word, "Kappa!" repeatedly, then waving them away. Watching himself do it as if seeing it