

A KNIFE EDGE.

By David A Rollins.

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Prologue.

The shark's back was the width of a boardroom table and crosshatched with countless battle scars. It cruised half a metre beneath the surface, dorsal fin knifing the oily blue swell above. There was little apparent caution in the way it meandered back and forth alongside the *Natusima*. If the cook didn't know better, he'd have said it seemed to be waiting for something, the inevitable theme music from the movie *Jaws* playing in his head. He took a final drag on his cigarette and then flicked the butt into the water. He glanced left and right and, satisfied the coast was clear, motioned at the kitchenhand to tip the pot containing what was left of last night's stew over the railing. The pot was heavy and the young man grunted with the effort required. The cook knew he was risking his job. The damn tree-huggers aboard ship would have his nuts if they found out about this. 'Don't feed the animals,' one of them had said when someone had suggested throwing scraps to the shark. The guy had only wanted to bring it in close to get some cool snapshots for the wife and kids.

'Now that there's a goddamn fish,' the cook said to the kitchenhand as he lit another Chesterfield and watched the shark glide past with its mouth agape.

'Fuckin' A,' said the young man.

The massive shark broached as it turned back towards the splash made by the stew hitting the water, displaying multiple rows of white teeth set in red, pulpy gums. But then the fish appeared to change its mind, resuming its original course. It circled back for a pass beyond the stern, trailing a wake like a boat with an outboard motor. The cook experienced the cold realisation that the brute seemed more interested in the meat moving around up behind the railing and beyond its reach – namely him – than it was in the chuck steak sinking slowly into the

depths. Confirming this, the shark appeared to fix him with its ancient and fathomless black eye.

The kitchenhand muttered, 'Fuckin' thing gives me the creeps. Why the hell are we feeding it, anyway?'

'So we can tame it. Maybe we can teach it to roll over,' the cook said.

The kitchenhand gave his boss a look that said, Are you serious? He found his boss's preoccupation with the thing freaky. He pulled the zipper on his jacket up to his chin and clapped his gloved hands together. His fingers felt brittle. It was getting cold, or perhaps it was the company giving him a chill.

The cook found himself wondering what it would be like to be down there in the water alone with that fish, helpless. His imagination ran with the thought and the skin on his arms turned to gooseflesh. He then wondered what it would be like watching a man being mauled by it – how long could you last? Now that would be some entertainment, he thought.

The shark had appeared two days earlier, trailing the ship. A veteran seaman was of the view that the animal had been following them for days as they motored up the Japan Trench.

The man-eater's presence had excited much interest at first - it was the biggest shark anyone had ever seen - but that had waned as the scientists and submersible specialists readied and then launched the *Shinkai*. There was some concern about what the beast would do when the deep-diving craft entered the water, but in fact the meeting between the two was a non-event. The sub was over nine metres long, barely three metres longer than the great white, and it bristled with many delicate sensors and remote-operated arms, any and all of which could easily be damaged by the shark if it became inquisitive. It did indeed

approach the sub, but then turned away with a flick of the tail, snubbing the vessel, much to the relief of the scientists.

The recovery ship, *Natusima*, was 'anchored' in a relatively shallow part of the 9000-metre deep trench, thrusters linked to its navigation systems keeping the ship stationary above a point on the sea floor. The *Shinkai* had been down for over six hours already, diving on hydrothermal vents at the very extremity of its 6500-metre performance envelope.

At a depth of 6210 metres, the world outside was solid black, so utterly black it seemed almost to suck the very illumination from the *Shinkai's* spotlights. Weird and delicate creatures in all their phosphorescent glory curled, snaked, drifted or darted past the submersible's portholes, indicating that this blackness was in fact teeming with life, and was liquid rather than solid.

'Back us up a tad,' said Professor Sean Boyle.

Doctor Hideo Tanaka's thumb shifted a toggle on the hand controller. There was the slightest vibration accompanied by an electrical hum and the *Shinkai's* twenty-six tons eased away several feet from the volcanic rock face. Darkness rushed in to fill the widening gap.

'That's got it,' said the professor. He watched one of the colour video screens, leaning towards it with intense concentration.

'You fine to go down again?' asked Tanaka, a little concerned about his research partner's wellbeing.

The professor nodded, perspiration dripping from his forehead onto his sweat-soaked t-shirt.

The technician handling the buoyancy controls made the adjustments and the sub slid horizontally into the depths. The hull

popped a couple of times. Outside, the pressure was close to 630 atmospheres. If a seal gave out now, even a thin stream of water under such pressure would slice through the three men inside like a wire through soft cheese. Professor Boyle was aware of the danger and it weighted heavily on his mind. His associate, Doctor Tanaka, however, had spent a considerable amount of time in deep-sea submersibles over many years and experience had taught him this fear - a type of claustrophobia - was irrational. These submersibles were over-engineered and the *Shinkai's* real limit, before the weight of the sea above the hull crushed it to the thickness of a slice of bread, was probably closer to 7000 metres.

'Let's get below the smoker,' said the professor.

Tanaka agreed. The American-born Japanese nodded at the technician and together they completed the manoeuvre.

Beads of sweat dribbled into Professor Boyle's eyes while he watched the monitor. It displayed what was visible on the volcanic plate just beyond the bow of the *Shinkai*, as well as providing real-time data for sea depth, current direction and speed, sea temperature and hull pressure. The temperature, barely three degrees Centigrade twenty metres away, was climbing rapidly as the sub neared the hydrothermal vent.

What had seemed bare rock gradually became a meadow of enormous pale yellow tubeworms captured in the *Shinkai's* lights. The tubeworms, each over a metre in length, swayed back and forth in the gentle convection current. A movement at the corner of the screen caught the scientists' attention. Doctor Tanaka toggled the external camera so that the view in the monitor swept to the left. A huge white spider crab crawled into view, reminding Tanaka of something from a horror movie. It was feasting, long and slender poles ending in claws

feeding torn strips of worm into its mouth. 'Christ, what a monster,' said Boyle.

An angelfish drifted into view as the submersible continued its descent. 'Now there's a face only its mother would love,' said the technician. The small fish dangled its phosphorescing lantern in front of a grotesque, lethal-looking underbite, the brutal fangs in its wide mouth ever poised for the strike. Alarmed by the sound of the sub's motors, it darted away.

The temperature climbed further as they descended. 'Anyone for a spa bath?' inquired the technician.

'Pass,' Boyle muttered, glued to the screen in front of him. The sea temperature had climbed to thirty degrees as the smoker came into view. They were several metres up-current from the volcano rising ten metres from the rock wall. It was spewing a plume of black, super-heated seawater, hydrogen sulphide and iron monosulphide into the surrounding sea. By rights, this area should have been devoid of life. There was no oxygen down here, and no light, only boiling liquids capable of stripping the paint off a ship's hull. And yet, around the base of the smoker's funnel was a thriving community of life, life that would, perversely, find existence in a more conventional environment lethal.

'Jesus,' Boyle said under his breath.

As far as Boyle and Tanaka were aware, this was the deepest anyone had ever dived on a smoker, and here laid out before them was an improbable Garden of Eden. The bed of worms had become denser and the creatures themselves were as big as anacondas - mutant. Large black shrimp the size of house cats darted between the tubes waving in the current. There were more giant spider crabs, and clams so big they looked like footballs. The tubeworms and the molluscs had been well-documented phenomena present at other hydrothermal vents at shallower depths, but those were nowhere near as big as the ones here.

Strange fish neither scientist had ever seen before hunted over the tubeworm beds, chasing smaller fish and shrimp. None of the life bore the usual hallmarks of fish found at this depth - the huge eyes and teeth and the phosphorescing lights swinging from various protuberances. There was no need for these things. There was so much life down here it was literally bumping into itself.

‘Amazing,’ said Boyle, awe-struck by the information provided by the monitor. It’d been years of theoretical hard slog getting to this point. There were moments when they’d been sceptical themselves about finding such a biologically diverse world at – he checked the gauge – 6393 metres. And yet here it was. This discovery alone would have made them famous, except that their research was classified. The people paying the bills, the US Department of Defense, wouldn’t have it any other way.

The technician sitting beside Tanaka tapped his watch. The *Shinkai* ran on battery power and the needles were leaning towards the red. They had an hour and a half at most before they had to commence the climb to the *Natusima*. Tanaka nodded, his usual method of communication.

‘Up we go,’ agreed Boyle.

The technician turned to another panel and readied the *Shinkai*’s arms. A thin appendage could be seen moving across the monitor, the claw-like hand flexing open and closed, ready to collect specimens. The motion reminded Boyle of the spider crab. And that thought reminded him there was a lot of work yet to be done.

The sea was flat; even the low swell present for the past week had rolled onto the Japanese mainland beyond the western horizon. It was

night and the *Natusima* could have been anchored on a lake of black glass. Doctor Tanaka tripped on a part of the steel deck hidden in deep shadow as he stumbled down the gunnel. He swore under his breath and grabbed the railing to steady himself. He threw his head back to get some air and looked up into the cloudless night sky. The moon reminded him of a polished quarter and he thought it appeared glued to the Milky Way. The doctor managed to hum a bar of *Moon River* before his stomach gave way, convulsing several times as a torrent of food and alcohol roared out of his mouth and splattered onto the sea below.

Vomiting made Tanaka feel better. He wasn't used to drinking alcohol – Red Bull was about as heavy as his drinks got, and never more than three. But there was no Red Bull on board and so he'd been convinced to have an inch or two of Johnny Walker. It was a celebration after all and Boyle had been insistent. How many scientific quests end up as failures? Tanaka didn't know the answer, but he reasoned the percentage would be high. And yet they'd struck gold on the very first day and bagged a huge variety of bizarre specimens. They'd had five days of uninterrupted diving and the hard work was largely done. Tomorrow, they would up anchor and leave, ahead of schedule. The ship's master informed them that the weather was going to turn nasty during the night – they were experiencing the proverbial calm before the storm - so they'd collectively decided to end the expedition early and head for the port of Yokohama. With luck, the sulphide-oxidising extremophiles they sought for further experimentation would be hiding amongst the specimens brought to the surface. No, damn the luck! 'Luck's for schmucks,' he slurred aloud, directing his comment at a winch. He and the professor had made their own good fortune, and it had paid off in spades.

The celebration in the mess was still going strong, the music leaking through the metal and glass superstructure and up on to the stern deck. Eminem and 50 Cent were getting a rest. The Rolling Stone's song *Sympathy for the Devil* played. One of the older members of the crew must be DJ-ing, Tanaka thought. There was a sudden short spike in the music volume, signifying that a hatch had opened and closed. Someone else had left the party to get some air. Tanaka peered drunkenly into the moonlight. The ship was illuminated by two large spotlights perched high on the crane's cross member, but the light was hard and stark and heavy black shadows thrown by a multitude of gear lay across the decks. 'Hello,' he called, but got no answer. He shrugged. Leaning on the railing, he looked out across the polished obsidian sea, his head spinning a little.

Suddenly, he felt himself being lifted from the waist. Before he could struggle, he was thrown over the railing. The world spun and a cry escaped his throat before he hit the water and plunged below the surface. The shock of the cold seawater forced him to gag. He broke the surface spluttering, choking, instantly sober. 'Hey, what the fuck?' he shouted, the saltwater searing his throat. 'Hey!' The *Natusima's* black hull reared up beside him, an unscaleable face. He slapped the steel slab with his open hand. 'Hey!' There was no reply, although he thought he heard something. Was it a cough? There was a mechanical sound to it. 'Hey! Someone there?' There was no repeat of the sound, just the distant beat of music coming from deep within the ship. He dashed the water's surface with his arms in frustration and anger and kicked off his sneakers so that he could swim better. Phosphorescence swirled around him. 'Who the fuck pushed me in?' he screamed, the chill of the water like sandpaper rubbing against his skin. No answer. 'Hey!' Tanaka's voice echoed back at him, bouncing off the cold steel hull. 'Jesus...' he said in frustration, treading water. He peered up into the alternating

dazzle and darkness of the ship and thought he saw the silhouette of a man's head and shoulders up behind the railing. 'Hey, you,' he shouted. No response. Someone had thrown him off, right? Was it that shadow up there?

Tanaka's heart rate was up, mainly because of the shock of close-to-freezing water, but also because he realised getting back up onto the ship wasn't going to be easy if he couldn't attract someone's attention. He could be stuck out here, but not for long. The cold would soon cramp his muscles and then he'd drown. He knew he had around three minutes, max, before his muscles stopped working and he sank beneath the water. There was no convenient ladder anywhere on the hull that he could remember – it wasn't that kind of dive vessel. His jeans and sweatshirt were weighing him down, making swimming difficult. He stripped down to his underwear, and noted that the phosphorescence illuminated his legs, accentuating their whiteness. He felt naked, exposed, freezing. His skin was numb. The realisation that there were nearly 9000 metres of water beneath his feet added to his feeling of exposure. Nearby, he heard the vibration of a ship's thruster automatically keeping the *Natusima* in position. It must be starting to drift, he thought. The ship turned slowly on its axis, as if moved by a giant and invisible hand, its stern swinging towards him. He swam away to prevent being struck by the hull.

'Hey!' he called out again. 'Anybody...!'

The lights on top of the crane that launched and retrieved the *Shinkai* also lit the water behind the stern. He swam into the light and it reassured him. He'd be seen for sure now. He yelled out several more times and loaded on the expletives as his frustration grew.

Suddenly Doctor Tanaka felt the pressure wave behind him. And then he swirled into an eddy, which spun him around a couple of times.

His mind froze, incapable of grappling with the nightmare finale to his forty-two years on the planet.

The impact of the shark's 1200 kilos drove the breath from Tanaka's lungs. Its serrated teeth ripped through the flesh of his back, buttocks and legs, and severed a number of major arteries and veins along with his spinal cord. He screamed and thrashed his upper body, fighting for a life that was already lost.

Tanaka felt no pain. In fact, he felt nothing. Everything had shut down, even consciousness. His eyes were open, but unseeing. His mouth was open but no sound came out. Everything that was Doctor Tanaka was in hiding way down deep, 9000 metres below the surface. For all he knew, his broken, crushed and bleeding body was someone else's.

The shark was unintentionally merciful on the second pass. It hit hard and took nearly everything in a single bite, leaving only the doctor's head to roll, eyes hooded in death, bobbing in its wake.

A handful of seconds later, up on the ship, there was another volume spike as a hatch opened and a shadow stepped inside. The music blared momentarily and then the hatchway clanged shut.