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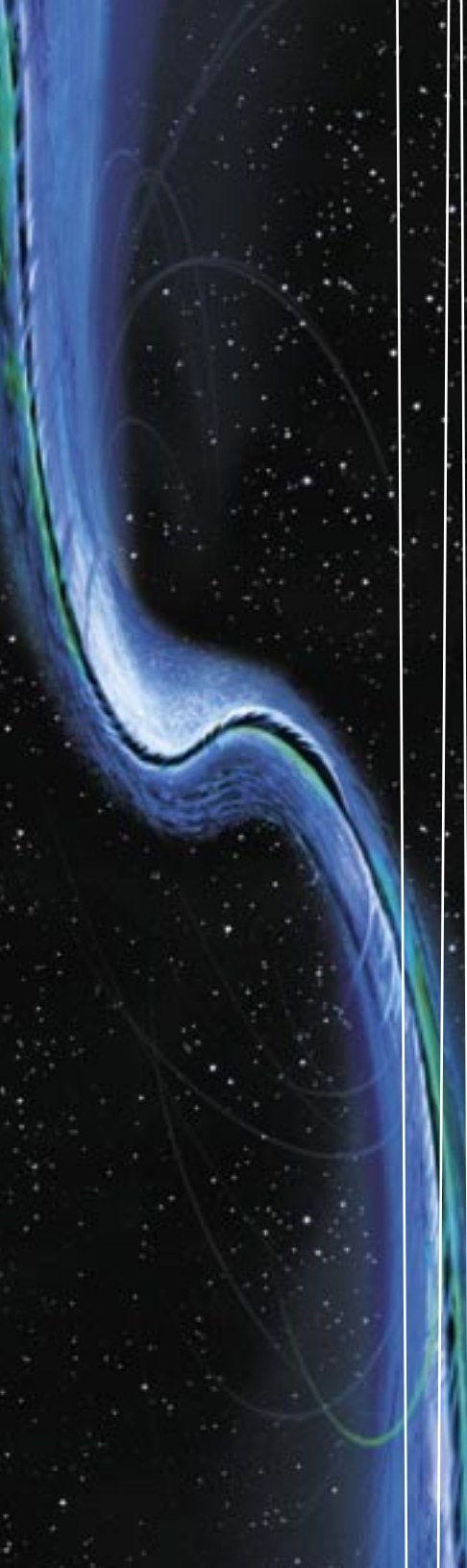
A Matter of Life or Death

by Michael A. Stackpole

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WARS
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*The eye like a shooting star,
The spirit like a lightning;
A death-dealing blade,
A life-giving sword.*

- Mumon Ekai

(The Project)

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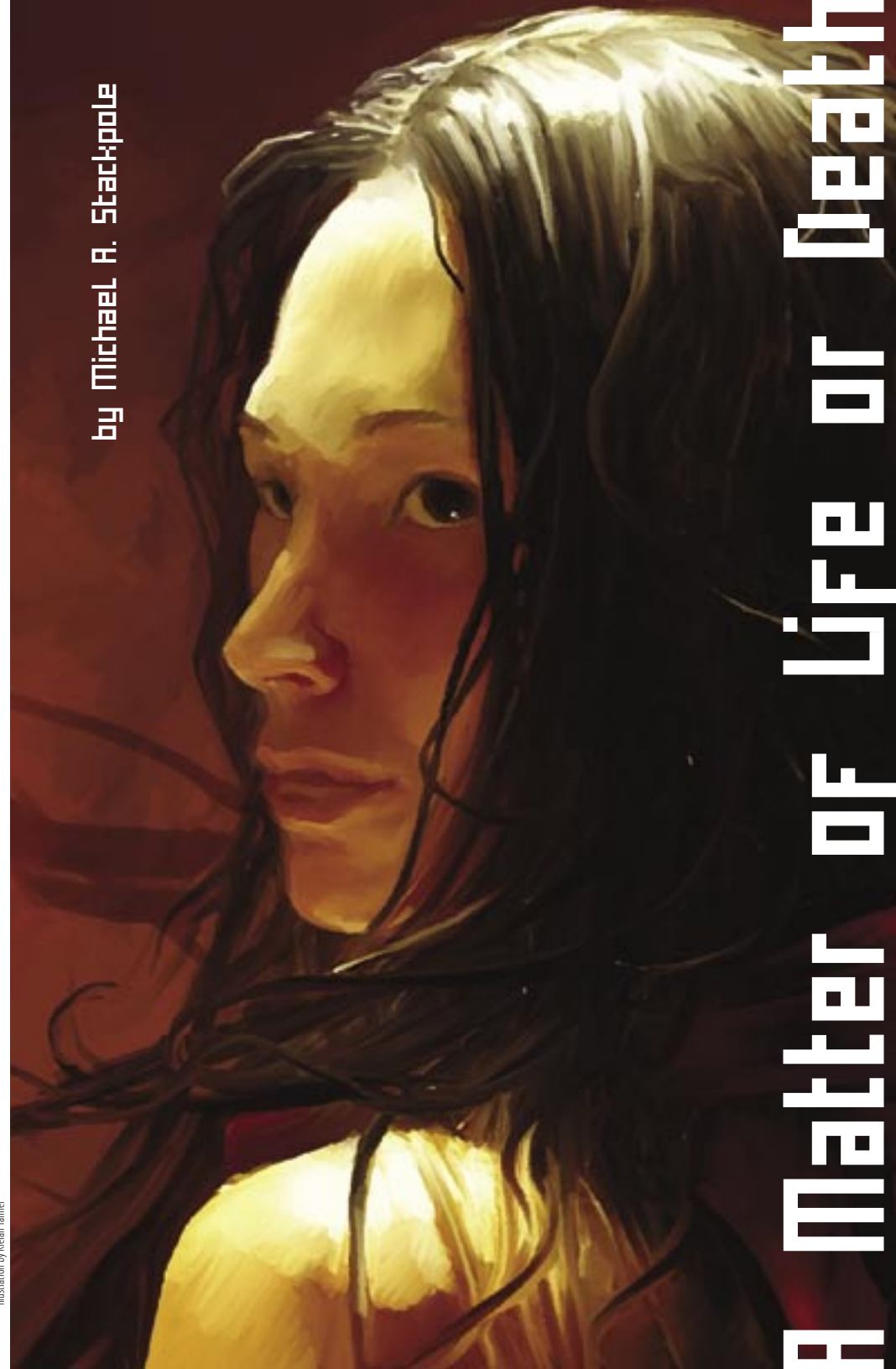
Illustrations by Drew Baker, Wesley Burt,
John Howe, Christian Pearce, Christian Schwager,
Paul Tobin and Kieran Yanner

Design & Layout by Dan Burns

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Illustration by Kieran Yanner

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A Matter of Life or Death

A Matter of Life or Death



I knew I was going to die. Most of me was, anyway. The mechanical parts like my legs, my left eye, that lung thing – they'd keep going until the power went out. Given that I'd not be asking them to do anything, that would take a long time. Then again, depending on how I died, the legs might just keep me marching along for days, grinding what was left of me into a smear on the wall.

This whole dying thing annoyed me. Well, not really the dying part, but knowing there'd be folks who would be happy I was dead. I really didn't want that, especially the tubers who marooned me inside this rock. That had been their intent when they dropped me off, and I'd spent a long time frustrating their effort so far.

I shook my head, trying to rid it of the dream that had awakened me. I'd not been much of a dreamer before I was stranded, but out here, close enough that the light from the Mumon Rift made this asteroid's dark side glow, the dreams came faster, seemed more real than a holodrama, and just kinda sunk into my bones.

I lifted my head and stared hard at the Gongen. Her peaceful, contemplative attitude really got under what flesh I had left. She sat there in the center of the tiny rock chamber, with the single overhead light shining down on her head. It flashed silver highlights into her hair, but hid her face in shadow. The Gongen would tell you she'd chosen where to sit because it felt right, but I wasn't fooled. She picked that spot for the drama.

I shook my head. *Martians, by any other name, are still annoying.* She'd landed on this asteroid and snuck up on me while I was asleep. A warning shot from her plasma pistol and I wasn't moving, so she bound my arms, deactivated my legs, and continued about her business as if I was nothing more than a useless lump of protoplasm. The binders were the kind that covered from fingertip to elbow, so I couldn't even detach my legs and crawl somewhere.

Sitting there in the light she had her legs crossed, mocking me. Her red armor had a black demon-face design on the breastplate that absorbed the light and stared at me. Her hands rested on her thighs as if she was in the middle of some garden, contemplating a warm afternoon. Her helmet, sword, and blaster had been arrayed around her in some pattern probably dictated by



Illustrations by Kieran Yanner (left) and Christian Schwager (right)

feng shui. All that mattered was that even if I got loose, her weapons lay close enough at hand to cut me down before I got within that circle of light.

I hadn't felt this helpless since I woke up with my legs gone and some reedy tin training-legs attached to my hips. Then I'd been trapped in that hospital berth, unable to move. The big difference now was that, in addition to having legs that she'd bugged and my arms bound, that whole death thing was rattling around in my skull.

Because of the shadow I couldn't see her lips move, but her whisper-soft voice filled our grey hole. "Do you believe in dreams?"

"No." Somehow I mustered enough saliva to spit dismissively. "Nightmares, them I believe in and I just had a brainripper of one."

"You would seek to blame me for this?"

"Nope. The binders are your fault. The nightmare I put on the Mumon Rift, which means the Seyalshi and their fight with the Quay catch that blame. So it's not your fault and not my fault, but here we are having to deal with it all. As they say, it *all* flows down into the old gravity well, and we're at the bottom, being squirted out as Hawking gibberish."

"A simple 'no' would have sufficed."

"Being as how all I can do is talk, thanks to you, that's how I'll spend my last few hours." I jerked my head to the side. "I dreamed the Shi were here."

"Yours was not a dream nor a nightmare. It was a vision — Ki." She remained motionless. "They are here."

"What?" I shifted awkwardly and flexed the trefoil claws that now made up my feet. "When? Where?"

"They landed four hours ago. Curious, is it not, that they found us here?"

"Curious just isn't the word that immediately comes to mind, thanks." Pain throbbed through my skull and I groaned because I couldn't even swipe a hand over my forehead. "Why didn't you get away?"

She shook her head. "Duty. Being here is my mission."

"Yeah, and I'm a footnote in your reports home. I remember."

The little asteroid we were inside of ran about a klick and a half end-to-end, and about half that from light to dark. Some mining company had cored it and left it in pretty good shape when they abandoned it. The underground facility they left behind had a passable atmosphere, a rickety fusion generator that powered heaters and air scrubbers, and enough in the way of old stores that I'd not starved when I got dumped here.



Illustration by Wesley Burt

My best new buddy, Kujiko Torako, had been sent out by the Gongen military to use it as a base for remote sensing to learn what the rest of us were up to. The rest being the Shi, the Quay, Earthers, and us Mavericks – at least that’s the name given to us Outer Rim dwellers by the Earthers and Gongen.

Watching us was important because the Gongen see everything in terms of imbalances in the universe. I don’t buy any of that claptrap, but it did seem like someone welded odd weights onto the universe’s flywheel when the Shi planet popped into the empty space between the belt and Jupiter. The Quay followed in their life ships, and things would have been fine if they’d just continued to annihilate each other. Both of them decided, however, that securing footholds in their new neighborhood would be a good idea – immediately injecting themselves into what had been, up to that point, a three-way grudge match between Earthers, the Gongen, and *homo sapiens maverick*.

I sighed, using up more of the air than I was entitled to, but with Shi paying their respects nearby, I had more than a lifetime’s supply to waste. “If you’re staying for the sake of duty, you’d best be thinking about how much training your masters put into you and how it’s going to die right here. You ever go up against the Shi?”

Torako remained calm. “I have not. Have you?”

I shook my head. “Nope, but I’ve tangled with the Quay a couple times. They got a bit closer to Ganymede than some folks thought good. They’re big, ugly, and nasty. The big part is good because it makes them easier to hit. The ugly and nasty work against you if you don’t hit them hard, and on a scale of one to hard, dropping a planet on them only ranks about a four.”

“You say you have no relevant experience.”

“True, sister, but I do know that if the Shi were tough enough to enslave the Quay, and the Quay turning their sun into a supernova wasn’t enough to kill the Shi off, I’d slink away rather than waiting to be evicted from this rock.” I shrugged as best I could. “Not like I have any choice — it’s a long walk back to Ganymede, and my legs aren’t working too well.”

For the first time I saw a slight break in her demeanor. Her shoulders slumped just a hair. “Though my legs work,” she said, “I have little choice either. The Shi have entered the main gallery, which puts them between me and my ship.”

“And I thought I was in a bad position.” The Gongen forces had sent her out here in a small patrol ship. When her mission was over, she’d signal for pick-up and rendezvous with one of the Gongen capital ships moving through the area.

“How many Shi are there?”

She shook her head. “I do not know. I have not seen them, I have merely *felt* them.”

“Felt them?”

“Yes. Their arrogance is palpable and shifts the balance of the universe.”



I started to make smart comment about the military intelligence value of feelings, but the nightmare started a rerun through my brain, which made her “feeling” seem like light comedy. “You’ve decided you’re going to stay here and learn as much about them as you can, right?”

“That is one possibility.”

“I can guess at the others. I think you need my help. I think you need to un-bind me, undo whatever you did to lock my legs up, and let me work with you.”

“And let you sell me to the Shi in return for passage off this asteroid?” She stood in one fluid motion, coming up with her sword in hand. The light touched her face and ran down the blade in a silver stream. Her expression, save for how her eyes tightened suspiciously, remained impassive. “You may think me foolish for remaining, but I am not stupid.”

I smiled as disarmingly as I could, which wasn’t very much. The metal flesh around the left eye prosthetic didn’t do sincerity very well. “I give you my word I’ll be on your side.”

“Trust you? You have consistently lied to me.”

“How dare you call me a liar? I didn’t lie to you.” I frowned, the paradox of lying about lying distracting me for a moment. “I just shuffled some details and stuff. It was kind of a Zen thing.”

Torako snorted and I thought I might have even seen the corner of her mouth twitch with a grin. “You know nothing of Kizen or balance – all you know about is lying.”

“You have your talents, I have mine, but you’re taking this all the wrong way. Look, if you were in my position – which, by the way, is really uncomfortable – would you have told me who you were? The truth?”

“Of course. It would be my duty to do so.”

“This duty thing. You’re making my brain hurt. Hurt more.” I sighed again. “I like surviving. I told you I’m Nick Murrin, which is true.”

She glared at me down the length of her sword – her disgust about as lethal as the monomolecular edge on that blade. Without looking she spun it around and slid it into the sheath on her back. The simple movement impressed me because if I’d tried it with one of the knives she had on her, or even a dull butter knife, I’d have ended up losing an ear and probably short-circuiting my left eye.

Torako straightened her shoulders. “The identification chips in your legs claim you are Starhawk. He led a small fleet that took a variety of our bases here in the asteroid belt. He also ambushed a Gongen patrol. Two cousins of mine survived the engagement, but were later emptied into the vacuum of space, trussed up much as you are now.”

She dropped to one knee and picked up her plasma pistol. It was a fairly sleek little number, including the stylized etching along the barrel. Scarlet cord wrapped the grip much as it wrapped the hilt of her sword. “My family’s honor demands I slay this Starhawk. I know you cannot be



Illustration by Kieran Yanner

him, however, for you have told me you are not. You said he hates you and that is the reason he marooned you here. As you have told me, Nick Murrin is an innocent, utterly unsuited to war. If you remain here, you will be somewhat safer.”

“And you won’t have to be watching your back.”

“Or yours, since you would be in front of me.”

“And the plasma pistol wouldn’t be on stun anymore, got it.” I frowned again. “If I really were Starhawk, I’d be just the sort of person you’d want to be allied with to get off this overgrown speck of dust, but you’d still be bound to kill me?”

“Exactly, which is why I would expect you would kill me at the earliest opportunity.” She shrugged and I almost bought the idea that she was happy with me being an innocent. “We move in circles, and they are not productive.”

I half-closed the eye that could close. “Let’s not make it a circle. Let’s make it a spiral, and you decide if it goes up or down.”

She raised her pistol so it pointed at the light. “I will listen.”

“My boss in the Accord was Raving Red-Jane. She’s one of yours, you know, a Gongen gone gangrel. She hates you *former* Martians something fierce. I did the ambush, but I took prisoners and figured to ransom them back to you, as always. She had the contacts to make the deals, so I sent them along to her. I’d done it dozens of times before with no trouble.”



Illustration by Kieran Yanner

“This time something goes wrong. Maybe she saw someone she knew. I don’t know. All I know is that she voided a bunch of the prisoners. I protested. I have a reputation to protect, and I’d be out there fighting, so I didn’t want my people treated the same way if they got captured.”

Torako’s eyes tightened more. “You protested the loss of ransom.”

“Sure, there was some of that, too, but mostly I realized she was losing it. Us Mavericks who’ve been generational, we’re used to life out here. Hell, I’m half machine now, that’s obvious, but the rest of me isn’t quite human either. Some things have mutated naturally, others were tweaked a generation or two past. There were others like me who grumbled about Jane’s action and the way she consolidated power. We talked, and then someone squealed.”

I nodded down toward my legs. “Before stranding me here, she had them take off my real legs and give me these industrial chicken legs. She redid my face, too, because I used to be a whole lot more handsome – hard to believe, I know, but it’s true. My eyes even matched. She’d have ruined more stuff if she knew about it. I was left here to die but Starhawk doesn’t die that easily.”

Torako pointed the pistol at me again. “The case for my showing restraint is not going well.”

“But you haven’t shot yet. Look, here’s the deal: I *am* the guy you want to kill, but I’m *not*, too. While I’d kill you in a heartbeat if I thought you were going to kill me, I won’t *murder* you. You want to avenge your cousins? Great, we’re allies on that score. First, though, we have to get off this rock and do something about the Shi.”

Torako studied me in silence. Her face softened for a moment, then the expressionless mask took hold again. “I would suggest we reverse that order. We do something about the Shi, *then* leave.”

My heart leaped in my chest and I’d have danced a jig right there, save for certain technical problems. “Great. Seriously, you have my word. We’re on the same side.”

She holstered the pistol and approached. “I take more comfort in your desire for revenge than your word.”

“At least you don’t want to kill me immediately, which is a fine first step on the way to a lasting friendship.”

As she knelt by my drawn-up legs, she looked me square in the meat-eye. “Understand. I still want to kill you. My *duty* requires I sublimate my *desire*.”

“Okay, this time I’m all for that duty thing.”

From a pouch at the small of her back she drew a small remote control device. She flipped open the cover and punched the screen. The binders clicked open and blood flooded back into my hands and forearms. It brought with it that glass-sliver and shrapnel feeling limbs get when waking up. I clenched my fists then opened them again, just trying to work the knots out.



Torako tapped the remote's screen again and touched it to the input port on each of my metal thighs. My sense of them returned immediately, and with it that haunting sense of wrongness. The industrial-sized legs bent backward, like a bird's legs. It had been Jane's joke and it had taken a long time to learn how to make them work.

If you listen to the common wisdom – which is always more of one than the other – you hear that the Gongen are quick and agile. Their sense of balance in the universe gives them an edge up on everyone and everything. Might be that's true most of the time, for most of the Gongen, but it wasn't true for Torako right then and right there.

I caught her flat-footed when I kicked out. My big flat foot slammed into her chest-plate and sent her flying across the chamber. She bounced down on her bottom just past where her helmet lay, then skidded and spun on into the wall. Her hair whipped around, veiling her face, which was okay by me.

I didn't want to see the look she was giving me.

And I could have seen it really well because the blue bolt from the Shi's little blaster carbine lit things up pretty well. The air snapped as the bolt burned through where she'd just been kneeling. It was a mark of the Shi's arrogance that it only triggered one burst, figuring that since Torako was the only person armed, she was the only dangerous one.

Everyone thinks they know what the Shi look like, but all the descriptions agree on only one point: they look wrong. It's not just the floating thing, either. The skin the grey shade of dolphin hide, the three elongated fingers, and the torso that melded into the planar-like lower body where you would expect legs to be. He wore silvery armor over his face and torso, and a shimmering sheath below the waist, but even that didn't bring him close to normal. That's probably because all three of his black eyes stared in my direction and weird symbols started flashing in my brain as if I was watching someone do higher math.

Higher math I don't do, but adding one and one I'm good at. My metal feet gouged scars in the floor as I kicked off, launching myself back and up. Unfortunately for me, there

Illustrations by Paul Tobin (left) and Drew Baker (right)





Illustration by Kieran Yanner

was not quite as much back to the chamber as there was up, so I rebounded off the wall and came right back down where I crushed Torako's helmet under my right foot.

I sank into a crouch, trying to make myself a smaller target, but the Shi only needed one eye to track me. His blaster came around again fluidly. I didn't see any trigger for him to tighten a finger around and kinda thought not having at least that much warning of my impending death wasn't fair. In all the old heroic stories – the ones the Earthers go on about to show why they should be running the show in the solar system — the hero gets that much of a chance at his own salvation.

Before the Shi could do whatever he had to do to kill me, this little orange energy bullet drilled into the Shi's right shoulder. I watched it skip through the armor's joint. The Shi jerked as the air crackled, and little orange energy tendrils played down along his arms and over his belly. The carbine dipped for a heartbeat and the Shi shivered.

I leaped and twisted in the air. With Torako I'd kicked one foot out and sent her flying, but with the Shi I went for a different tactic. One foot hit him in the chest, the other where thighs would have been on any self-respecting creature. The three toes closed tight, partially cracking the chest-plate, and holding him firmly as I landed on my back. The Shi proved to be a lot lighter than I would have imagined and I was hoping that lack of mass would make my next move easier. I began to spread my legs in an effort to rip him apart.

I never got the chance to see if I could do that. Torako, sword in hand, appeared at my feet. Her blade flashed through a short arc, cutting through the Shi about 80 centimeters from its bottom tip and stopping just shy of cutting me where I didn't want to be cut. The Shi made a gasping sound and dropped its carbine. I tossed the upper half against the side of the chamber and its helmet popped off, revealing a hairless head with a trilobite where its mouth should have been, bony plates everywhere else. The trio of eyes was the creepiest part, because not one of them looked as dull in death as I was thinking they should.

I leapt to my feet and crouched again, staying eye-level with the Gongen. "Nice work. You okay from that kick?"

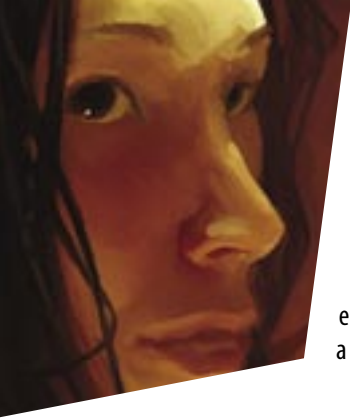
She delicately hooked a dark lock behind her ear. "It would appear I owe you my life."

"Yeah, well, let's not start keeping score on that count." I toed the Shi and it made an attempt to grab me. "He's still moving. Get it off me!"

Torako stepped up and thrust her blade through the crack in the Shi's breastplate. The Shi jerked violently, and this time its three eyes closed. "Satisfied?"

"Thanks. Yes, mostly. Our new problem is this: if they have any organization at all, he should be calling back to his comrades on a regular basis. When he doesn't report, we're discovered."

"We are faced with another problem." She studied the unbloodied blade, then sheathed it again. "Unless you know an alternate path beyond the main gallery, access to my ship is still blocked."



I picked up the Shi's carbine and still couldn't find a trigger. "You know what they say: 'the shortest distance between two points...'"

"...is a straight line."

"Nope, it's the route you target when you want to ambush the enemy. We know they're going to come looking for him, so let's pick a few more off, and then we'll worry about what's in that chamber."

Granted I was feeling a little giddy and a lot cocky because of how easily we'd handled the Shi. Torako's silent nod of agreement with me reinforced my feelings, and kept them strong even past the time I noticed that she let me lead the way through the asteroid. It made tactical sense, of course, since I'd been on it for a while and knew it better than she did. I could also see in the dark. Mostly, though, I led because she could hide behind me and pop a shot off at any Shi who took us by surprise.

I did realize this meant I was more likely to get shot than she was, but even that wasn't bothering me too much. I'd been cooped up in my little prison for a long time – I really had no clue as to how long it was – and I was all for making my first shot at getting away my best shot at it, too. When you've been living in a grave, almost any alternative looks good.

I was yanked from my thoughts when Torako felt the approach of another Shi and slipped past me. She tucked herself into a little alcove the tunneling machines had gouged out by mistake, sinking instantly into shadows. I had a hard time picking her out, and that's saying a lot because the left eye can see in all sorts of spectrums. I managed to secret myself away, too, having deposited the first Shi's weapon in the center of the passage.

The technical term for that would be bait.

So, I'm not sure if it was stupidity that led the Shi to approach the other blaster, or arrogance in assuming that whatever could have been planned as a trap could not get someone as brilliant as it was. It strikes me that being smart isn't what saves you from traps. It's being smarter than those who set them and, in this case, the Shi just wasn't.

Of course, it could have been having a bad day.

We just made it worse.

It stopped at the carbine, then looked to its right at the fresh marks scraped into the passage's rough wall. It looked up and a bit further up, following the zigzag trail until, craning its neck back, it saw me above him. My feet had a great grip on the tunnel's reinforcement arch, so I was able to add a wave to my smile.

Its carbine started to track up as Torako slipped from the shadows. Her first slash took its right hand off at the wrist. The Shi turned quickly and aimed a backhanded blow with its stump at her.

She ducked beneath it, but came up as the carbine whipped around in its left hand and clipped her temple. She spun away back into the shadows. The Shi flipped its carbine into the air, then grabbed the pistol grip and leveled the weapon.

As I dropped on it, my left foot did to its helmet what my right had done to Torako's. After a sharp crack, the Shi fell backwards. My right foot landed on its midsection and drove it into the ground, which caused a wet, popping sound, and the Shi lay motionless.

I stepped as lightly as I could over to Torako, who lay slumped against the wall, but still hadn't dropped her sword. I crouched and caressed her head. She hissed and my fingers came away bloody.

"You going to be okay?"

She nodded, then stood slowly. She leaned heavily against the wall. Her sword rose and quivered, pointing back toward the Shi. "Look."

I turned, then took a step back. The Shi we'd just killed wasn't moving, but the Shi we'd left for dead in the chamber was crawling through the passage towards us. It was dragging its torso along, slowly clawing its way up the tunnel. I was thankful it wasn't floating, and I didn't care why, but I also didn't want to stick around.

"Can I revisit that 'satisfied' thing? This is definitely not good."

"I have heard it whispered that the Shi are immortal."

"Yeah, I've heard that, too, and so has the crawler." I pointed at the Shi lying near Torako's feet. "And if that's true, this one's going to have a headache for a long time coming."

I picked up the two Shi carbines. Torako grabbed my arm and pulled me towards the opposite end of the passage in a slow jog. "I do not think it is the blow to my head, but something is wrong here. I cannot explain it. Something is askew."

"Out of balance, you mean?"

"Not tracking the right ones and zeros."

I blinked my one blinkable eye. "You speak Maverick?"

"You are not the first Maverick of my acquaintance." I looked back to see the first Shi stopping to examine the Shi we ambushed. I picked up the pace of our jog.

"I bet the others weren't as handsome as me."

"Nor as self-deluded."

"Ouch. Look, this problem you're feeling, I can tell you what it is." I folded my arms over my chest. "One soldier goes missing,



you don't just send one after him. You already know whatever is out there is more trouble than one can handle."

"But they only sent one."

"Which means they don't have many. That means a covert mission, just like yours."

"But these are not the only two. There are more."

"Sure." We slowed to a walk and I looked her in the eyes. "They have no need to leave the chamber they're in, and we need to get through it. I'm not seeing any benefit from lurking down here because they can always call in more help from somewhere. We might as well go see what they're up to."

«Your discomfiture is unnecessary.»

That sentence burst into my brain with all the gentle subtlety of an exploding shredder-round. The queer thing was that it was loud, but it wasn't in words. It came in symbols that tickled different parts of my brain. The message felt like having white-hot steel being shoved through your guts, then having that sensation negated. It got the point across but the tingle of pain neurons quieting down distracted me from the logical implications.

Torako grabbed me again and hurried us along the passage. Further along it opened into another chamber in which a blue glow had started to grow. As it became closer to white, I caught three shadows, two longer than the third, but all Shi-shaped.

"Are you liking that they seem to be eager to have us come to them?" Torako whispered.

"No, especially since they offered us bait to get us this far. *Live* bait at that."

"There are three of them. No more bait. They'll hunt us down if we try to run." She arched an eyebrow over an almond eye. "So we enter their trap and use their self-confidence against them?"

"Exactly." I really didn't have the heart to tell her that the idea of running away in these legs just wasn't appealing to me. Starhawk might be stuck with the legs of a chicken, but he wasn't going to run like one. Besides, from the Shi, there's just no place to run.

We made as stately a procession across the chamber as possible, with Torako in the lead. She's much more presentable than I am, and it isn't just because of the legs. Mine, that is, hers are quite fine. I wasn't marooned with much in the way of clothes, so what I had on more closely resembled rags than anything else.

To her credit, she didn't hesitate as we drew near, though I did. Three Shi waited for us. Two were foot soldiers – floaters, more accurately, since they don't have feet. They did have carbines and covered both of us. I lowered my two Shi carbines and tried to look casual about the threat the two of them presented.

The real threat came from the third one. It wasn't because he was that much taller than the



Illustration by Drew Baker

others, or his armor more ornate – though both cases were true. He just exuded something special. If he'd ordered the other two to turn their weapons on each other, they'd have done it. Instead of a gun, he carried a curved staff with a crescent on one end and a sharp point on the other. Beautiful and fluidly elegant, it still looked like a nasty bit of work to me. I didn't doubt for a second he could wield it with a lot of skill.

The blue light came from the glowing crescent tip, which pulsed in shades from azure to cobalt. A little blue electricity played along the head of the weapon. I'd known the Shi were incredibly powerful, but this casual use of something our scientists would have killed themselves to create gave me a good look at the gulf that separated our two species.

And I couldn't even console myself that they put their pants on one leg at a time like everyone else!

«You are not quite what we envisioned.» Again that came in images and symbols – flowers wilting and treasures tarnishing.

Torako bowed respectfully. "I am Kujiko Torako of Gongen."

The leader didn't move, but I sensed his attention shifting from her to me.

I burped. A really good one, loud and wet. Then I shrugged. "I don't think names mean much right now."

Something else blasted into my brain, long, tangled, sharp. It left my mouth tasting of ashes, my heart racing, one eye weeping and my flesh twitching as if I were being embroidered with razor wire. That was his name, wrapped in arrogance and reverence and we knew we should be honored he'd shared it with us. *«But We shall deign to accept you addressing Us as Master.»*

He'd almost substituted God for Master, but I'd had as much use for God out here as I had for dancing lessons, so he amended things. "Okay, Master, it's your party. What's your pleasure?" Just in case he was reading my mind, I imagined him doing all sorts of anatomically impossible things.

«We have come to learn.»

I got *learn* out of it, but Torako got something else. "Enlightenment, *Sensei?*" She cocked her head. "How could we enlighten you?"

«You shall. You will know. You are the one.»



Her being 'the one' came with a distinct sense that I wasn't the one, or even a zero, but a big negative. One floater crossed behind the Master and the both of them kept their carbines on me. The Master drifted to his left and in toward the center of the chamber. He brought the staff up effortlessly, with the ease of someone who had complete mastery of his weapon.

«Our vision leads us to this point. You lead further.»

Torako brought her sword up in a salute. "I will enlighten you, *Sensei*, but I would ask you let my companion go."

«Companion?» Surprise tingled through the word. *«We believed it was something you kept as a pet. It is of no consequence. Dispatch it.»*

No one has ever figured me for being the brightest diode in the display, but I'd been assuming my demise would be coming before or after Torako's no matter what. About the time the pet image – which painted me as drooling, dirty, and diseased – coursed through my mind, I knew what was up. I'd begun to shrink down, crouching on those now-useful industrial toes. I leaped at the Shi a heartbeat before they fired, and soared over their shots.

I accomplished about half of what I'd intended. I'd managed to jump at them feet first, toes spread, just waiting to close my feet around their skinny bodies and squeeze them like tubes of protein paste. I was actually wishing I had some fine tactile sense in my toes so I could feel them getting all pulpy and squishy, but I was going to settle for dead.

Just my luck, they didn't want to play along. As if they were working with one mind between them, they cast aside their carbines and caught hold of my legs. Those slender arms didn't look very strong, but somehow they got a good grip and managed to hang on. To make matters worse, they drifted slightly up and apart. As much as I tried to draw my legs in, I couldn't. All but effortlessly, they flipped me over and I smacked my head on the floor.

As my vision cleared, my predicament didn't seem so bad when I saw Torako and the Shi leader. She circled him and he rotated smoothly, always facing her. She'd feint and slash, but he'd always manage to block her blows. Her sword clanged when it hit, but the staff didn't. It made a sound that was more wooden than anything else, but it couldn't have

been. Her blade's monomolecular edge would have whittled any wood down to nothing, but the staff remained untouched.

Torako redoubled her efforts and the Shi could no longer react so nonchalantly. He still floated and flowed, but now he had to curl his body to avoid her strokes. Her blade flashed at him, missing by millimeters, even nanometers. At first he'd toyed with her, but now she pressed him and he had to work.

And he didn't like it. I caught the flash of a thought, dismissive, as if a bug were being flicked away. Blue energy shot from the staff's crescent. It hit Torako's right shoulder and the energy arced down her arm with a sharp crackle like a hundred tiny lightning strikes. She cried out and dropped her sword, then the staff caught her a glancing blow that spun her to the floor.

She tried to come up on all fours, but her right arm collapsed. I could see the staff's mark on her right cheek and knew she'd be getting a hell of a bruise there. *If she lives that long.*

Of course, living long wasn't going to be a problem for either one of us. As the leader flicked his staff out and sent her sword spinning back to her, my playmates decided they should obey orders before watching the finale of that match. They began to pull harder, straightening my legs out parallel to the floor. This put me in a tough position, one in which desperate measures seemed to be the only logical response.

You have to try logic every so often, just to be different.

As they did their best to pull me apart, I tossed aside the carbines. Easy as you please, I reached up and hit the emergency release switch at my hip. Just as it's supposed to do, the ball joint popped open with a satisfying click.

Now I've never been much of one for too much physics, but that whole "equal and opposite reaction" thing moved way up on my list of lessons I'm glad I learned.

The one floater who ended up with only a drumstick flew back about ten meters and hit a solid stone wall. Inertial forces being what they are, three hundred kilos of leg slammed into his torso armor and the claw toes embedded themselves in his chest. He did have a moment or two of consciousness to contemplate his situation, and the symbols he used to convey it were scatological, obscene, and told me more about Shi culture than I wanted to know.

The other Shi was stronger and even though my torso added another fifty kilos to the mass he was handling, he managed to brace his arms and stop my foot from stomping him into the wall. For the barest of moments a sense of victory flashed through his mind.

Then I closed my toes on its chest and the visual of a Shi scream raked claws through my brain. I hung on as it thrashed about trying to break my grip. Skinny and fine boned like that it shouldn't

have been able to muster much of a battle, but it did and finally pushed me away. My claw foot tore off a large chunk of armor and an even bigger hunk of its chest as we parted ways.

I fell back onto the floor and both of us thrashed around, grabbing for Shi carbines. I got one before he did and aimed it towards the floater, but suddenly realized I didn't know how to work the triggerless bastard. He scooped one up and gave me a lovely view of the muzzle, and if the mouthless monster could have grinned, that would have been the last thing I ever saw. My mind exploded in symbols again as the Shi celebrated his victory. *«Die, mortal filth.»*

Just as I saw the symbol for *fire* burn into my brain the Shi jerked. A Gongen knife sank to the guard in its throat, Torako's throw having surprised it as much as it did me. The Shi still triggered a blast from the carbine, but it sizzled past mere centimeters from my good eye. The creature sagged forward and I swung my carbine, clipping it in the helmet. The Shi's last thought as it hit the floor was more practical than its compatriot's — it just wished it had shot straight and a lot sooner.

I flicked my toes open, getting rid of the armor, then came upright and nodded at Torako, where she crouched beyond the last Shi. I balanced pretty easily on my good leg, shifted the Shi weapon to my right hand and aimed it at the ringleader of the circus. I wasn't really surprised that he'd already turned to face me.

I got a whole blizzard of things from him, starting with outrage down to amusement, all with an undercurrent of derision tossed in just for the fun of it. He opened his arms wide. *«Your using that weapon is an impossibility.»*

I shook my head. "You're wrong. Again. I figured it out. Your boy here gave me the second glance at your hole card." Keeping the weapon steady on him, I let the symbol he'd used for *fire* come back into focus. The floater had used it and it made perfect sense to me that if they talked with their minds and their guns didn't have triggers, there was only one other obvious way to make the thing work.

And just for a second, whether he plucked it from my mind or read it in my eyes, the Shi leader caught what I was doing. He had to wonder if it would work, if he'd underestimated me. He had to wonder if the mangy pet would do what his keeper couldn't and kill him.

Well, as it turns out, there was more than one other way to make the weapon work, because it didn't fire no matter how hard I thought at it. That really didn't matter, however, because Torako had used the diversion to scoop her sword up in her left hand, and run at the Shi leader. Exhibiting legendary Gongen agility, she leaped into the air and brought the sword down in this great glittering arc that was a blurred bit of wonder. The blade struck the leader on the shoulder and sliced down and in for nearly 30 centimeters. The Shi gave out a grunt that ended in a gurgle, then the body shook and it collapsed to the chamber floor. I was hoping its helmet would fall



away so I could see its surprise, but that bony face couldn't have held an expression if it were painted on.

Torako pulled her sword free and fell to her knees. The Shi leader's staff rolled out of his hand. The glow faded from the tip of the weapon, changing from the vibrant blue to a smooth, alabaster appearance.

"Stay where you are, Torako. Don't move." I hopped over to where my other leg was still imbedded in the Shi. I pulled it out and snapped it back onto place. As I turned back to Torako I heard the Shi against the wall take a deep, sucking breath. "Can't at least *one* of them stay dead? Is that too much to ask?"

"It would seem that it is."

"Great. Well, we'll have to kill them better next time." *Not that I want there to be a next time.* "What do you say we get out of here fast? Are you hurt bad?"

"I should live. And, yes, we should leave." She looked up at me in the dim light, the chamber no longer illuminated by the blue glow of the Shi's staff. I could have reached out with a foot and crushed her as easily as I had the Shi. There was no reason not to. It was probably my best chance to rid myself of someone who would eventually kill me.

I crouched. "Got enough room for me in that ship?"

She smiled and resheathed her sword. "It'll be tight. Just wipe your feet before you get in."

"Was that a joke?" I helped her to her feet and she resented it for the requisite nanosecond.

"I am not completely without humor, Nick."

"Well, there goes one preconception about you Gongen." I took her left hand and led her out of the chamber and through the connecting passage toward where her ship waited.

"You have other preconceptions?"

"Probably about as many as you have about us Mavericks, Torako."

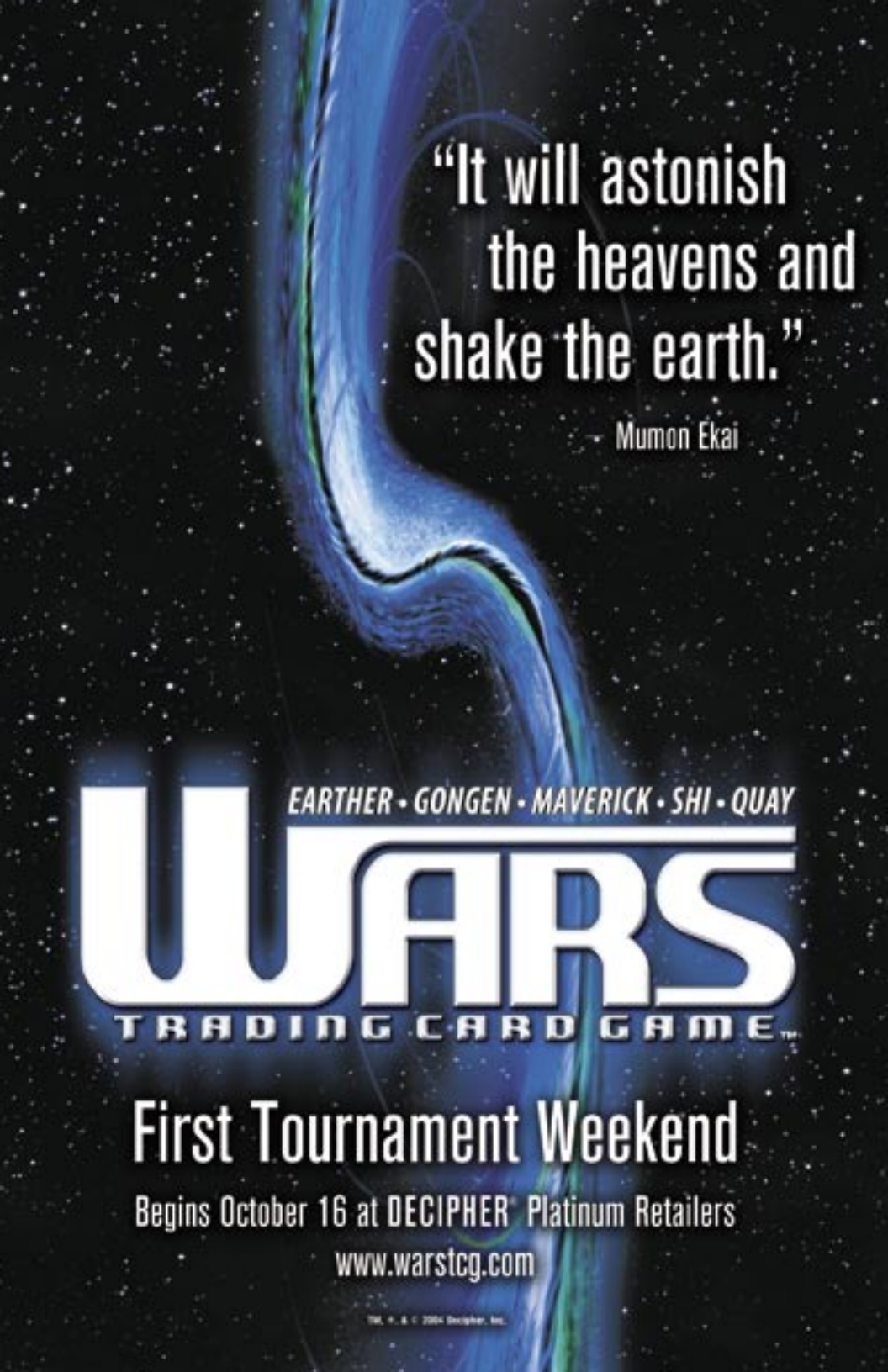
"Tell me."

I shook my head because I could see the nascent smile on her face. "Nope, I'll save them. It'll take us a while to avenge your cousins. We'll need something to keep the conversations interesting."

"We might, if I conversed with pets."

"Another joke." I smiled broadly enough as we reached her ship that I was sure she could see it in the dark, but I kept it on my face until the light from the hatch made certain. "How many more surprises do you have?"

"More than you can imagine." Torako smiled openly and invited me into the ship. "I think, however, Nick Murrin, you will have a chance to learn them all."



"It will astonish
the heavens and
shake the earth."

Mumon Ekai

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