

## Negotiation Is My Business

By Chuck Kallenbach II

Mitsu Hanako was an eighteen-year-old student in Michiyo enclosure. She was shunned by her classmates for her looks and for the rumors about her. Dark red hair, blue eyes, and pale white skin made her a novelty in any Gongen crowd. This was unacceptable in Michiyo society, which had little tolerance for things that were different.

The rumors said awful things about Hanako. They said that her mother, Mitsu Makiko, was a soldier who was captured and raped by an Earther patrol. Hanako was a half-breed bastard, they said. The rumors said that her stepfather, Kujiko Takeo, was a stim addict who beat his wife during violent rages. Sometimes he abused Hanako as well, they said. The rumors did not lie.

On the night of Hanako's graduation, Takeo beat her mother, not for the first time. Except that this time, Makiko stopped screaming. He had killed her. The rage in Hanako's heart took her mother's sword and murdered her stepfather. That rage sent Hanako into hiding. It took her to the Outer Rim, where she became someone else.

How do I know so much about this girl? I'm the Maverick that rescued her. My ship was making a smuggling run to Gongen during the War. Hanako stowed away when I made the return trip to the Belt.

"She's got nobody to take care of her. She's just a girl." My pilot, a new hire named Amethyst Fatale, begged me to take care of our unsolicited passenger. I accused Ammie of having overdeveloped protective instincts, but she assured me this was an unusual case. That was a lie. She's done this lots of times since then.

I told Hanako she could be anything she wanted out here. She created a new life for herself, as so many other Mavericks have. Red tattoos reminded her of the society that made her an outcast. A Gongen gone gangrel. She chose a common name to stand out in flashy Maverick society. An Earther name. Jane. They called her "Red-Jane," for her hair and tattoos.

She met a Maverick named Lucan, who believed that the Outer Rim needed an Accord to unite against the Earthers and Gongen. Jane's rage killed Lucan and his trusted lieutenants in a bloodthirsty massacre. She took control of the Accord, turning a symbol of unity into an instrument of terror. Since that night, she's been known as "Raving Red-Jane." Ammie and I have been along for the ride, just trying to hold on.

My name is Kinnet. I'm a Maverick, originally from Vesta. I make my fortune with my brains, and my mouth. Two of my body parts that are still original equipment. I've always been tall, too lanky to be a proper thug. When you don't look like a tough guy on the Outer Rim, you have to live by your wits. I'm still alive, so that must be working. I keep trying with the beard, making it look sinister. I think that's the right word for it. Intimidation is helpful in my line of work.

I'm a negotiator, a planner, a businessman. My associates in the Accord will tell you that my most valuable skill is babysitting. I'm the second in command to Raving Red-Jane, the most dangerous pirate in the entire Solar System. I know her better than anybody. She's a complicated lady.

The Accord sent the brand-new Bandit Squadron to bail out an up-and-coming warlord named Brutus. Janey and me thought the guy had some potential, and figured it would be good if he owed us a favor. It was time to collect.

Brutus had run afoul of the Earther Commerce Authority. They're a persnickety bunch, with their rules and tariffs and inspections all the time. Earthers think they own everything in the damned system. Maybe they did once, but sure as Seyal, that ain't how it works now. So he had himself all hunkered down in some asteroid with the CA ships hot on his trail. We decided to send in the Surgeons to cut him loose. The kids that fly our new squadron are raw and cocky, just the right kind to throw at some stodgy Earther types. Anyway, long story short, Brutus owed us a favor for running away all those Earthers on his tail. Not that we don't enjoy that kind of work, 'cause we do. But it's business.

Janey insisted on coming with me for this negotiation. That's not normal procedure. She's not good with the subtle stuff, and that's supposed to be my job. "I want to look him in the eye," she told me. Just her and me were to meet with Brutus and his boys on the backside of Ceres. We agreed to see him in an abandoned hangar where he would give us the ship he owed us in payment for services rendered. That would be the aforementioned ass saving the Bandits provided.

"Jane, it's not necessary. Stay aboard the *Corsair*, and I'll handle this." I tried to reason with her. That doesn't usually work. When she cares about something, there's no changing her mind. "I've got to size him up," she declared. "We have to know if he's got what it takes. I can tell by looking at a man." She spoke calmly, quietly, and looked me straight in the eye. Her clear blue eyes narrowed, and I recognized the *don't mess with me on this one* look, so that was that.

Janey's tall, but so am I. We're about the same height until she puts on high-heeled boots. She's one of those tall women who wear heels so they can look down on everybody else. She wore black synthleather from head to toe, with lots of chrome rings that jingled. It's an occupational hazard for me that I think she's just about the sexiest thing on two legs, but I can't let her know that. She doesn't like personal comments, and especially about her looks. The girl has some difficult history.

Amethyst landed the *Crimson Corsair* a few hundred meters away from the hangar. The ship is only about 70 meters long and besides, she could park the thing on a city street if she had to. Best pilot I've ever seen. Ammie looked great in a flight suit, but all my love belonged to Janey.

We could see the ship inside, a small freighter, *Vulture* class. The big grappling claw is a nice feature. Jane said, "Stay with the ship, Ammie. We'll be right back."

"I always stay with the ship, Jane. I never go anywhere. I'm here when you leave, and I'm here when you get back. I'm just a pilot bot, I don't know why you even talk to me." Ammie stood in the hatchway looking pouty.

"What's her problem?" Jane asked me as we left for the hangar.

"She can't stand to be without me for a moment."

"What's it like having a lonely lap dog follow you around?"

*You oughta know*, I thought.

Jane always walked like something was gonna blow up if she didn't get there right away. Long strides from her long legs. I walked fast, but I had trouble keeping pace with her. I'll confess, I liked watching her walk.

As the two of us approached toward the building, a guy with a tall mohawk went inside. Another fat guy motioned us in with an oversized, crappy looking mechanical arm. Not near as nice as mine. Looked like these guys were not quite living large yet.

Inside, we saw those two boys standing by the ship's ramp. This *Vulture* wasn't new, but looked to be in good shape. The Accord always had a use for a small, fast cargo ship. It's called the small package trade. We don't call it smuggling.

We boarded the freighter and immediately entered the common room in the middle of the ship. Aft, through an open hatch, we could see the small cargo bay. Forward was another hatch, closed, which presumably led to the bridge.

A table occupied most of the room, where Brutus himself sat waiting. Big Arm and Mohawk stood by the two hatchways. Sitting beside their boss was a dark-haired young woman with lots of tattoos and a skinny, nervous old guy with a holo eyepiece. Skinny futzed with a datapad on the table. The girl was mostly decorative. Her skimpy outfit tried to help.

Brutus stood as we entered the ship. A muscular guy with long blonde hair, a jaw like a brick, and about a dozen piercings in each ear, he looked like he should be a pirate gang leader... in a cheap holodrama. The guy simply oozed small-time and slimy. He looked Jane up and down with a lecherous leer. I had a feeling this would not go well. This is just one of the reasons why I don't like to have Red-Jane come along for the negotiations.

"Welcome aboard the *Wind of Jupiter*," announced Brutus, as he extended his hand to Jane. She ignored the gesture, keeping her eyes fixed on him as she sat down slowly. Tattoo Girl made a dismissive snort. Jane leveled her gaze at the girl for a moment, and she shrunk down in her chair.

"I'm Kinnet and this is Raving Red-Jane. We're here to collect your payment for the Accord," I began, hopefully.

"Yeah, we're real grateful and all," volunteered Skinny.

"Shut up, lamebrain," barked his boss. "It's clear, Miss Jane, this is the start of a long and profitable association." He offered a wide grin, showing a great deal of teeth.

"Red-Jane," she stated, her eyes narrowing. "Call me Red-Jane." All business, our Janey. Her hand slowly slid to her sword hilt. Not a good sign. Mohawk and Big Arm saw this, adjusting their guns slightly. Jane took notice of their taking notice. I watched her eyes flick from one thug to another as she assessed the situation. You might think she was measuring how far it was to hack one of them in half with a single slash. Because she probably was.

"Well, I'm sure you're a busy warlord, with lots of things to take care of," I stammered. "So if you have all the data in order, we'll take possession of this ship and you can just be on your way." I nodded to Skinny, who pushed his datapad toward me. I grabbed it and looked as fast as I could for the place to press my thumbprint.

Brutus still grinned the big grin. I'll always remember him that way. Because then he asked, "Once we get this business taken care of, maybe you and me can have a private drink, okay, Janey?"

A ringing noise, a musical note produced only when a fine Gongen blade springs forth from its scabbard, chimed once. Brutus had a cut on his face, and his big grin melted away. Jane wiped blood from her blade with her hand, and then licked her fingers. Nobody in the room saw the blade strike, that's how fast it was. Later, we looked at vids of the meet, and you still couldn't see the strike.

I heard the click of a safety, the whine of plasma pistol, a boot shuffling, and my chair rolling back against the wall. I hoped as I had several times before that I could somehow stay alive for the next few seconds.

Jane faded. She didn't become invisible, she just became unnoticeable. Everybody else in the room, me included, had trouble figuring out where she was. Like she stood the edge of your peripheral vision, and when you turned to look there, she moved away again. Even though you couldn't see her when she faded, you couldn't ignore her blade.

The others had not even raised their guns or uttered a curse before the top of Mohawk's head flew off. His glorious hairdo fluttered to the deck with a spurt of blood like a wounded bird. Jane began a low, guttural, war cry of a scream.

Next, I saw her blade slice horizontally through Tattoo Girl's chair from the back, and it didn't stop for her torso. The Gongen monoblade cut through everything like butter. The girl's scream lasted a single second, and then stopped. She was a fountain of blood.

Jane stepped past Brutus and Skinny, and her blade swung with an uppercut stroke to sever Big Arm's mechanical hand at the wrist. His plasma pistol auto fired a half-dozen shots that sprayed wildly across the room. One hit Skinny squarely in the chest. Big Arm threw a punch at Jane and with one fluid motion, she ducked under his fist and her blade went through his chest, into the hatch behind him.

As quickly as it began, the dance of death stopped. Jane unfaded and stood breathing heavily, facing Brutus. She had stopped screaming, and the only noises were wet pumping blood. The room smelled of ozone and death. Brutus looked at her, his eyes huge with terror, and whispered one quiet word, "No..." That's just what her stepfather said, those many years ago. Her blade flicked once, and his head fell from his shoulders.

Bent in a combat stance with eyes blazing and teeth clenched, Jane looked at me. Her black outfit, her auburn hair, and her white skin were spattered with blood. Somehow, she still looked gorgeous. For a moment, my instincts screamed that she was going to leap over the table and take my head too. My heart pounded in my chest and thundered in my ears. Then she straightened and the fire left her eyes. She took a deep breath and looked down at her sword. She swung it once to flick off the blood and put it back into its scabbard. I heard that bzzt as the magnetic field grabbed the blade that cuts through anything. She still breathed heavily, but her face resumed its normal repose. She looked down her nose at me and said, "That went well."

I had nothing to say to that. It might have been a joke. I found the datapad, wiped some blood away, keyed to the last page, and thumbed it. Then I reached over for Brutus' hand and thumbed for him too. He didn't seem to mind.

Jane looked around the room as if someone else had killed Brutus and his crew. Then she sighed, and I asked, "Janey, did you..."

She interrupted with, "As a matter of fact, I did have to kill every last damned one of them."

When we got back to the *Corsair*, our captain stomped inside and went to her cabin. Ammie looked at the trail of blood she left on the deck, sighed, and then looked up at me. "You seem to have all your limbs," she remarked.

"Yeah, it's been worse," I replied, showing her the bloodstained datapad with my mechanical arm. "Look, a signed contract!"

"They don't usually live that long."

"Oh, he wasn't alive, but he signed it anyway."

"It's all about the deal with you, isn't it, Kinnet?"

"Negotiation is my business, Ammie."

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