

Your Life is Already Lost!

A Maverick Tale

by Michael A. Stackpole

I hate the word *Gongen*. It doesn't feel right in the mouth for cursing. Now, *Martian* does, and so does *Red*. The big problem with the *Gongen* is that they're so frustrating. All you want to do is swear at them, which is disharmonious, so they redouble the efforts to be harmonious and the cycle gets amped.

And it's all especially annoying when you don't like one of them, but he's being polite — feels he *has* to be polite — when he'd like nothing more than to be tearing off your head and spitting down your neck. Which is pretty darned disharmonious when all is said and done. And messy.

Torako's homecoming on Mars had been less than spectacular. You could see that her family was glad she was back safe and sound. Her having taken down a Shi or two didn't hurt. Pretty much everyone in her home of Michiyo had heard about things and while they were so subtle they never mentioned it at all, everyone already seemed to know everything and by talking around it could share opinions about it.

I suppose, in the long run, this not talking about stuff is good because it saves a lot of wind and bandwidth, but it's not good in some other aspects. As it turned out, I was dubbed one of those things that never got talked about and while folks were courteous, they would have rather been having a meaningful conversation with a blowtorch than me.

But, then, I'm disharmony in the flesh — well, flesh save for the parts of me that aren't flesh. In my case, that's my legs, my left eye, and a few other parts that don't show, but not *those* parts — c'mon, that's what you were thinking. I knew it, and worded things that way so you *would* be thinking that, which I mention just so you'll know I can do some thinking in depth despite being half-machine, more handsome than is allowed by law, and just oozing the sort of charisma that has stars lining up to form the Starhawk constellation.

Actually, it's a galaxy they'll be forming, but I don't want to leave the impression that I'm arrogant. I'm humble, and proudly so.

I'm also someone Torako should have killed the moment she met me because of that thing with her cousins that ended up in their being dead rather permanently. On Ceres Station she and I had gotten a line on the woman who had slain them, and learned a bit more about how tough it was going to be to avenge ourselves. A lot of folks on *Gongen* thought she should have killed me then, and it was practically unanimous that she shouldn't have brought me home with her. Folks would have preferred she was carrying on a meaningful relationship with a blowtorch rather than just breathing the same air as me.

And I know this is making it all sound like it's all about me, which it is, but it really isn't. It was my first time on *Gongen*, and everyone was being very polite. I actually liked the clean lines of the buildings and how they melded into the landscape. The rooms were not crowded and the *Gongen* really took to heart the whole "less is more" thing. I actually came to understand it, and even appreciate it.

That doesn't mean it didn't creep me out. Growing up Maverick is like being raised in a kaleidoscope world — lots of colors, lots of stuff, your world occasionally being turned upside down and all. I was still a kid when they took my real legs and gave me my first set of tin trainers. There wasn't anything wrong with

the originals, the metal ones were just better for doing whatever I was going to do with my life. Once I was up and around on them, my grandmother bought me my first tattoo to celebrate — we got matching ones, and she promised me my great-grandfather's legs once she got them back from the guy Uncle Deuce-Wild lost them to in the Hellcats game on Themis.

About the only person on Gongen who liked me, aside from Torako, was some tiny old skinny dude named Okurimono, whom Torako, Oushi, and everyone else seemed to worship. We have guys like that among the Maverick. Sister Spotweld was Mother Teresa with a wrench and blowtorch. Give her a feather and a bone and she'd build you an eagle. Like Okurimono, she was ancient, wise well past that and she'd warn you when you were swapping ones for zeros in your thinking. Okurimono would do that with a comment, Sister Spotweld would use a spanner, but the result was the same.

But she wasn't here, and Torako's brother, Oushi, wasn't listening, so that's how we'd come down to my agreeing to fight him *mano a mano*. It was just going to be a demonstration, but everyone knew blood would flow before it was all done. Or hydraulic fluid, which stains worse than blood.

Torako had agreed to act as my second for reasons I don't understand. I'm not sure she did, either.

"Starhawk, you do not need to do this." She pointed across the small arena area, which sat under a transparent canopy in a small, naturally formed bowl. Her brother sat there polishing a sword with a monomolecular edge sharp enough to sever nucleotide bonds in DNA. Oushi had been the biggest Gongen I'd seen, towering over me by a handful of centimeters and, were I not wearing tin-pins, would have outweighed me by a good twenty kilos. "He will hurt you very badly."

"You're right about one thing, but wrong about the other."

"Oh, he *will* hurt you."

"That's the one you're right about, Torako. What you're wrong about is my not needing to do this. It's more important than squashing Shi was."

"I don't understand."

"Not your fault, but you're incapable of it." She gave me a puzzled look. "Torako, I'm a Maverick. Earthers think we're scum because we willingly fled as far from Earth as possible to take up a life in the outer planets. We defied Earth's policies before you Reds ever thought of becoming anything but Martians. They hate us because we're different, we don't want to listen to them, and that's fine, too, because we tired of their old messages a long time ago.

"You Gongen, you're all about living in harmony with the universe. I mean, I love what you've done with Mars, really, it's peaceful and almost a seamless marriage of humans with the environment. It's very impressive. You've seen the demands made by the world, and you have decided to work with them."

I rapped knuckles against a titanium thigh. "To you, Mavericks are chaos incarnate. We modify ourselves for no other reason than it feels good, or it's a whim, or we lose a bet. You Gongen care very much about everything, and we don't give a damn about anything — leastways that's what it seems to you."

"If you cared about your life, you would not fight my brother."

I looked at her carefully, fixing her with the organic eye, not the one from Zeiss. "But you were ready to put your duty before your life back when we faced the Shi. Don't I have that option?"

"It is your duty to fight my brother."

"Of course, otherwise he and a couple other Capulets will beat up on my crew and I'll spend the next decade pounding dents out." I held a hand up. "No, look, not my *duty* per se, but I can put an ideal before life, can't I? Or is that only an option for you and the mudbugs on Earth? Did we abandon that when we fled planets?"

Torako frowned, which was a major display of consternation for her, then sighed. "I do not see the ideal here, Starhawk."

"It's pretty simple: your brother and everyone else, save for Okurimono, has been counting the ways you could have gotten rid of me and still fulfilled your mission to avenge your cousins. They don't see me as a human. I've been identified as an enemy, even a traitor to my own kind since I'm helping you. Well, I'm not standing for it."

"But you will die for it?"

"If needs be, I will." I slowly smiled. "Of course, I might just beat your brother."

"Technically you might. It is to first blood, this match, but the blood he'll draw will be from your aorta."

Okay, so the finality with which she underscored her words did knot my guts up. I held my right hand up, flexed it, then stiffened the fingers. "Back to Plan A, then. I just reach into his chest and pluck out his heart."

"Starhawk..."

"Hey, it worked with the Shi, didn't it?"

"You had different legs. You surprised them. And we don't even know if the Shi *have* hearts."

Same goes for Oushi there. I didn't let that thought get into the queue for my voice, but the quick narrowing of her eyes let me know she knew what I was thinking. I didn't know if that was because of our short association, or the weirdness with the Mumon Rift, or both. Sometimes she could be as spooky as a Shi.

Down below, Master Okurimono stepped to the center of the little arena and beckoned us forward. Oushi strode down wearing a red robe with a black Shikami No mask embroidered on the back, breast, and sleeves. Torako wore a similar robe, though the colors were reversed on it. I'd been given something in peasant brown with a hawk crest on it.

We stopped a half-dozen meters apart and all parties bowed respectfully to Okurimono. He returned the bows, then smiled that sort of thin-lipped smile that is supposed to be ironic, I think. "This duel is to first blood, as agreed, and has begun, but I would ask a favor of you, Oushi."

"Anything, Master."

Okurimono clapped his hands and four young men and women came struggling down a narrow path. The two oldest carried a bronze cylinder about twenty centimeters long and ten in diameter. The other two

brought a small stand upon which the cylinder was placed, raising it on two arms about a meter from the ground. The four aides retreated and knelt, heads lowered.

Okurimono looked at me. "Starhawk-san, I wish you to know exactly what kind of foe you face, and how formidable his weapon is. More important than that weapon, however, is the precision with which he is able to wield it."

I nodded.

"Oushi, bisect the cylinder to a depth of seven centimeters."

"As you desire, Master."

The big man moved around so he faced me and his master, but to his credit, he didn't make any face at me or try to intimidate me. The demonstration would be enough to do that. I'd already figured out that my legs would be kindling compared to that cylinder, and the parts of me that could bleed would be even less of a bother.

I glanced at Torako. "You ever beat your brother in a fight?"

"No."

I shrugged as nonchalantly as creeping terror would let me. "Then I'll be one up on you."

Oushi put the lie to that comment by drawing his sword, raising it and sinking his blade into the bronze so quickly that I was barely aware he'd moved. The *clang* of metal striking metal shocked me. I immediately invoked a program that replayed the short-term video buffer from my left eye. It recorded things at 300 frames a second and he was still a blur.

The sword in the cylinder wasn't.

Master Okurimono smiled. "Excellent, Oushi-san." He looked at me. "Inspect it. You will find it is seven centimeters exactly."

I stepped forward, very close to the metal, and squatted. The blade had sliced through it cleanly. It hadn't even wavered enough to shave off little curlicues of bronze to dangle like party streamers. Of Oushi's skill there was no doubt and, as I looked into his brown eyes, we had one of those moments — sort of like sharing thoughts with his sister, but different.

In an instant he knew I'd expected to pull some subterfuge to defeat him, and he'd been alert for anything. His hands even tightened on his blade's hilt. He had no respect for me because he expected, he *knew*, I was going to use some dishonorable trick to defeat him. For him to allow that to happen would be to dishonor his family, his teacher, his people. It wasn't going to happen, and in doing whatever I would do, I'd have proved I was less than honorable, and certainly incapable of understanding the subtlety necessary to be as refined and impressive as the Gongen.

I read that in his eyes and he read it in mine. What he didn't read was that I'd always been looking for a way around a trick. Doing that would be to win the fight on my terms, and I knew that wouldn't get me anything with the Gongen. I'd won a little respect agreeing to meet him for a fight. To dishonor that would confirm all the bad things he thought about me. I would have lost even if I won.

Until that moment, though, I'd not had the flash of insight that showed me the way to win. I was a Maverick in a Gongen fight. I couldn't be expected to win. In losing, I would be victorious because I showed I respected their way. I would be in harmony with their system.

Oushi never could have dreamed that, glancing at my own reflection in his blade, I could have reached such a conclusion. Because of that, he had no time to react as I tilted my head and pressed my right cheekbone to his blade's edge. The slightest pressure opened a five centimeter long cut just below my right eye. I rocked back and away, leaving blood on his blade and more seeping down my cheek.

I rose, then bowed to him. "You have succeeded, Oushi-san. You are the victor."

Oushi stared at me and almost dropped his jaw in surprise. Then he released the sword, stepped back, and bowed to me. He held the bow a bit longer than I had mine. He came back up, bowed to his master for a longer time, then spun on his heel and retreated from the arena, followed by the four students.

Okurimono produced a small white cloth from the sleeve of his black robe and cleaned the blade with it. He looked at the shape of the bloodstain as if trying to read portents from it, then folded it and hid the cloth away again.

"That was not what I expected, Starhawk-san."

"No? It's what you set up."

"No, this test was just a catalyst. It would have sped you to cheat, or Oushi to show mercy. Either would have hastened your death. I did not expect you to willingly lose."

I shrugged. "It was a catalyst. Since my loss was a foregone conclusion, why fight it and die?"

"Such is the essence of the Maverick." Okurimono smiled openly. "Remember this, Torako. Earth seeks domination. Gongen seeks harmony. The Mavericks know that survival is the best. Domination and harmony are but means to survival. The Maverick adapt and change to survive, and that may be the best strategy over all."

"Yes, Master, thank you." Torako bowed to him.

I did the same and he returned our bows, and then left us alone with the sword in the cylinder. I pointed to it. "Your brother going to leave it here forever?"

"Probably. You have destroyed his harmony with that blade."

I frowned for a second, then nodded. "Makes me a little sad. Then again, here, in this place, it almost seems to fit, doesn't it?"

She studied it, then nodded. "It does. It is our way. It may remain forever."

"That would be okay. Not like I'll be forgetting it ever."

"No, you should not." She raised a hand tentatively toward my cheek. "I will get you medical care."

"Don't bother. It'll stop bleeding soon."

"But you will scar."

"It'll just make me even more handsome." I smiled, ignoring the sting. "After all, how many men can say they've been in a fight with Oushi Kujiko and only come away with a scar on the cheek. We go back to Ceres Station and I'll be drinking for free on that story alone."

Torako gave me one of those long glances, part disbelief, part reproof, then she shook her head. "The Master is right. Somehow you manage to survive. I have to wonder something, however."

"What's that?"

"Why do you feel compelled to put yourself in so many situations where you are required to survive?"

"It's easy, Torako." I gave her a wink. "Someone has to watch *your* back. If that puts me in harm's way, so be it."