

“The art of war, then, is governed by five constant factors, to be taken into account in one's deliberations, when seeking to determine the conditions obtaining in the field...

Earth comprises distances, great and small;
danger and security;
open ground and narrow passes;

Sun-Tzu, *The Art of War*

THE ART OF WAR: EARTH

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PART ONE

Preface

When we last left our intrepid Duchess, she was believed drugged as Dave Hollister drove the two of them back into Qingliu to make a switch: her for his sister, Jade.

Aris Sung and Raven Clearwater had learned of a meeting between the Lancers in the city and a man named David Hollister.

Force Leader Erik Richardson's relationship with Doles and Smithson is tenuous due to his failure in producing the Duchess—until Hollister makes the call to arrange the switch.

***North of the Convention Center, evening
Shou Lao Mountain overlook, Hustaing
Sian Commonality, Capellan Confederation
09 October 3060***

Erik Richardson stood on the overlook's edge, his knuckles white as he gripped the cold iron guardrail, waiting. Shou Lao Mountain rose behind him, its highest peak reaching nearly a kilometer into the velvety night sky. Stars twinkled like diamonds against the black as the ever-present October wind pulled at his cap and numbed his fingers. He hated waiting. He and his people had waited long enough for this night. Once it was finished, they would all be going home.

Except for the Duchess. If he had anything to do with her future, Isis Marik would never see the Celestial Palace again.

Several attacks from House Hiritsu against what remained of the Blackwind Lancers were only the first in a week of disasters, forcing Richardson to delay the retrieval of his prize. On the heels of Smithson's reassignment of over half of his remaining unit, two of his men found what Richardson had always feared they would find—had missed—upon their occupation of the abandoned headquarters.

A final bomb.

Oh, his unit had scoured the entire bunker before occupying it upon their reassignment under Richardson's command. But always in the back of his mind there was a niggling doubt. This was the Maskirovka.

The *Mask*.

The Chancellor's secret service did not release their property easily.

Or freely.

Playing along side his desire to acquire the Duchess, Richardson had waited for the other shoe to drop.

It did in the form of a well wired, lo-key trigger device placed just within the inner door frame. The Maskirovka counted on the relaxation of the enemy—on their feeling secure, and safe, and so booby-trapped a gesture so common to man in a period of relaxation.

One of the two had simply leaned against the door frame. The other had heard the click. The poor soldier leaning back need only move forward and the entire underground bunker would become their tomb.

Without a word to Smithson, or to Captain Doles, Richardson evacuated his people along with the two prisoners, and accepted the soldier's sacrifice when the trigger was released. Richardson would make sure he received the highest of honors when their time on Hustaing was done.

And that was a personal vow he would keep, not something he would trust to the muddle-minded decisions of his superiors.

Doles no longer spoke with tones of confidence and reassurance in Richardson's abilities. Major Smithson refused to speak with him at all, as if she'd already given up on his competence, her own focus diverted to the survival of her few remaining BattleMechs. Any day they feared DropShips would appear in the sky, filled with the Chancellor's men.

After the evacuation, Richardson's focus diverted to finding a new safe haven. Days passed and there was no word from Hollister. He would admit to himself and no one else that he'd given up hope, and considered a suicide mission against House Hiritsu. Anything to end the standoff.

And then the call came through to him—not from Hollister, but from Isis Marik herself—renewing their deal of exchange. But Isis had demanded the mountain. Isis had demanded the cover of night.

Shou Lao Mountain, a local hiking area. Since the invasion of Qingliu, the roads to it had been blocked by debris, and a VTOL was necessary for quick access, though back roads could still be traveled with all-terrain vehicles. But even as he stood on the edge of a popular overlook at the deserted road leading down toward the highway into the city, Richardson had his misgivings. Things were quiet.

Too quiet. Both on the horizon and in the forest on either side of him. Some of the trees to the left and right reached high into the night with naked spires, stretching up and out from evergreens like the limbs of some great serpent grasping for light. The evergreens were too close together, wrapped by endless vines and waist-high scrubs with sticky burrs that tore at skin and clothing. There were no sounds, other than the distant echo of fighting in

the city, and the rustling of dead leaves in the trees as the wind wrenched them from their branches.

But even through the dense foliage their thermal imagers and night goggles could make out the movement of tiny animals—as well as the larger ones dressed in clothing, carrying concealed weapons. The Lancers hadn't been alone since topping the mountain. Richardson had expected this—more gangs to interrupt their plans.

Let them come, he thought to himself as he brought his thermal enhanced binoculars up to his eyes. He'd spoken to Hollister several hours earlier, confirming the location of their exchange. But only a fool would believe the man would come to the mountain alone, without surprises.

I have a surprise or two of my own.

Five of his best snipers lay in wait within those woods. Intel gathered at the expense of his closest aide identified a group of twenty young men and women. He'd sent a small group of infantry in first to scout around. All of them had reported in seeing various movements in the trees, the bushes, along the mountainside. And one by one his men had dispatched those little nuisances and disposed of the bodies.

But if Isis or Hollister had any more surprises, Richardson opted to use the VTOL behind him. Once he had Isis, he would lift up and away, taking her straight to his commanding officer.

He allowed himself a brief smile when envisioning taking Duchess Isis Marik by the hair and dragging her before his superiors, delivering their hope of a safe exodus off Hustraig.

Soon. So very soon.

Footsteps to Richardson's left signaled Sergeant Cooper's advance. "Sir."

"Is Hollister's backup taken care of?"

"Yes sir. All that we can see. Shadow One reports no activity along the main highway. But Shadow Two noted movement along the left footpath. Awun's people are in place, and if his boasts are to be believed, they've already slit the throats of over fifty Yellow Dragons."

Richardson knitted his brows together. Boasts or not, the gang's added man-power as well as their hatred for the Yellow Dragons

and the Ch'in-Shu-Pao were needed. "I'll take that into advise-
ment. Tell Shadow Two to keep an eye on them. Observe, but do
not engage. If they discover the movement is not our target, kill it
quietly."

Cooper nodded and left. The VTOL Richardson had used to scale
the mountain sat silent twenty meters away. Jade Hollister sat in-
side with his most trusted marksman. If she made a sound, he was
to shoot her.

But Jade was smart. Richardson knew that. She would remain
silent until she found the chance to come after him, her brother
and Isis be damned. He'd seen it in the beautiful blonde's eyes—an
unforgiving hatred. Of that he was sure.

It was too bad both she and her brother would have to die to
ensure a clean escape. He wasn't sure if the Yellow Dragons were
acting on their own agenda or with Hollister, but knowing David
Hollister's ties to some of the local city gangs, Richardson was
certain he would not be alone when he brought Isis.

And Richardson would be ready.



"How many?"

"I counted more than twenty, just to the right of that high peak,
and several up in the trees—go se!" Raven Clearwater hissed. Aris
could just see her outline beneath the moon's light that filtered
through the half-bare tree branches above them as she flicked her
hand away from her, and then brought her finger into her mouth.

He could see much better if he used his night-goggles, but felt
they were a hindrance to his connection with the wood itself. The
trees would tell him where the enemy hid. He'd noticed the sur-
rounding scrubs, felt a prick on his finger. Once. It was enough for
him to stay well clear of their inconvenience.

But it seemed Raven hadn't learned not to touch the fire yet.

Aris Sung pursed his lips. Twenty meters ahead was the start of
the footpath that led to the overlook where the exchange would
be made. Jade Hollister for Isis Marik. He could feel, as well as see
and smell, others in the forest.

“Yellow Dragons?”

The answer to that question came from Aris’ left, where Robert Cheng had moved in after Raven. Robert had proven his worth by leading them this far with no interference. He’d proven to be a good scout as well, and had had no problems following Aris’ lead. “Yellow Dragons are all dead. What lives is worse.”

Aris turned to look into the shadow of a clump of brush. He could just make out the outline of Robert’s dark jacket. “The Ch’in-Shu-Pao?” Aris named one of the three gangs from Choi-bay that had entered the city, looking for a fight, and the payoff of a bounty. The Ch’in-Shu-Pao were self elected Guardians of the city, upholders of justice. *Their* justice. The code of the street.

Aris had hoped they would work with he and Raven in rescuing Isis, in sort of a Guardianship of the Chancellor’s fiancée. But there had been no response to the Zengs’ requests.

One shake of his head. “No. Fan-K’uei.”

“*Go se*,” Aris spit out, in spite of himself. He had heard of the Fan-K’uei. The Butchers. They were known for their mercenary ways—hired hitters. Murderers. Killers of children.

Even their leader had adopted the name of war.

Awun.

So why were *they* here? Aris closed his eyes in frustration. The Fan-K’uei weren’t known for their ability to negotiate. They rarely took hostages for ransom, and anyone taken by the Fan-K’uei was never seen again. *No, they are here for the prestige, the game, and the spoil. The Lancers have made a deal with the devil—the K’uei are here for Isis. I fear not only are we in danger, as well as the Duchess, but the Force Leader has just misjudged the loyalty of a snake.*

Robert continued. “The Fan-K’uei have taken out the Yellow Dragons. I saw one of them move no more than a few meters from me.”

“Does Hollister have any connections within the Fan-K’uei?”

Robert shook his head. “No. In fact, the two of them clashed a year ago. There was a shipment of antibiotics that went missing. Awun’s men had killed the courier and took it—then wanted payment for its return. Awun had wanted Jade as that payment.”

This just keeps getting better and better. “Where are they? How are they recognized?”

Robert's low voice deepened. Aris noticed his continuous glance at the woods around them. "Arrogance is their weakness," the other man said softly. "They wear a dragon pierced by a sword embroidered on a black band tied around their arms. Left arm denotes ranking, right arm means soldier."

Aris nodded. "Good. Awun?"

"Oh, you'll know *him*. Trust me."

That isn't very reassuring. Aris was confident in his abilities of stealth and prowess against a gang leader, but he knew that with so many players on the board, it would be hard to move through them to their target.

The Duchess.

His princess.

And as of this moment, he had no idea where Isis was. He was certain Force Leader Richardson didn't have her—the few Zengs that had volunteered to help them were posted closer to the overlook. If he were to take her, Aris would hear the signal.

But there had only been silence. Rumor was the Yins were on-ground as well. But Aris had seen no sign of them. And that bothered him more.

No news was perhaps good news. But now that he knew an even greater threat than the Lancers loomed nearby, Aris decided it was time to move. With a signal to Raven, he melted into the darkness again and started up the footpath, sensing Raven to his left in the woods, and Robert to his right.

After several minutes of quick, uneasy steps, Aris moved out of the scrub and bare trees and stopped. A VTOL sat quietly between him and the overlook. He didn't see Richardson, but knew he was nearby, because he could just hear the receiver on the Force Leader's radio as reports from varied positions came through.

It was a low volume, but Aris had trained ears.

Raven appeared on his left, and he saw Robert edge to the forest's end several meters to his right. Aris narrowed his eyes as he watched the VTOL. No movement, but his guess would be if Richardson intended to honor the trade, then Jade Hollister would be inside the carrier—either subdued or restrained. And under guard.

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A quick glance around and Aris counted seven Lancers in the scrubs, all wearing goggles and armed for night-combat. He, Robert and Raven might have already been seen. He looked at Raven who held up seven fingers to tell him her own count. Seven—not so bad. Seven infantry. Second signal, no movement. Perhaps they'd not seen the Zengs, or heard Aris and his two shadows appear.

Aris raised his hand so the posted Zeng could see it, then made several signs. They would remain where they were, until they saw Hollister arrive with Isis. Aris' plan was to take Jade and have Robert get her back down the mountain to safety. Aris decided then he would wait in the VTOL for Hollister and take Isis himself, and kill Richardson.

He checked his chronometer. Minutes until the appointed meeting. He could feel the tension surrounding him as so many waited for their chance to take the prize. In the distance he could hear as well as feel the low, pounding sounds of gauss fire, laser cannons and the step of BattleMechs.

The Warrior part of Aris wanted to be inside of his *Wraith*, aiding in the fight against the Lancers. He realized he was fighting for the greater purpose, for his Chancellor's heart.

Or so he hoped.

Aris set his own goggles over his eyes. He placed each of the Lancers hidden in the brush—and only spotted five. Five out of how many? Twenty—was that what Robert reported?

Where were the Lancers on point?

The few there had their attention split between the wood and the VTOL. If he kept closer to the mountain and low to the cool ground, they may not see him and he could slip into the carrier.

Aris made a sign for Raven and Robert to keep watching before he moved out of the cover of the trees and blended in with the shadow of the carrier. He eased against the hard, metallic edge of the flyer and felt the cold steel against his back through his shirt as he set a small knife between his teeth and pressed further into the shadows. The wind was stronger and much colder outside the cover of the trees and scrub. He felt it numb his fingers and he wiggled his toes inside his shoes.

Radio static drifted out on the wind from inside the carrier. Tiny metallic voices reporting in from the perimeter. A few scattered reports of movement, but Aris wasn't sure the Lancers were seeing the Zengs, still living Yellow Dragons or Awun's people.

Just let me get to Jade and get to Isis. He prayed to the universal winds that the Zengs and the Fan would keep things on a level field.

But that was asking a lot from the universe.

Aris looked down and checked the ground for any dry, crackable leaves. There were none—the wind wouldn't allow them to rest here. He slid along the carrier's side to his left until he was beside the open door. He knelt down, making himself little more than a pesky shadow, and peeked up and into the VTOL.

A uniformed man sat on Aris' left, a needler held up in his right hand, his left clasped around a radio. His attention looked to be diverted between the radio and the woman to his left.

Jade Hollister sat very still beside the soldier. Her mouth was set in a thin line, and she kept her eyes wide open, watching every move the man made. If Aris read her body posture right she was going to try something stupid.

He double checked the scene again and melted back down into a shadow. Aris knew what he had to do for the least amount of collateral damage. Or noise. It was going to take precise timing—assuming that Miss Hollister didn't attempt that something stupid at the wrong moment.

Aris retrieved his knife from his teeth, holding the blade with his right hand and unholstered his Nakjama with his left. He stood slowly, his back pressed against the cold metal.

One. Two.

Three.

Without a sound he whirled to his left, appeared in the open door, hurled the knife into the soldier's neck as he lowered the radio and looked at Aris, grabbed the falling gun before it clattered to the metal floor, and aimed his Nakjama at Jade's face.

Her eyes widened. She was beautiful, if not a bit mussed. Wheat colored hair glowed in the dim light of the VTOL as it cascaded over the shoulders of her dark green jumpsuit.

After silently sliding the dead soldier's gun into his belt, Aris put his right finger to his lips, winked and motioned with a move of his head for Jade to follow him. She nodded, but paused over the dead soldier and began rifling through his clothing.

"What are you doing?" Aris' whisper barely cut through the still air.

"Looking for a key!" She was louder. Too loud for his tastes.

Oh...good.

She yanked the knife out of the soldier's neck, and Aris was impressed with the woman's stomach for gore. She found the key, but couldn't get to it with her hands bound. Aris reached in, took the key from her, and unlocked the restraints. She set them on the seat she vacated and Aris helped her out of the VTOL.

But as he turned to signal to Raven he felt the sharp edge of his knife against the right side of his throat. *Ahh...there's the something stupid.*

"Give me that gun."

Aris smiled. "No."

He felt her hesitate at his simple answer, and used that second to spin left, push out with the lower part of his right fist, and shove it hard into her right elbow. As expected, she staggered to her right and dropped the knife.

Aris rolled forward and was back on his feet in seconds, the knife in his own hand. "I believe this is mine."

Jade narrowed her emerald eyes. "You're not from around here."

He decided to give her one more chance. "I'm a friend of the Duchess."

Jade reached out and grabbed his shoulders. "She's alive? Isis is alive? She really survived the crash?"

Aris hadn't expected such a startled reaction, and nearly spun her into a headlock. Pulled back at the last second. He started to answer, but something thumping deep inside his chest stopped him. Jade's eyes widened as well. It was the sound of a VTOL in flight.

Wind tossed dead autumn leaves up from the ground, stirring about the cold and what little dirt was not transformed to mud from the rain in the previous days. Aris put his hand up to protect his eyes as a light shone through the open left door of the VTOL.

No.

It couldn't be.

"Well." The tall blonde crouched beside Aris, behind the stationary carrier, and frowned at the hovering VTOL above them. "I certainly hope that's not Dave or we have to have a little talk on quiet entrances."



Seven days.

A lot could happen in seven days.

A girl could be shot at. Learn to field dress a wound. Throw a pretty good punch. She could even learn to handle a truck and shoot a gun with decent aim.

And she could get a warmer change of clothing that didn't look like it came from the mental ward of a hospital.

Seven days, and Isis finally felt like she was doing something other than running.

Seated on David's right inside the cab of the "borrowed" truck, dressed in jeans, warm socks, boots, tank-top and tight weave jacket, a pistol strapped to her side, her hair washed, combed and pulled back from her face, Isis felt—pretty good.

The Ch'in-Shu-Pao gang worked with David to set up the meeting on top of Shou Lao. The mountain itself was their original home, and they knew it better than any other group. Which was why Isis chose it.

Repaying a debt owed to the Hollister family, their leader, Tien Mu, had devised a plan to infiltrate the mountain, distract the Lancers' leader and rescue Jade. They were aware of the others nearby, the Yellow Dragons, a few Zengs, as well as the shamed Fan-K'uei, and the plan was to avoid any unwanted skirmishes with any of them. They were to be invisible, to come and go like a breath of air, unnoticed and unseen.

Well, the best laid plains....the Fan-K'uei had killed nearly all the Yellow Dragons, as well as a few of the Lancers. Tien Mu's right hand had found a few of the bodies.

The truck jostled and rocked as David wrestled with the steering wheel on the little-traveled access road. A Ch'in-Shu member once worked the grounds of the mountain park and had often used this route. A hole in the road several meters up, closer to the rendezvous point with Richardson, would prevent the two of them from driving the entire way.

Tien Mu and one other gang member held onto the back of the truck, their weapons ready, their entire bodies robed in black.

When the hole loomed before them, visible beneath the moonlight, David stopped the truck. Isis checked her weapon and stepped lightly to the ground. She winced—her calf was still a bit sore—but she was determined that it wouldn't interfere with her helping Jade. David and Tien Mu came around the side and moved in close.

"My men will keep the Lancers busy—but we aren't enough in number to dissuade the Fan-K'uei."

David nodded as he checked his pistol. "We'll be quick."

Isis looked at Tien Mu as he stepped closer. He stood several centimeters taller, with light hazel eyes nearly the color of her own. He kept his hair long, and pulled back in a neat ponytail at the nape of his neck.

In a way, he reminded her of Aris Sung. Or maybe Aris before he was a 'MechWarrior.

"My Lady," he said in a soft voice and put a hand on her shoulder. Though she sensed he held a reverence for her position, for *who* she was, he was also more familiar with her than any Capellan she'd ever met. "I must again state my objections. The Fan-K'uei are here because the Lancers have employed them. The Yellow Dragons sent several scouting parties and all but three members have been killed, their bodies tossed over the side of the mountain. But my fears rest heavily with Awun's men. They are not to be trusted. You are in danger and should remain across Choi-bay."

She'd heard this speech before. And like before, she gave him a thin smile. "I appreciate your concern, Tien—but Jade's in this because of me. I have to go with David."

"I'll take care of her." David sounded less than confident.

Tien Mu turned a raised eyebrow at David. "You were the one ready to trade her without a fight, Hollister. The Duchess isn't currency."

"I know—but I didn't, did I?" He looked as exasperated as he sounded. "Maybe the knock to my head actually did some good."

Isis gave him a wink. Her playing possum that night on the drive back into Qingliu had proven a wise decision. Through the rain she'd seen the movements of BattleMechs to the right. David had seemed oblivious, somehow certain they wouldn't engage a single vehicle as they made their way into the city.

She'd watched the *JagerMech* closely, remembering her dreams of towering behemoths of metal, and of Sun-Tzu with Richardson's face. Prophetic? Maybe. But she had wasted no time in grabbing the wheel and wrenching it to the left when the 'Mech rotated its torso and fired at them. The van had crashed, and David had been unconscious, but they had survived. And she'd taken care of him in the shadows of an old building.

And during their second night, as David lay sleeping, she had spoken directly with Erik Richardson.

David's phone had chimed and Isis hadn't been sure what to do. She knew Jade's life depended on her, and that thought brought the receiver to her ear. "Hello?"

"....Hollister?"

Her thoughts had traveled back to that morning—had it been a month?—when her limo had been attacked and her guards killed. She recalled Li Wynn's face, and that of the tank driver who acted with bravado and kindness when he believed he was helping a hostage escape from the enemy. "No."

There was a pause. "Duchess."

Her title had never sounded more awe-inspiring as it did in that breath. She felt as if she was a prize set upon a pedestal atop a great mountain, and he had finally reached the pinnacle. "Richardson."

"So—Hollister is telling the truth."

"Yes. Are you? Is Jade still alive?"

He had laughed, and the sound hadn't been mocking. "Jade is fine—and very—spirited. Are you spirited, Isis? So much so that you would trade your life for hers? You know, if you hadn't run that day—Jade would be free. So many people would still be alive. Are you ready to take responsibility for those lives?"

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And there it had been—that nexus—that turning point for Isis when no one but herself made the choice.

Her choice.

“Yes—but not today. *I will call you.*”

“You don’t make the rules here, Duchess.”

Isis had grinned at that moment—the first one she’d felt deep down in her bones. “Yes, *Captain*, I do.” And she’d disconnected.

It wasn’t long after that Tien Mu’s people had found them, and the deal was done.

“Duchess?”

She blinked, banished the memories of the past week, and nodded to David. As frightening as these last days had been, they were better than living them afraid and helpless.

No longer.

“Let’s go.”



Erik Richardson turned as the VTOL sailed up and over him, its light making an excellent target. His men as well as himself began shooting at it, the clink of slugs against metal nearly drowned out by the VTOL’s engines.

What deceit was this? He stumbled back as the whiz and thud of slugs from the VTOL pummeled the ground around him. He bellowed as one of them found his left calf and he buckled to the ground less than a meter from his own VTOL.

“Evans!” he shouted as he slapped a hand over the bleeding wound. “Evans,” he repeated as he moved his shoulder mic to his chin. “It’s a trap—start it up.” When the VTOL remained dark, Richardson felt his heart sink. “Evans?!”

No answer from the carrier. Nor did any of his men race from the trees. The woods were silent of his own force.

"Sir," came a familiar voice over his earpiece. It was Cooper. "The enemy carrier moved over the mountain top out of range. Jones and Misaki are dead."

Two more soldiers gone. *Dammit.* "Any movement on the road?"

"Not from our target, sir—but some of us have encountered—*behind you!*" The crack of gunfire echoed both through the mic's speaker, and through the trees nearby. "It's Awun's men, sir! They're attacking *us!*"

A simple exchange had quickly turned into a disaster. "Cooper!"

"They're in the trees!" called out his second from the mic.

I hate forests! Richardson reached into the left hip pocket of his belt and pulled out a med dressing. He yanked on it with his teeth, releasing the bandage, and then wrapped it quickly around his calf several times. The antiseptic was delivered promptly to the gaping wound, disinfecting it and deadening the pain. But even with the pain gone, his damaged muscles weren't going to work at one hundred percent. No—he was going to be slow going.

Richardson grabbed his pistol from where he dropped it when he fell and limped toward the VTOL. He pulled himself up and slammed his body to the side before leveling the gun in front of him and looking inside.

Evans was dead. Jade was gone.

The enemy carrier appeared over the mountaintop again, over Richardson, firing down below and shining a blinding light over the area. When the light played inside the cockpit, Richardson saw the wound in Evan's neck.

Knife.

He'd seen the same wounds in his men over and over during the gang attacks. Knives. Small. Easy to conceal. And wielded with deadly accuracy.

Hollister had indeed brought company with him.

More gunfire erupted all around Richardson. He called into his mic for a status report and received varied reports—all of them giving accounts of things dropping from the trees. He heard screams, and more gunfire.

And then he heard something else. Voices, just outside the VTOL.

“—sure she’s in there? It’s awfully dark. Do you see those bodies over by the trees?”

“Yeah, I noticed. Maybe there were hit when the VTOL passed over. But where else would he stash Jade? And besides, they’re all busy right now—at least the ones that aren’t lying on the ground.”

Richardson held his breath. Could it be? He recognized Hollister’s voice—but the other one. The voice was feminine, though not Jade’s. And if it was Isis Marik, it sounded to him as if she were no longer Hollister’s captive, but his ally.

He grabbed the restraints from the seat beside Evans’ body and peered out the side window. Two figures in fatigues and black caps were crouched on the dark side of the VTOL. One was definitely male and the other had a long stream of dark hair threaded through the adjustment opening of her cap.

Isis.

A slow smile pulled at the corner of his lips as he raised his pistol to his chest and he pressed himself into the darkest recess of the carrier.

Come on in, Duchess. I’m ready for you.



“We cannot go that way!”

“Now you listen to *me*—”

Aris spun around and put an index finger in Jade’s face. Her hair practically glowed in the dulled light of the full moon. “No, *you* listen. There are not only Lancers posted along that road, but Fan’K’eu members, all vying for the Duchess. You really want to stumble into their waiting arms? And will you please keep your voice down?”

For the first time since retrieving Hollister’s sister from the VTOL, Aris felt he’d actually broken through the woman’s bravado. She hesitated with a quick glance into the dark. Gunfire still echoed

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throughout the woods as the remainder of Richardson's men fought for their lives. "Awun is here?"

Aris nodded once. Jade's voice had sounded panicked. "My goal is to retrieve you, and the Duchess, and then disappear."

"And David. I can't leave without David."

Raven snorted from the darkness. "Of course. All we need are more complications."

He hated to admit it, but Aris sympathized with Raven Clearwater's frustration. None of them had counted on the surprise VTOL, and though dramatic and surprising—having taken the Lancers off-guard—chaos had ensued, making finding Hollister and Isis practically impossible. The only lead Aris had was the radio he'd plucked from the dead pilot in the VTOL.

No one had come up the main road guarded by the Lancers and Mi'Tien's people, though several scuffles between the two had left black spots in their patrols. Aris didn't know if their two targets were in the flying carrier, or down here on the ground. The situation had digressed rapidly into bedlam.

"And just who are *you*?" Jade covered up her obvious fright with volume as she cast a glare into the darkness where the voice had come from. "His sidekick?"

Raven appeared from the darkness, and Aris became aware of Robert nearby, approaching their position from the left. "*Gwon nee tze-jee du shr.*"

Jade narrowed her eyes. "I will not mind my own business—David *is* my business."

"That's enough," Aris hissed. "Robert," he addressed the darkness.

"Yes," the Zeng member moved out from behind a tree.

Jade gave a sharp intake of breath. "Robert—what are you doing here?"

Aris frowned, until he remembered Robert's comment about making deliveries for Hollister Printing. It would make sense that she knew him.

"I'm here to help you and Mister David," Robert gave her a short bow. "It is good to see you healthy and in one piece." He looked to

Aris. "Most of the Lancers are engaged with the Butchers. I found a cache of Yellow Dragon bodies, near the drop off, about twenty meters that way."

"He wasn't kidding?" Jade shifted uneasily, the gun she'd insisted Aris give her held tightly in her hand as she gestured to him with a nod. "Awun is really here?"

"I have not seen him, Miss Jade, but I have seen his mark."

Raven shook her head. "Mark?"

"He carves an A into the flesh of his victims," Robert said. "And I have seen many As."

"*Go se*," Jade muttered.

"What about Hollister? Or the Duchess?"

Robert shook his head. "Nothing along the main road—but we've found a truck on one of the old access roads."

Jade nodded. "That would make sense—David knows several of the Guardians—the Ch'in-Shu-Pao. I'll bet they're here helping him, and they used to work the grounds of this park."

"It was empty?" Aris said.

"Empty, but the engine was warm."

Another volley of shots made everyone look in the direction of the ledge where Aris had found Jade. "My guess is they went after you." He looked at Raven. "They're on their way to that ledge. We need to backtrack. Richardson's there."

Raven nodded and disappeared. Aris started to walk behind Jade until she grabbed his arm.

"Wait—where are you going?"

"Back to the VTOL. If David and Isis went there for you—since we did not intercept them along the road—then they are in danger if Richardson is not dead."

"I'm coming with you."

"No," Aris nodded to Robert and gave him two hand signals: get Jade off the mountain and to safety. He looked at her. "We'll get them both back, but we have to hurry before our activity here catches the attention of the Lancer 'Mechs."

With that he moved into the forest following behind Raven, hoping his guess on Hollister and Isis' location was right, and that Richardson had died during the VTOL's initial strafing run.



Isis held her gun in front of her as David circled around the other side of the motionless VTOL. All around them the night sky flashed with the gunfire. She heard men and women shouting. *Just exactly how many people are on this mountain? Awfully crowded up here.*

She shivered uncontrollably, though not from fear. It was cold, and the wind whipping around them felt like an arctic blast as it flowed through one open door of the carrier and out the other, creating a small wind tunnel of a sort.

Once she saw David on the other side, he gave a hand-signal for her to stay put while he looked inside. Isis was proud of herself for learning the signals so fast. Even David seemed impressed.

Isis, now crouched at the base of the VTOL, peered through the runners. She should have seen David by now, or at least his feet, on the other side. Around them she could just make out several unmoving uniformed men half in and half out of the trees and shrubbery.

Maybe if I just creep up over the side—

She heard the blast, felt the vibration against the carrier's sides. A small yell escaped her before she could gain control. A gunshot.

But who...

Wind whipped leaves and debris in her eye as she saw someone fall to her right. Light from the passing VTOL shone down, and she saw David on his back, his eyes closed. She could see the blood welling over his chest.

“David!” Isis scrambled over to him, put a hand on his chest, felt the slight rise and fall of his breathing, and then placed the two fingers of her left hand to his neck. Alive. He was alive.

“It’s nice to see you again, Duchess.”

She looked up and saw Richardson standing in the opening of the carrier. A bandage was wrapped tight around his left calf, revealing he hadn't escaped unscathed from the earlier VTOL fire. His right hand pointed a Nakjama at her. Her own grip on her pistol tightened.

"Raise your hands. High."

Isis set the pistol on the ground beside David, pushing it a little to hide it before she stood, her hands held up over her head.

Richardson kicked something out of the VTOL. It landed with a thud on the leaves and mud near her left foot. It was a pair of restraints. "Put those on."

Isis stared at the cuffs. Then she looked back at David's body.

"He's still breathing, and he might live," Richardson said. "As long as you do as you're told. Hands behind you or my second shot goes through his head."

The pistol lay on the ground to her right between her and David. With her gaze locked on Richardson above her, she knelt and reached out with her left hand and grabbed the restraints. She then put them behind her back and dropped them, and moved her right hand behind her as well to grab the pistol.

Richardson frowned. "Uh, uh—I need to see your hands. Please stand and turn around."

She kept her expression angry so as not to show her fear. She trembled, and this time Isis was sure it *wasn't* from fear. If she stood, he'd see the restraints on the ground, so that meant she was going to have to hold them. She pretended to wobble a bit and grabbed them again in her left hand, the pistol clutched in her right.

Richardson leaned forward as if to jump down from the VTOL. She needed to act right now, before she ended up in Lancer custody.

As Richardson crouched, Isis dropped the restraints and angled her pistol around to the front. Richardson saw her movement and went to dodge out of the way, but he was too slow, and Isis honestly thought the man believed she wouldn't shoot.

Isis aimed as best she could and fired several times at Richardson. She didn't know if she'd hit him, only that he fell backward into the VTOL.

"Over there!" came a voice from the right side.

Isis didn't wait to see who had called out. She didn't recognize the voice and ran to her left, heading blindly into the trees, panting as the sticky burrs caught on her jacket, her hands, her pants, and her face.

Twice she stumbled over dead bodies. She didn't know if they were friend or foe, nor did she care. There were Lancers in the woods, and a man named Awun that frightened David.

And if he frightened David, he downright terrified her.

She paused beside a large tree; its bark peeling back in tiny curls like the water birches on Sian, the ones by the river she loved so much. Oh, what she'd give to be there now, reading a book, or listening to one of Sun-Tzu's "discussions" with his advisors.

"Be the cougar, be the cougar," she whispered to herself like a mantra. She needed to calm down, breathe slower, take stock of her position in relation to the mountain, to the road she and David had traveled up. If she could get back there, maybe the gang member she'd met would see her, and help her.

Male voices filled the dark spaces behind her, coming from the VTOL and the overlook. Thick, accented Cappellan. She could make out some of it—enough to know they were looking for her.

Experience taught her to fear the worst, and she knew those voices belonged to the Fan-K'uei and not Richardson's men. Their slang was too rough, and not that of a military mind.

Something rustled the bush beside her and she turned, her pistol up and ready, clamped tightly in both hands.

A familiar, feminine face appeared in the moonlight. Isis had only seen the woman's statuesque profile from a distance, a member of Aris Sung's team assigned to her security. In the past, the woman's countenance had frightened her. But now her face was the most reassuring thing Isis had set her gaze on in weeks.

"R-Raven?" Isis voice trembled, belying some of the disbelief she had at seeing a familiar face.

A half smile pulled at the side of Raven's lips. "You going to shoot me?"

“Oh,” Isis realized the barrel of her pistol was directly in the Warrior’s face. “Sorry. It’s just that—” she sniffed, forcing herself not to collapse, willing her tears not to flow. *I will not lose it, I can’t. Not now. We’re not out of here yet.* She took several deep breaths, pressing her relief and exhaustion back. “It’s good to see you.” Raven was a member of House Hiritsu—so that meant—“Aris?”

“He’s to our right—we’re surrounded by the Fan-K’uei.” Raven’s dark skin creased between her perfect eyebrows and she crouched further down. “And a few Lancers. The Fan-K’uei waited until the VTOL appeared and attacked, working their way from the bottom of the mountain up against their employers.”

Isis envisioned the attack in her head, thinking back to Sun-Tzu’s planning sessions with Ion Rush—it was a brilliant move—to cut off all escape. Confuse and confound and then kill your way to the top.

“They’re after me,” Isis nearly sobbed. “Oh god...all these people,” she took in a deep breath. “David Hollister—he’s back there. He protected me—his sister—the Lancers have—”

“Shhhh,” Raven put a hand on Isis’ shoulder. “Jade Hollister is safe. I have to tell Aris where you are.” She turned to raise her hand, and then abruptly crouched low, using her nearly raised hand to shove Isis down too.

“What is it?” Isis asked, mimicking the Warrior’s actions, crouching down.

“There’s something—”

But her words were cut off as a black shadow plowed out of the dark and knocked Raven to the side against a tree. Isis heard as well as saw the glint of Raven’s Nakjama as it struck the ground beside her.

The attack didn’t slow Raven very much. The warrior reached behind her and withdrew her *jian*, a medium sword. She turned, ducked and then swung low, slicing in and upward beneath the shadow’s neck.

But as this one fell, someone grabbed Isis from behind. A large hand clamped over her mouth and an arm tightened around her neck, cutting off her air supply as she was wrenched onto her backside. In seconds she realized she still clutched her pistol in her right hand, grabbed it in both fists, pointed it upward at the shadow above and behind her and fired twice.

BATTLECORPS

Something jarred her hand and the gun was knocked from her grip.

The pressure on her neck released, and she coughed as she scrambled out of their grip. She tried to call out to Raven, though her attempts came out mostly in coughs.

She heard Raven fighting, saw her sword reflect the moonlight as it swirled and moved. Isis turned and started looking for her gun. Two yards to the left and the ground abruptly disappeared.

The Duchess let out a few unladylike words and scrambled back. She'd had no idea they were so close to the edge of the mountain-side. She grabbed at a clutch of trees and looked back over her shoulder, past her boots where the ground abruptly sloped down at an impossible angle to climb.

She heard Raven to her right, in the dark. "*Hwoon dahn!*" There was the sound of something hard striking metal and then nothing.

Isis crouched down on all fours as she struggled to see in the darkness. Several shadows moved in circular patterns as she clung to the base of a tree near the edge.

"Where is she?"

"She won't be hard to find," said a light voice. "She's just a girl."

"No—not her—that Warrior. Where is she? Bitch sliced my chin. I'm going to slice her throat."

"Went over the side. Forget her—we find the Duchess."

Over the side? Isis squeezed her eyes shut. Raven had gone over the side of the mountain? That wasn't possible—she hadn't heard a sound—no body crashing into the trees and shrub growing on the side. Maybe she was only knocked out? Wounded?

But please...not dead. Oh god no.

If Raven was gone—where was Aris? Did she get to him? Had he heard them? Was he coming? Several of the sticky burrs cut her face and hands, but she wasn't going to move. She didn't have her gun, and she was no match for so many men. Her fingers numbed as she gripped the tree and she was sure they would hear her teeth chattering.

What do I do?

If she called out for Aris, they would know where she was. If she didn't, how would *he* know where she was? And David...someone had to get to David! Jade would never forgive her if her brother died.

What do I do? Isis pushed back tears as the wind whistled through the bare branches of the tree she desperately clung to. *What the hell do I do?*

That question was answered seconds later when a shadow appeared from behind the tree she clung to. It reached out with a powerful hand and grabbed her arm, wrenching her from her trunk.

She screamed and kicked as she tried to hold on to the tree, but her strength wasn't a match for her attacker. Within seconds she was pulled clear and forced onto her back, and then felt the cold, hard edge of a knife pressed against her neck. She stopped thrashing and grew very still as she felt something looped around her right wrist.

"Quiet, little Duchess. You have a new fiancé now."



Aris parried again, and again, pushing his attacker backward into a tree. Hack—slash. Jugular cut.

And the little Fan-K'uei falls. Aris wiped his blade on a nearby tree-trunk and slid the sword into its back sheath as his eyes sought the darkness, listened to the air.

And there it was, the clink of a sword.

And another.

"Hwoon dahn!"

Raven.

He gave a derisive noise as he pulled his night goggles from his utility belt and zeroed in on quick movements thirty meters to his left, close to the overlook's edge. He recognized Raven's outline, and assumed the three attackers were Fan-K'uei.

He scanned along the ground and caught sight of a man struggling on the ground with something—and then he was standing—and half lifting, half dragging the figure of a woman behind him.

Aris blinked.

Isis!

He ran, ran as hard as he could, jumping over bushes, ducking around trees, avoiding more Fan K'uei on his way to his Chancellor's love.

But in the end, he was too far away.

Always too far.