

"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...

...the chances of life and death.

Sun-Tzu, *The Art of War*

THE ART OF WAR: EARTH

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PART TWO

***North of the Convention Center, early morning
Shou Lao Mountain Pass, Hustaing
Sian Commonality, Capellan Confederation
10 October 3060***

Failure came in all shapes and sizes, and at all times of one's life. It froze the heart and crippled the mind. It was the enemy of triumph. Of success.

I will not allow failure to build fear. I will not allow fear to cloud my mind. I will not allow my mind to cower in shame.

On and on went the mantra in Aris Sung's head as he searched the brush around him. How was it possible that a man could leave no trace as he carried a woman away?

It wasn't possible.

Unless—others were working to hide that trail. And that could only mean one thing.

They were betrayed.

An owl hooted nearby, up high in a tree. Aris froze where he crouched. He barely breathed as he listened to the forest. The earlier cacophony of sounds of combat between the forces on the mountain had ceased. Now only the tentative movements of small animals came to him.

Sweat trickled down between his shoulder blades. His breath blew out short, just visible in the faint illumination of the VTOL's lights. The vehicle sat poised for engine ignition yet remained unmoving. Perhaps the pilot and crew were dead.

And what of Isis?

The shape and clothing of the shadow he'd seen carrying off a female form was not that of the Lancers. He did not bother to hope that the attackers were Zeng, or Yin, or even a surviving Yellow Dragon.

Ah—

The small crack of a tiny twig caught his attention. Aris turned his head toward his left shoulder. In his right hand he held a nakjama. In his left, a needler. Strapped to his back was his most prized weapon.

His katana.

It screamed for blood. And vengeance.

He detected six men spread out to cover all directions. They had him surrounded.

And he had allowed them to get this close—wallowing in his failure to rescue Isis. Perhaps it was they who hid the trail so well. The captor couldn't have traveled far. Not with a hostage.

Aris smiled to himself. And if that smile could have been seen by those who prowled around him, it would have given them reason to pause.

These men seek to detain me while the one who has Isis makes his escape. Clever. But not clever enough.

Boldly, Aris lowered his arms and stood slowly to his full height. The crisp, October air brushed against his cheeks, perhaps a kiss of acceptance from an ancestor. At this moment, he would win or lose.

And Aris Sung did not lose.

Only a short few moments passed before those who stalked him revealed their locations. Two were less than two meters away. So close. So very close.

He counted six—but he was sure he'd heard the distinct snap of twig betraying the presence of a seventh. There could be more behind him: this would take caution, luck and timing.

Precise timing.

An unsubtle movement returned his attention to the area in front of him. Through the shadows of the trees and shrubs he saw a man twice his own height step forward. He held a woman in front of him, close to him, his right arm pressing her back close to him. She was moving—slowly.

Isis?

A beat later he knew it wasn't his duchess. It was Raven.

She was alive!

"You," the man holding Raven boomed out at him, disclosing their position to anyone passing by. "Drop your weapons or I kill her."

Aris narrowed his eyes. The only way Raven could have been captured was if she were injured. Dazed in some way. And from the way her head lolled to one side, he knew that was the truth. She would need medical attention. He had to get her out of here.

But with five, possibly six other gang members flanking him, that would be a challenge.

"You with the knife," the man shouted again. He held up his left arm to expose a short sword. "Drop your weapons or I'll cut her head clean off."

The House Hiritsu warrior tilted his head to his right shoulder. He was aware of several things simultaneously. There was a movement behind him. The men to either side of him were looking from him to the big man and had relaxed their guard just a bit. And the position in which her captor held Raven could be used to his advantage.

I have the element of surprise.

He smiled.

Sucking a searing cold breath into his warm lungs, Aris brought the two weapons up simultaneously. He aimed the Nakjama at Raven's shoulder and fired, the bolt of energy slicing cleanly through meat and flesh to impact directly into the heart of her captor.

The needler that he fired simultaneously to his left took down two of the men in one shot. Screams of agony pierced the night as millions of sharpened spirals of plastic sliced through flesh and bone—direct hits. Maybe not kills, but Aris doubted these men would be moving against him any time soon.

Without a second breath he twisted his torso to the right, his arms stretched out at his sides as he fired the nakjama and needler twice more, each attack eliciting another round of screams.

All of this was done before the captor and Raven hit the ground in front of him.

Seconds ticked past as he crouched low, aware of the single remaining enemy behind him. That foe he could not have reached, and Aris was fully aware he might not survive if the enemy struck his back and paralyzed him.

Waiting for the step of the attacker, he heard the sound of a blade of grass being bent and turned and fired.

Not fast enough.

Something struck his left shoulder with fire—nakjama shot—and he was knocked back a few centimeters.

He could see the enemy gain confidence that his prey was sufficiently neutralized, and he stood up out of his crouch. Aris raised the hand holding the needler, but a deafening noise threw him backward as the enemy's brain, bone and muscle sprayed the area.

He remained still afterward, not daring to move. There had been someone else behind the enemy—a new foe.

"Aris?"

He started. He recognized that voice. And after gathering his weapons from where they had fallen to the ground beside him, he narrowed his eyes into the darkness. The smell of charred flesh was overwhelming. "Jade?"

"Are you hurt?"

He glanced at his shoulder, and then twisted to face where he knew Raven had gone down. "I'm fine. Keep me covered."

He found Raven standing at a half-crouch. She was dazed but conscious and cut him an accusing look as he bent down beside her. "You shot me."

"It was a good shot." He felt the edges of his mouth twitch. It was hard to see her wound in the semi-darkness. But he was certain he had done no permanent damage.

"You shot me."

"Aris?"

Even through the pain of her injury Raven's hand sought her weapon.

Aris put his hand on her arm. "It is Jade."

Raven's exotic features twisted in pain. Or perhaps confusion. "The sister?"

"Yes."

Jade approached through the brush. In her arm she cradled the mighty cannon that had obliterated the enemy. Aris was convinced

he could still feel the heat from the huge weapon, and could see smoke rise from it.

He looked around. "Where is Robert?"

Something moved behind Raven. "I'm here."

The dark female warrior swore a string of expletives. Aris smiled. Robert had been able to sneak up on her in the woods, but Aris knew that was only because her mind was preoccupied with her injuries.

"The VTOL's still in the clearing up ahead. I didn't see anybody around it—dead or alive." He paused. "But then the Fan K'uei are known to keep their kills and use their remains as trophies. I'm sure having the head of a Blackwind Lancer would make quite a prize."

"Only if it were Richardson's." Aris said distractedly. He continued to look around them—sensing—something.

"Where's David?" Jade asked.

Aris answered. "I do not know. My concern is for the duchess."

"They took her," Raven said, her voice tight with ill-controlled pain. "I overheard them while feigning injury," she glared at Aris, as if to say *I was doing okay till you came along*. "One by the name of Awun has her."

Jade took a step back, nearly dropping the weapon in her hand. Even in the twilight of near morning Aris could see she was visibly shaken. "Miss Hollister?"

"Awun?" Jade said in a whisper. "If Awun has her, I'm afraid there isn't anything we can do. He'll see her as a prize. She'd be *the* prize if he knows who she is. If he has her," she put her free hand to her mouth. "I'm afraid she's good as spoiled."

"Spoiled?" Raven said.

"Defiled," Aris said in a tight voice. "He will break her."

"He'll do more than that. Awun likes his women—" she swallowed. "Silent—and obedient."

Raven leaned forward. "What does that mean?"

"It means," Robert spoke up. "He'll cut out her tongue and wear it as a necklace around his neck and he'll rape her until he's taken the fight out of her."

Aris felt every muscle in his body spasm as outrage overcame reason for several minutes. “We find Isis.”

“What about David?” Jade demanded, recovering a bit of her earlier bravado.

“David is not important,” Raven said.

And even Aris had to admit the statement sounded unkind. They were alone on the planet while House Hiritsu engaged the Lancers: antagonizing the locals wasn’t exactly good infiltration technique.

Yet for a fleeting moment he saw himself in his BattleMech, crushing the Lancers and the Fan K’uei beneath his feet as he punished them for thinking themselves beyond the chancellor and his fiancée.

The click of gun hammers cocking killed their chatter. Aris fell into a half crouch, his hands on his weapons. Even Raven managed to look ready, even with a bleeding shoulder. Robert had abruptly disappeared, and Jade had both hands on her weapon.

“That wasn’t a natural forest sound,” Jade commented.

“No,” came a tenor voice from the woods to Aris’ right, just beyond where Robert had been seconds before. “And I would advise each of you to keep as still as possible.”

Aris did not know this voice. But he heard its authority. Command. A soldier.

“Show yourself.”

“Not until Miss Hollister puts away her new toy.”

“Like hell.” Jade stood up straighter and turned to face the dark woods to her left.

“I have no intention of offering my assistance in finding the duchess as long as I am under the threat of”—there was a pause and Aris was positive he heard amusement creep into the tone—“annihilation.”

Aris knew of only one individual on the planet who could be so arrogant.

Casting a glance at Raven, Aris spoke. “You can be assured you will not face such a fate. Show yourself, Lieutenant Richardson.”

There was a slight movement against one of the closer trees and a tall, thin man limped forward. He held a needler in his right hand, trained on Aris. His left hand he held close to his body, as if he were suffering from a stomachache. Or a wound.

Aris noted a field bandage on his left thigh.

"I would have to say," Raven Clearwater remarked in a droll voice, "You aren't in any shape to help us find anyone."

"Flesh wounds," Richardson said. "And my rank is Force Leader Richardson."

Aris felt a smile creep onto the corners of his mouth. Arrogance indeed. And he is balanced on the edge of failure. Not such a good combination. Frightened, wounded and volatile.

Common sense urged him to shoot Richardson now. If for no other reason than to ease his own troubled conscience. "Well, *Richardson*," Aris replied in a calm voice, refusing to show fear at the needler and emphasizing the lack of rank when he addressed his enemy. "What exactly do you think you can do for us?"

"I know where they are taking the duchess," he said with confidence. And a wince as he shifted his injured leg.

Raven immediately had her blade pointed at him.

Aris heard the shift, felt the air move around them. Ah... the sounds from before. *There are several of them. Well hidden. Perhaps a special ops team not involved in the massacre.*

Smart man—not to use all of his men at once. Aris listened carefully, his senses detecting at least five others in the darkened wood with them.

We are not alone—was this what he'd sensed before?

"Where?" Aris said. Not too loud, not too demanding, keeping his tone neutral.

Richardson shook his head. "Not so fast. I want a deal."

"A deal?" Raven scoffed.

"Erik," Jade said abruptly.

Her use of his first name caught the Lancer by surprise. Aris filed that information away for later examination. "David—did you see David? My brother?"

Richardson stared at Jade as if he were seeing her for the first time. "You killed my man. He was a good man. Two kids back home. Twins."

"That was me," Aris said. "Answer her question."

He felt Richardson's glare even in the darkness. Good thing looks couldn't kill. "I saw Hollister. Or what was left of him once I shot him."

Oooh. Aris winced. That was unnecessary.

Jade's reaction was expected. She brought the weapon up and took a step toward Richardson. The echo of other weapons being brought up as well, locked and loaded, stopped her short.

Aris held out his hand. "We are not alone, Jade. Richardson has friends."

"Force Leader Richardson," the man said again. He looked at Jade. "Isis was there, kneeling beside Hollister. I thought I had her—but the duchess is full of surprises."

Realization dawned on Aris and he couldn't stop a chuckle ringing out. "She shot you."

He looked back at Aris. "I told you it was a flesh wound—nothing serious."

"But she got away."

"Yes, and ran right into the arms of the Fan-K'uei."

Aris tilted his head to the right—for two purposes. To get a better look at Richardson's position, and to check Robert's position. The boy had disappeared again and was likely to do something rash. He needed to get the young Zeng's attention. "And whose fault is that? Who contacted the Butchers and brought them into these woods?"

"*They* contacted *me*," he insisted.

"And if you had better intel, then you would have known they'd turn on you," came Robert's voice from behind Richardson.

Aris shook his head twice. He saw the slight movement in front of a tree just behind and to the right of Richardson's position. It was a pre-arranged signal for Robert to do nothing.

And Robert appeared to understand.

That wasn't going to keep him silent.

"The Fan-K'uei are destroyers. Betrayers. The slaughterers of small children, Richardson," Robert said from the darkness. Richardson looked in the direction of the voice. "They bring death to whomever they touch. And now you've brought that death to your own men, as well as Isis."

"Where is my brother?" Jade demanded, her voice sliding up an octave. She shifted the weapon in her hands.

"He's gone," Richardson spat out. "They took him, as well as Isis. He's to be used as ransom."

"You overheard this?" Aris said. "As you hid?"

"I did not hide from cowardice," Richardson said, and his voice was low, almost a growl. "I hid because I did not wish to die. Yes, I overheard the larger one, the one they call Awun. He had Isis over his shoulder even as they took Hollister. I can understand using Isis for ransom, but not Hollister. He has no use."

"Yes he does. He wants me, you bastard. Awun would trade Dave's life for me," Jade said and took another step toward him. Richardson moved the aim of his needler from Aris to Jade, though Jade didn't seem to notice. "You bastard. You *knew* he was wounded, and yet you hid—while they took him away? While they took away the greatest feather in your cap? You allowed them to take the duchess?"

"I did not want to risk my life for that of a con artist and a swindler, Miss Hollister," Richardson said loudly. "His life is not worth mine to my men."

"Your men," Robert said. "Your men are dead."

"No," Aris said, his voice soft. "Not all of them." He kept his stare focused on Richardson. The Lancer switched his gaze from Jade to Aris. "You have perhaps—twelve left. Special ops."

"Shadow." Richardson said. "Yes."

"They have surrounded us."

"Yes." Richardson gave him a slow smile. "Which pretty much means you'll do as I say."

Aris smiled—his knives already in his hands. "I think not."

The shadows worked with him as well as against him, as did the wound in his shoulder from the Nakjama blast. He'd identified the closest of Richardson's men—and took three breaths before launching his first knife in that direction. Before it left his fingertips he was in a crouch, dodging the hiss of a needler that shredded a small bush to his right as he listened and threw the second knife to his left.

Two screams, nearly simultaneous, told him he had secured his targets and Aris knelt and rolled backward into the brush. He heard Robert move—though he was sure no one else did.

Raven also made to slip away into the wood—apparently unhindered by her injuries. Those would have to be looked after soon. He couldn't afford to lose her to blood loss or infection.

Not Raven.

Not as he had lost the duchess.

"Okay—stand down!" Richardson barked.

Aris remained in his position, his needler still in his right hand as he peered through the winter-damaged brush.

Richardson was now pinned against a tree, Robert's weapon pressed into his neck. Impressive. Aris nodded. Though the boy was still a little impulsive.

Raven appeared behind them, just to the right of the tree. There was a small cry of pain. "You now have nine soldiers to command," she said in a neutral tone.

"You've proven you can't be controlled," Richardson said. "At least by ordinary means. What I'm offering is an alliance to get back what we both want."

"You want the duchess to secure safe passage off this world," Robert hissed. "How cowardly is that? You will not fight with your own though they are losing every day. It isn't long before House Hiritsu takes them down." He spat on Richardson's shoe. "Dogs."

"Lovely," Richardson said. "Warrior—will you please remove your attack pup?"

Aris smiled, but remained still as Richardson again shifted his weight off his injured leg. Impulsive, and a little exuberant. Might prove to be useful yet. He stood but kept his needler visible. "An alliance? Richardson—my goal is to return my chancellor's fiancée. In one piece. Your goal is to use her to somehow guarantee freedom from Hustaing." He shook his head. "I'm afraid our goals are in conflict."

Robert moved back to stand beside Jade. She kept her weapon high but had grown very quiet during this altercation.

Very quiet.

Richardson leaned heavily against the tree. "I have an OPS nearby. In the convention center. I have medical supplies and weapons. Tanks. A VTOL, as well as twelve soldiers," he raised his eyebrows. "As long as you haven't killed them."

"Oops," came Raven's comment from behind the tree.

Richardson glanced back in her direction. "Eleven soldiers. All of them want to go home. If we help you get the duchess back, would you work for us to gain us anonymity from Major Smithson's insane gambit?"

"Gambit?" Aris said. "You mean thinking the chancellor would be here, unprotected and vulnerable to Candace's will?"

The Lancer did not answer.

Aris no longer believed Candace Liao sent the Blackwind Lancers into Hustaing. If the leader of the St. Ives Compact truly wanted to capture or use her nephew, she would never have made such a foolish, unprepared attack.

No—he knew the Lancers could not be trusted. They were too desperate. As to how the battle fared between those fighting in 'Mechs within the city and House Hiritsu—the only contact he'd had was sketchy reports received via the Zengs. Apparently they had warmed to him, thanks to Robert.

It was only weeks before the Lancers would have no choice but to surrender. Smithson knew this. Therefore Richardson had to know it.

And he was doing what he could to get himself and his people out alive.

"I know where she is."

The statement hung in the air between Aris and the trees. He'd expected Richardson to make some sort of final play for his cooperation. Offering him leadership, or weapons, or even command himself.

But not this.

"You're lying," Jade said.

"No, I'm not." Richardson said, though Aris was aware the Lancer was watching him. "I know where they are taking her." He glanced at Jade. "And your brother. Across Choi Bay."

"But that's Ch'in-Shu-Pao territory," Robert protested. "The Fan have a base set up there?"

"Either that," Jade said, her voice low. "Or they're working together."

"That—would be bad," Robert said.

"Zealots working with Butchers?" Raven commented in a tired voice. "I would think so."

"And you know where this place is?" Aris asked, diverting the attention back to Richardson.

"I know where, but I don't know the exact location. That's where you would come in." He took in a deep breath and winced. His leg was apparently bothering him. "I can provide the stealth equipment and the manpower."

"If you have that," Aris said. "Why do you need us? You could certainly torture some poor resident across the bay into telling you what you need to know."

Richardson pursed his lips. "I like you. I would kill you in a fair fight—but I would feel bad about doing it. And regardless of what you've been told it is not our way to torture needlessly."

Jade snorted.

Richardson ignored her. "We could take her. But I do not believe we could escape successfully. With your help—your obvious knowledge of the local color—we could perhaps survive."

"You're scared," Jade said abruptly. She laughed—a deep melodic sound. "And you're so full of it. You know that even if you get Isis out you won't be able to make it to your leaders. You know

the Lancers are going to fail before you succeed. You just want to ensure you're seen as," she released the weapon to hang at her side on the shoulder strap so that she could create the impression of quotes in the air, "helping," she lowered her hands, "in rescuing Isis."

Richardson gave a stiff smile. "And as usual, Miss Hollister, you are wrong. But I do like to keep my options open." He looked at Aris. "Do we have a deal?"

Aris glanced at each member of his own team—though he used that word loosely. Robert Cheng, a Zeng with the determination to prove himself. Jade Hollister, tall, blonde and beautiful, and desperate to rescue her brother. Raven—loyal and in a great deal of physical pain.

And himself. Determined not to let Isis be used as a pawn in any Blackwind Lancer intrigue.

"We have," he smiled, "an understanding."

***An unknown room, Hustaing
Sian Commonality, Capellan Confederation
14 October 3060***

Isis put her right hand to her right cheek and touched it.

“Ouch,” she hissed, and sucked air in between her clenched teeth. She could feel the swelling, both from the inside and from the distended stretch of her skin.

Her cheek wasn’t the only bruised place on her body. She didn’t want to think about all the other aches and pains that plagued her sleeping and waking moments.

And they were just moments. To sleep meant to relax, and there was no way she was going to relax being locked up in—

Actually—Isis had no idea where she was. It was dark. And damp. Which made her first guess she was in a cellar of some sort. Only the walls were rusted metal, as was the floor. So that could mean the hull of a ship.

Only there was no motion of being on the water. There was only stillness. And the occasional sound of battle somewhere close.

‘Mech battle.

Wherever she was it was close to something important. Maybe the capital? Or had the war between House Hiritzu and the Lancers spread? Maybe Sun-Tzu had finally sent in reinforcements to rescue her.

But after the second day Isis had pretty much given up that hope.

Hope of being found at all.

On the first day after Awun had tossed her in this room, bound and gagged, Isis had feared he’d be back later, and maybe not alone but with his men—and then all the stories she’d heard of female captives being repeatedly raped came to mind.

And she’d cried. A good cry. The kind that put her to sleep.

When she woke she wasn’t tied anymore. And there was a plate of rice, fish and some sort of broth next to the door.

The food hadn’t lasted long. And then she’d heard the moaning and realized she wasn’t alone.

In the farthest corner lay a figure. Isis didn't investigate until she'd eaten everything on the tray—and forget table manners. This wasn't the time for social graces.

The figure had proven to be none other than David Hollister.

He was alive—but barely. Someone had cleaned his wounds and stitched them, though carelessly. He'd been given a new shirt, as well. But he was feverish.

Isis wasn't a nurse, but she knew that a fever could either be a really good thing, or a really bad thing. Fever meant the body was fighting infection. Things could go either way.

And so she'd stayed next to him. Talking just to hear a voice. And then she'd slept beside him.

Until the next morning when men came for her and she was dragged down a narrow hall and shoved into a small bathroom. After she heard the lock turn in the door, she looked around and found a robe on the wall and soap inside the shower.

Not caring if she was being watched or even filmed, Isis had stripped naked and taken a shower, scrubbing the crud from her hair and body as well as the blood she'd accumulated on her fingers and face.

She'd just gotten the soap out of her hair when two women dressed in silk robes came in and pulled her, still naked, into another room and began drying her hair. They combed it out and then wrapped a silk robe around her that matched their own.

Isis didn't have a good feeling about this at all. Cleaned, dressed and (metaphorically) perfumed?

Uh oh.

All those images of rape and nastiness had come back to her at the moment when the women—with very solemn expressions on their faces—lead her out of the dank, darkened hallways and into an elevator.

Alone.

The doors had closed.

The trip had been short—only a second or two—and she'd found herself staring out at two men with long greasy hair, tattoos, leather jackets and guns.

Isis swallowed and stepped forward, her scalp hurting where her hair had been pulled back severely from her face and twisted into an impossible knot at the base of her skull.

The two men flanked her, steering her into another set of gray, dingy rooms, littered with glass, bottles, tin cups and soda cans. Through another set of doors into a much larger room.

This room was like nothing she expected. Polished hardwood floors ran the length of the room against dark paneled walls. Elaborate carvings decorated those walls; dragons and cranes, volcanoes and small people with conical hats.

Awun sat in the center of the room on a small dais of pillows near a gold table. On the table sat a golden tea service, and to either side of the dais sat two women, their heads bowed.

"Bring her closer," growled the emperor of the moment.

Isis kept her features as bland as she could—hoping like hell she wasn't letting her terror show. The last thing this brute needed to know was that she was about to wet her pants.

Er ... skirt.

"Duchess Isis Marik," Awun boomed.

He was big—but not in a muscular sense. More in a fat sense. Big boned. *Really* big boned. He had short greasy hair—as opposed to everybody else's style. He'd exchanged his leathers for a rather worn looking silk robe.

There was another *Uh oh*.

He rose (with great difficulty) and ambled toward where she stood, still flanked by the two men. Everything smelled rotten. Like raw fish left out in the sun in the heat of day. Did these people not bathe?

He moved around her once, and then twice. "Not much. Too skinny. Too pale." Then he'd stopped in front of her and narrowed his black eyes at her. "Wrong color eyes. Too dark. I like green eyes. And yellow hair."

That was when she'd thought of Jade. Emerald eyes and yellow hair. Tall—a sure match for Awun. Was he somehow thinking of Jade?

Naw... it'd be too much of a coincidence.

"Uhm," Isis cleared her throat. "Sorry. Not my fault. But I'm sure you could take it up with the captain general of the Free Worlds League. He's my father."

She hadn't seen the fist coming, so when stars exploded in front of her eyes and she found herself on the floor, Isis decided maybe it was better to just—keep quiet.

The two men pulled her back to her less-than-stable feet.

"You will only speak when I command you to speak. Understand?"

She nodded.

He swung again, but Isis figured it out in time. "Y-yeah. Sure."

"You will address me as Master Awun," and with that he turned and started pacing slowly back and forth. He was barefoot, and his feet were nearly black from dirt and grime. He clasped his massive hands behind him. "Now, I have contacted the leader of the Blackwind Lancers, a Force Leader Richardson."

Keep it calm, keep it calm.

"He was less than happy to hear from me—seeing as how we betrayed him on the mountain. But when I see the opportunity for gain," he moved toward Isis and stroked the cheek he had just given a fresh bruise with a meaty forefinger. "I take it."

She resisted the urge to spit.

On his bare foot.

"I have arranged a bargain with him."

Oh great—another deal. Dave should be up and around for this one.

"Richardson wants you. I want technology. Stealth technology that I can use to arm my people. So that we can eliminate our only competition."

Isis waited. It was sure to be some big dramatic reveal with the pause he was leaving open.

"The Ch'in-Shu-Pao."

Oh. Isis pursed her lips. *Them.*

She remembered David talking about them. He'd never had good business with them. They weren't the scourge that the Fan'Kuei were—more like fanatics.

If she remembered correctly.

"You're not impressed."

Isis opened her mouth, then closed it. Her right jaw had started to ache.

"You may speak."

And you may kiss my ass. She gave him a sweet smile. She really wasn't this brave—but terror did weird things to one's common sense. "You want to trade me to the people you betrayed so they'll give you weapons capable of defeating the—" she stumbled. "Those Chin people. But what does this have to do with David Hollister? Why is he alive?"

Isis decided at that moment she did not like Awun's smile. It was dirty and made her want to take a bath.

In acid.

"As I said—I prefer yellow hair and green eyes. David Hollister has a greater use to me than you do, Duchess Marik. I don't care about your precious Inner Sphere machinations, nor do I care whether your 'Mechs scrape the Lancers off our world's surface.

"What I do care about is having the one thing I have never been able to possess."

Isis took a step back as he lunged for her but the men flanking her grabbed her arms. Awun grabbed her throat and began to squeeze slowly. "Jade Hollister."

And that was how she'd ended up dumped back in the room, or basement, or ship's hull or whatever it was. Other than the occasional tray of food and medical supplies, she'd been left alone with David.

His fever had broken earlier that morning and she'd used what was left of the hem of the now-dirty silk robe they'd given her to wipe his brow.

She realized his eyes were open and he was watching her as she sat still, touching her damaged cheek, staring into space.

"A C-bill for your thoughts?" His voice was cracked and harsh.

Isis tried to smile but it hurt too much. Instead she grabbed the cup she'd been hoarding water in and crawled closer to him. "Can you prop up on your elbows? That way you can drink. I'm afraid I don't have a straw."

He did as she asked, without the slightest verbal protest, though the pain in his face was obvious. After taking three sips and refusing the rest he laid back down, breathing heavily. "Wow ... I'm going to suck at running if we bust out of here."

Isis sighed and sat back. The silk shushed beneath her. "What I didn't tell you this morning when you woke up is that Awun wants your sister."

His expression didn't change. "I know. I figured he would."

Smiling was hard, but frowning seemed to be less work. "Why?"

David gave her a sly smile. "What is it, Duchess? A little put out at not being the feather in the tyrant's cap?"

She wanted to smack him, and decided that maybe she would. When it wouldn't cause him to hemorrhage again. "No. Well, maybe yes. I don't know. I'm sort of confused. Why Jade of all people?"

"She's not exactly ugly, Isis."

"No, she's quite beautiful. Exotic almost. I mean—he has me. He could use me to get more than just weapons. But what he seems to be excited about is the prospect of getting Jade."

"Isis—I've lived on Hustaing all my life. My entire family has. Jade and I grew up in Quingliu. So did Awun." He took in a deep breath. Coughed. "We went to high school together."

"You did?"

"Yeah. Want to know Awun's real name?"

Isis nodded.

"Vincent."

She couldn't stop the laugh that burst from her mouth. "Vincent?"

"Vincent Boudreaux Peed, to be exact."

"Boudreaux?" She winced when her cheek protested the grin. "I take it Jade used to make fun of him?"

"Oh no. Actually in school, Jade was the only one who was nice to him. But she always refused to go out with him. So he thought it was because he wasn't good enough." David shook his head. "Never guessed it was because she just wasn't interested. So. He left school—joined a gang. Got lucky and killed the leader. Became the leader and changed his name, and the gang's name."

"And he came back sniffing around Jade?"

Dave nodded. "You guessed it. And Jade told him to get soused. So," he sniffed. "He's been after her ever since. She's the one thing—"

"—he can't have," Isis finished. "Yeah, he said as much. And so he thinks she'll give herself up to free you? Well, it's all rubbish. Once Sun-Tzu arrives and the Lancers are all destroyed, or killed, or rounded up—whatever it is he'll do to them—then we can just throw him in prison—or under a 'Mech if I had my way."

Dave's expression darkened. Isis felt a chill roll down her back, like ice water. "Isis—you still believe your fiancé is coming for you? I admire your loyalty, but it's misplaced. No one is coming. House Hiritsu is going to destroy the Lancers, and you'll be little more than a casualty of this little war they tried to start. Your death will give the chancellor what he needs to justify going up against St. Ives and his aunt."

"Stop it."

"It's time to grow up, Isis. You're a pawn. You're nothing more than a means to an end. Whether Richardson uses you, or me, or Awun—or even your fiancé. Your life is only worth what can be bargained for it."

She wanted to hit him—even balled her hand into a fist. He'd told her these things before and she'd hated him for it. But hated him why?

Because she was afraid they were true?

I've been here—how long? Weeks? A month? Has he truly used me? Left me alone to be captured and killed?

No—that wasn't possible. If that were so he would never have sent Aris Sung after her.

Aris and Raven.

No. David was mistaken.

Yet—even in the dark, cold prison—thoughts of seeing her beloved didn't fill her with as much happiness as those thoughts always had.

"Don't be angry with me, Isis. Once Awun gets what he wants, I'm dead, and you'll disappear, lost in a sea of broken and beaten women, little more than a plaything for... "

He stopped and closed his eyes.

Isis was glad he didn't finish his sentence.