

"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 commander stands for the virtues of wisdom, sincerity, benevolence, courage and strictness ...

Sun-Tzu, *The Art of War*

THE ART OF WAR: THE COMMANDER

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PART ONE

**Lancer OPS (abandoned art gallery), Hustaing
Convention Center Square, early morning
Sian Commonality, Capellan Confederation
20 October 3060**

Aris Sung stood at the edge of what had once been administrative offices overlooking the gallery below. He'd disliked this place the second he, Raven and Jade had arrived. Aris had noticed Robert's absence, but he did not know where the young Zeng had gone.

He assumed the glass and debris had been cleared away when Richardson's men appropriated the abandoned building. The art had been either moved and stored, or destroyed. Aris didn't want to ask—he feared it was the latter.

His shoulder twinged where the nakjama had seared flesh and muscle, but the mind was a significant tool in ordering the body silent. He held his arms crossed over his chest; he was clad in black, head to toe, his hair pulled back and up.

Raven's injury had been bandaged, and she was now out in the city with Jade. The two women had formed an unusual bond, with Jade showing a fascination with Raven's weaponry and skill—which in itself was something that made Aris uneasy.

So much time had passed since Isis was taken. Ten days. Aris gazed through the glass wall and watched the smoke streaming skyward in tornadoes of black. The battles still raged on—but they were few. Soon there would be nothing left of the Lancers.

And still Richardson believed his few remaining soldiers would leave Hustaing, and unscathed.

I cannot protect them. I don't trust him. I know the moment he has Isis in his sights, he will betray me and run to his superiors with his prize.

Which is why Aris had other plans in place.

"We have a confirmation," Richardson said from behind Aris.

Aris turned. Richardson limped toward him holding a piece of paper in his left hand. In his right was the cane he now used. "A confirmation?"

Richardson stopped beside him. "Shadow Two confirmed activity in a warehouse along the north of the bay. Abandoned area. Some residential housing within a two-kilometer area. Vans in and out, and several nearby residents admitted to seeing the Fan-K'uei symbol on several jackets and along one wall."

"And the Ch'in-Shu?"

He looked like a Cheshire cat. Aris was immediately on guard. "They're the ones who led us to the warehouse."

Ah—my reservations at trusting him were well founded. "I assume you told their leader about Awun's offer of weapons trade?"

Richardson frowned. "Of course I did. Keep the local gangs warring while we slip in and take the prize. Now," he turned and motioned Aris to follow him to a large table in the room. It was covered with maps and coffee cups.

Aris stood to the side as Richardson picked up a red pen and pulled a map of Choi Bay to the top of the stack. He leaned forward, bracing himself against the table for support, and drew a red circle around a small gray area. "Here is where the vans have been moving in and out. The Ch'in-Shu's leader claims she's seen Awun here as well." Richardson gave him a smug look.

Aris leaned over the map, the weight of his sword shifting against his back. He looked at the roads, and at the dock. "How recent is this map?"

"Within five years."

"A lot can change in five years." Aris straightened. "I suggest more recent photos. Use the VTOL."

Richardson shook his head. "Can't do it."

"Are you afraid?"

"No," came the abrupt answer. "We have no time. We're moving tonight."

That set Aris' nerves on end. "Tonight? You just received this intel, didn't you? We should send in teams—do our own scouting."

"No. We go in tonight."

Aris paced a step closer to Richardson. The force leader took a wobbly step back. "Why, Richardson? What deals have you made?"

Have you bargained with the Ch'in-Shu-Pao? Do you believe they will help you?"

"They have guaranteed me Isis' location. And they have already set up their own perimeter. We have more than enough resources and information to go in and take what is ours."

Aris took a deep breath. *Patience. Test the caged animal. See where it will strike first.* "What is it you would have my people do?"

Richardson's grin returned. "I need you and your people to meet up with Shadow Two just east of the designated target at oh nineteen hundred. Sergeant Smith will give you your instructions from there."

Aris shook his head. "No."

Richardson blinked. "Excuse me?"

"What you propose is unacceptable." He turned on his heel and left the office.

Richardson did yell after him.

Once downstairs, Aris stepped out into the bright sunlight and at once saw a shadow moving across the rubble-strewn street. He recognized the silhouette as Raven's and turned right, strolling to the next building so he could duck out of sight of Richardson's lookout.

Days in the gallery had given him ample opportunity to scout out the Lancers' defenses—and their weaknesses.

Once out of sight, he backtracked along the street and then crossed the road using fallen chunks of buildings and abandoned cars to hide his progress. As soon he was near enough to Raven, she oozed out of the shadow of a building and put a finger to her lips.

"You have news?" he said in a low voice.

"And you have that look on your face," she said, arching a dark eyebrow at him. "Richardson?"

"He is a fool. He's in league with the Ch'in-Shu."

"Bad idea. But good for us," she smiled. "I have established contact with an ally."

Aris frowned. "Oh? Someone you trust?"

He wasn't sure he liked the insane gleam in his friend's eye. "Oh, someone I know you'll be glad to see." She made a small hand signal.

Someone moved in the shadows of the rubble to their right. Aris reached for his sword and then stopped as a ghost moved from the ash and came to stand beside him.

"Li Wynn?"

"It is good to see you, *Lien-zhang* Sung. I am here—to help you slay the dragon," was all the thin, pale man was able to utter before collapsing into Aris' arms.



Richardson watched Aris retreat from the room. A slow smile pulled at the right side of his lips. His original plan to take possession of the duchess had met with disaster. Trusting a gang such as the Fan K'uei was one of the biggest mistakes he'd ever made. Erik Richardson was a man who believed in honor.

He was a soldier.

Honor was not about betrayal—unless he was doing the betraying.

He'd forgotten how backward and full of self-worth were those who lived on the streets with no hope of a future. Such a sad life. Especially here, on this worthless rock. Subservient to a madman's regime.

And in the end, it didn't matter. These small-time traitors were nothing more than pawns; and Richardson could move pawns—sacrifice them—use them—betray them.

I'm not stupid—Aris Sung is House Hirltsu-trained, though he hasn't admitted his position. Or his reason for being here. I'm also aware he doesn't trust me, or my men, nor does he believe I will play fair tonight.

Force Leader Richardson had no intention of being fair to anyone who got in the way of him achieving his prize, the one goal set for him by his commanding officers. If he pulled it off—if he brought in Isis Marik—alive and unharmed—and they could arrange safe transport off Hustraig, then he knew he'd be a hero.

And Smithson and Doles?

Those two had gotten the Lancers into this situation. And it would take a nobody like him to get them out.

Only this time he had every intention of going after Isis himself.

The door opened from the side staircase and he identified Cooper's shuffling gait without turning. His right-hand man had suffered a jarring blow to his lower left leg. A pin held the bones together with the knee joint, and the entire thing was now incased in an exoskeleton of metal.

As long as he didn't rust, he was still useful. Though Richardson was sure the lower part of the leg would need to be amputated once they were home.

"Sir, Aris Sung disappeared behind the building. We lost his position soon after."

He'd expected it. "Doesn't matter." He turned and moved back to the map, his own mind superimposing the real layout and goal of the night's exercise.

"Cooper, make sure your best snipers are here"—he pointed to two places on the map, one after the other—"and here. I've told Aris that this is where we're entering, and that's where we want him to rendezvous."

"You sure he'll do it?"

"Of course he won't," Richardson sighed. "He'll come in his way, and with his own intel. Which of course I'm sure will be vetted by that woman, and perhaps that Zeng boy." He looked up at his man. "Any word on where *he* got off to?"

Cooper shook his head. "He wasn't spotted across the bay."

"No matter. Whatever he or Miss Clearwater discovers will be information planted by Fin's people." He thought of the Ch'in-Shu-Pao's leader. She was a small woman. Plain to the point of being almost invisible. But he'd felt the power radiating from her. She was devout in her gang's cause. And to her, the elimination of the Fan K'uei was necessary. And it would make her and her people heroes. Which wasn't a bad thing for a zealous group.

But none of it mattered to him. Who won. As long as the final result yielded him with the duchess and the rest of them killing each other in the warehouse.

It was all so simple it was laughable. The Ch'in-Shu-Pao would plant false clues to lead Sung, Clearwater and the punk kid to one entrance, the Fan K'uei would guard a second entrance based on information also planted by Fin's people, while he and his people infiltrated the third entrance—the correct entrance—based on intel from Awun.

Sung would be killed by the Fan K'uei, Awun by the Ch'in-Shu-Pao, and Richardson's people would disappear into the night.

"Sir," Cooper said. "Is the location for the duchess correct?"

"Not the one I gave Sung. If he takes the route I suggested he'll face twenty Fan K'uei," he smiled. "And even with his bravado and fighting skills, he'll be no match for that many men with guns. The same for Clearwater."

Richardson rubbed at his chin. "Once I give the signal that I have the duchess, your two OPS should go in and make sure David Hollister is dead—and make it look like Awun did it. Don't forget to carve the A in his chest. By oh-twenty-hundred hours I want two men here"—again he pointed to locations on the map—"in case Sung and Clearwater bring in backup. Two men here, and here, in case they use this entrance or this entrance, and two men over there to keep an eye on the shore."

"And the rest of our men?"

"Get them ready," Richardson said. "We're going home in the morning."

***Mako Warehouse, Choi Bay, evening
Sian Commonality, Capellan Confederation
20 October 3060***

"What exactly are you doing?" David asked, from where he'd propped himself up against the farthest wall.

Isis waved at him to be quiet, making a shushing noise. "Not so loud. I'm going to get us out of here."

"By hiding by the door?" He gave her a pained expression. "Duchess—that's the stupidest idea you've had in three hours."

She gave him her best withering look. "Well, have you got a better one? In all the vids I've ever seen, daring escapes always happen by outsmarting the guards, because they always leave the stupid guards to guard the prisoners."

David chuckled and then grabbed his side. "Okay. You win." He sighed. "You know—you're really not what I expected."

Isis decided to ignore that comment. She heard it a lot—and still wasn't sure how to take it. What exactly did they expect? She narrowed her eyes at him.

Isis knew that hiding behind the door was stupid and moved away from the entrance, her shoulders slumping. And what good would it do to trick the guards? They had no weapon. Not even a stick or a pipe. How were they going to defend themselves?

"Careful," David said. "You nearly tripped in that hole again."

Isis sidestepped the protruding concrete and moved to sit on the ground beside David. He looked better—and he was sitting up on his own—but he still had a fever. Without antibiotics to fight the infection in his blood there was little she could do. Isis could smell the sickness, even over the rancid smell of fish and oil that surrounded them in their prison. "You're right—it's a ridiculous idea."

"No, no. You might have a point." He smiled, but it looked more like a grimace. "They usually do use their dimmest bulbs to guard prisoners. I'm sure it's because they think if we're stupid enough to get caught, we're too stupid to free ourselves."

Isis pursed her lips. Random thoughts filtered through. She wanted a bath. She wanted a real night's sleep. She wanted a manicure. She wanted a decent toilet. She wanted—

A heavy sigh flushed the air from her lungs as she looked at David, who was obviously in a considerable amount of pain.

She wanted a real doctor. Someone who could fix him up right.

“But what I wouldn’t give for a good, heavy weapon.”

David frowned at her. “Huh?”

“Nothing,” she felt her face grow hot. “Thinking out loud. What time is it?”

Her stomach growled at that moment and she clutched it.

“I’d say it’s getting close to dinner time,” David said. “But please—don’t make me eat that fish again. I’m afraid all the salt is going to somehow preserve my insides.”

“I’m sure it’s making us dehydrated,” Isis said. She looked at the pothole in the floor, and then back at the door. “David—I need you to moan.”

“What? You told me to stop moaning.”

“That’s because I was trying to sleep.” She put a grimy hand on his upper arm. “I need you to act feverish.”

He smirked. “There’s very little acting required for that, you know.”

“Fine. Just do it. Please.”

With a sigh, David settled back down on the makeshift pallet of burlap bags and oily rags and began making a constant, painful-sounding moan. Isis started for the door but then paused and turned. David really didn’t need to try very hard to sound convincing.

But that only made her feel worse for him being in this situation.

The entire thing was her fault. All of it. If she hadn’t been on Hustaing to begin with, none of these people would have been touched by her. Not Jade, not April and not even David.

Aris Sung and Raven would not have been in danger.

All those men and women in the forest—

Stop, stop, stop it. That is not the way to think. What would Sun-Tzu do in this situation?

Ha. That was easy.

He wouldn't *be* in this situation.

With renewed determination, Isis went to the door, took two deep breaths and started pounding on it. "Hey! Anybody! He's dying and I can't stop it! Hey! Somebody! Hel-LOW!"

Her voice reverberated around the metal walls, and she was beginning to think they'd been abandoned. Then the clomp of footsteps answered her. The door clinked, followed by the grinding of worn metal on metal.

Two men stepped in, both holding needlers in her face. "Get back," one of them said.

They were about the same size—bigger than her. Dressed in leather waistcoats and black pants. She saw the sword-and-dragon emblems on their shoulders and chewed on her lower lip.

"What're you screaming about?"

Isis cleared her throat. "It's David," she pointed to the moaning man a few meters away. "He's dying—I can't get his fever down. Nothing you've given me is working."

The one with the needler in her face glanced at his partner. "Awun doesn't want Hollister dead—not till he gets his sister."

"Right," Isis couldn't help the snarkiness in her voice. "Because wow—we wouldn't something to happen to the duchess and her former kidnapper, now would we?"

"You get over there," he waved the needler away from David. "And stay put."

Isis backed up as he moved quickly toward David. The partner took up a position at the door, but he hadn't raised his own weapon yet.

Things couldn't have gone more wrong—and yet worked so well.

Her plan had been to jump the guard at the door and then put him in front of her when his partner shot at her, so that the guard took the needle-sharp bits of plastic.

She'd seen Aris do it, and it looked easy.

But instead the big oaf tripped in the pothole and went crashing forward toward David, sprawling on his face.

Well—Isis turned and jumped at the other guard as he ran forward to help his partner. She hung on his back and used his ponytail for a rein as she dug her fingernails into whatever flesh she could reach—especially his cheeks. When she was done with him he'd look like he had permanent war paint on his face.

But he wasn't giving in so easily. He scrabbled behind his back until he succeeded in grabbing a handful of her hair and pulling—to which she screamed in response and then used her right hand to grab his wrist and bite down.

Hard.

He screamed.

She screamed.

A needler blast deafened both her and her assailant as he twisted around, and Isis feared he'd actually tried to fire at her. What a stupid thing to do! Didn't he know he could hit somebody else?

"Isis—jump off!"

That was David's voice.

With a final yank she pushed herself away and landed painfully on her backside, rolling and then slamming the back of her head into the wall by the open door.

Another needler blast, and her assailant exploded backward, his flesh and muscle splattering against the wall behind Isis—and all over her.

He landed on his back a few centimeters away, his ruined face turned toward her.

Bile rose to the back of her throat and she gave a dry heave to the side as she saw the bits of skin and blood on her hands, her knees. She was coated in her enemy's flesh.

"I'm sorry, Duchess," David was saying as he limped toward her. He held the needler in his hand. The first guard's weapon. "I promise I'll make it up to you."

Isis pushed herself up, her back against the wall. Her legs felt wobbly beneath her as she lurched forward and took the other

needler from her dead assailant's hand. "Yes—you will. But first let's get the hell out of here." She frowned at him. The way he was standing—or not quite standing. "You okay?"

"Oh yeah, fine. I do this all the time." He gave her a lopsided grin through his new beard. "Was this what you had in mind?"

"No," she grumbled. "but it worked. I'm not looking a gift Liao in the mouth. Let's find a way out."

And the two of them moved through the door and down the eerily quiet hall outside.

**Mako Warehouse, Choi Bay, 11:52 p.m.
Sian Commonality, Capellan Confederation
20 October 3060**

Aris lay flat on his front atop one of the warehouses two buildings east of the target. The night was quiet—not even the sound of 'Mech battles penetrated the cold. It was all winding down—so little left of the Blackwind Lancers.

So many desperate moves to anticipate.

And to stop.

He held the night goggles to his eyes, watching the few Fan-K'uei guards outside the side and back doors.

Damn-strange few. And loaded only with semi-automatic weapons. He narrowed his eyes as he zeroed in the right dial—drawing the image closer and focusing on the patch sewn to the left arm of a leather jacket.

If he were in a better mood, Aris might have laughed outright at the absurdity of what he saw.

Those were not true Fan K'uei. The emblem was authentic—and he was sure the jacket had belonged to one of Awun's men.

Once.

It did not fit the current wearer. Nor did the jacket of the other guard.

They were not Fan K'uei.

The air behind him changed pressure, and because of the noise he knew it was—

“You see anything?” came the voice, pitched a little too loud.

Jade.

Aris kept his focus on what he was seeing through the goggles but raised his right hand in hopes she would know it meant silence. Where was Raven?

Jade lowered herself onto her elbows to his right. He handed her the goggles and pointed subtly. “Look there—and there. Do you recognize any of them?”

He waited as she adjusted the scope—as if she were accustomed to such stealth devices. Perhaps she was. She'd already shown she could handle herself with a weapon.

"Two? There are only—wait—" she adjusted the scope again. "This isn't right."

"What?" But he already knew the answer.

"I know the taller one—he's a member of the Yins."

Aris frowned. That wasn't the answer he'd expected. He had met a few Yins on his first foray into the city when he rescued Robert Cheng. Nearly a third of the gang had arrived at the mountain to help him and Robert rescue Jade and Isis; why were Yins here?

"How well do you know him?"

Jade shrugged and pulled the goggles away from her face. The light from the warehouse below illuminated her profile and cut deep shadows along the contours of her face when she looked at him. "I only know him through David. They had some business last year—I didn't really care what." She looked back to the two men. "But that's him. I thought Richardson said there were Fan K'uei. What are the Yins doing here?"

And where are the Ch'in-Shu-Pao Richardson boasted he'd done business with?

Aris took the goggles back from Jade and looked through them once again. He refocused his sights on the roofs of the buildings opposite. If Richardson's men were there—in the positions their leader was so eager to give him, a warrior of House Hiritsu—then they were indeed a credit to their name of Shadow.

They are not there.

He lowered the goggles. "Where is Raven?"

"Here."

Again she came upon him with no warning. *He was going to have to be more on his toes with her.* She moved to his left side, keeping low and out of sight of the men below. She nodded to the two men. "You see the problem?"

"That they're not Fan K'uei? Yes." He pursed his lips as he ran his gloved hand over them. The gloves were worn from years of use—mostly in the cockpit of his 'Mech. The leather was flaking

off at the finger tips, and the hanging edges pulled at his chapped lips. He was allowing himself to become dehydrated. "What I'm trying to puzzle out is why."

"Richardson claims he dealt with the Ch'in-Shu-Pao."

Aris gave a single nod.

"And the Yins were not a part of this."

Another noise behind Aris raised the hairs on the back of his neck. He, Jade and Raven turned to see Robert's silhouette appear on the staircase that emerged onto the roof. He crouched low as he came quickly toward them. "Li Wynn is with my sister—she'll look after him until it is time for you to return."

Aris felt a slight lifting in his heart: he knew Li Wynn wanted to fight, wanted revenge on the man who had tortured him.

As did Aris.

And that time would come—very soon.

"Robert," Aris motioned him closer and Raven moved away, giving Robert her spot. Aris handed him the goggles. "Please look down there and tell me what you see."

Robert did as he was asked. He'd changed his clothing, donning black jeans, tee-shirt, leather jacket and gloves. His thick, glossy hair moved in the chilly air.

"*Go se*," Robert hissed. "That's a Yin."

Aris made a small noise of acknowledgement. "Do you know why a Yin would be here? And do you recognize the other?"

"No—he's not familiar. I assume he is Fan K'uei. What is going on?"

Aris looked through the goggles again and adjusted the night scope. He glanced at the lime-green information feed of distance, range, temperature and infra-red option. "I suspect Richardson is being played for a fool, as he believes he has played Awun as such. He boasted he'd made a compact with the Ch'in to assist in his acquisition of Isis while still holding talks with the Fan K'uei—and he's probably promised both sides guns. Something they would value. But now I suspect the Fan K'uei have allied with the Yins."

Jade spoke up. "So... Richardson thinks he's in with Awun—that he'll be able to trade for Isis—but he's also made a deal with the Ch'in, and Awun has hired the Yins?"

Aris nodded. "It's a good tactic—set the two strongest parties against one another and keep them engaged. The Ch'in are not here alone—of that I am sure."

"So there are technically four parties sneaking around here—us, the Fan K'uei, the Ch'in-Shu-Pao and the Yins?" Jade shook her head. "All this to find Isis? I am so confused."

"I somehow think the only group out here really looking for Isis is us. The others are here for selfish reasons." Aris breathed deep. "I'm sure Richardson doesn't understand there are sometimes stronger bonds between rival gangs than those of family."

"Like the Fan K'uei and the Ch'in-Shu," Robert snickered. "As in—the Ch'in's leader is Awun's sister?"

Aris, Jade and Raven looked at Robert.

The young Zeng looked at each of them. "What? It's true."

Jade leaned forward as she sat up, far enough back from the roof's edge that she could not be seen by the men below. "They're related? By blood?"

Robert nodded.

"Well—that explains a lot. I wonder if David knows that."

"Yeah, he told me." Robert smiled. "They fight for a while and the two gangs go at each other. Then they'll make up and they're having Sunday picnics." He shook his head. "There's something really weird between them. Some old argument."

Aris glanced at Raven, a smile playing on his lips. "Any relation to the Yins?"

Robert smiled as his eyebrows danced up and down. "Oh yeah—one of the reasons we Zengs hate the Yins. Their leader is Awun's nephew."

Aris' smile widened. "Blood fights blood. Do you know if they're fighting or picnicking?"

"Uh—no. I do know the last brawl between her and Awun was right when the Lancers invaded. So—" he shrugged. "But when it comes to a war between gangs and the local authority..."

Aris nodded. "The gangs will band together—at least the closer ones will. Meaning all three of them will be working against Richardson as much as against us."

Raven held up her hand. "I thought the Ch'in were the bringers of peace? That they believed the only true purpose of gangs is the removal of the Fan K'uei?"

"Yeah."

Raven glared at Robert. "But they are family?"

He nodded again. "The Ch'in have always believed in peace and standing up for the moral path—"

"—but their methods are sometimes—questionable." Aris finished. "And Awun believes in taking what he wants, when he wants it. Death and injustice fuel his fire."

"Creepy, if you ask me." Jade shivered. "And every bit the wild card."

"Do we know if the duchess is even in that building?" Raven nodded to the smaller of the warehouses.

Robert nodded. "Our contacts on this side of the bay insist she's here. The building itself is three levels, and it's rumored Awun keeps a sort of court in the same building. The two larger ones—like the one we're on and that one across the street—are for training, and bunking his members who don't have homes. And since the Lancers invaded," he looked at Aris, "there are a lot of them without homes."

"So they're ripe for taking advantage of an opportunity to punish the Lancers." Jade said.

"Richardson is in for a rude awakening." Aris peered through the goggles again. "There are two down there that we can see—and let's suppose it's picnic time."

Robert nodded. "They've done this before, the Ch'in—brought in a smaller gang to do their fighting. If they win, it gives them higher boasting rights." He smiled. "The Zengs already have several badges with the Ch'in-Shu."

Aris moved closer to Robert. "Are the Zengs here for Tien Mu?"

Robert's eyes widened and Aris feared the young man would lie. That would be a pity, as he'd grown to like the boy—killing such potential would be a tragedy. But eventually he nodded and lowered his shoulders. "Yes. They are here to fight for the Ch'in-Shu."

"And which side do you fight for?" Jade said, her attention focused on Robert.

He looked at Jade. "I'm here to make sure David and the duchess are returned to you unharmed. Honor is the way of the Zeng. And Tien Mu knows that."

"So we have the Zengs working to help us find the duchess," Aris said softly as he adjusted the goggles to zero in on the men again—

There was only one guard. The other lay on the floor, his head at an odd angle. Blood pooled around him. The other guard held his gun up high—his eyes wide as he searched the darkness for whatever had killed his companion. "Wait—"

He felt the others move to the building edge, keeping low.

"What is it?" Raven asked.

But what he saw happened too quickly to recount in real time.

It was impossible.

The air seemed to shimmer in front of the remaining guard. Then it seemed that the scene blurred—or perhaps it was Aris' eyes—just before the head of the guard snapped back. He dropped the weapon, fell and lay still.

Aris pulled the binoculars away from his face and rubbed his eyes. He blinked several times and looked back through the magnifying lens again.

There was nothing there but the unmoving men.

But how—

"They—" Jade said in a soft voice. "What happened? They're both on the ground. Robert—are the Zengs nearby?"

"I'm not sure," Robert said as he disappeared again. "But we should move."

Aris scanned the surrounding area, but he didn't see any other movement. Not even a slight glint of light on metal. Nothing to tell him where Richardson's people, or Awun's people, were.



Gunfire blasted the night's quiet, setting off an avalanche of shouting and dogs barking.

Aris heard the thrumming of a VTOL over the noise, and looked up to see a single star shining brighter than all the others—and it was coming closer.

Richardson.

"Idiot," he hissed. "What is he playing at? He knew I wouldn't follow his plan, so what is he up to?" And was this part of his plan all along? If the Zengs and the Yins were to be the advance teams—one to thrust, the other to defend—then were these two guards all there was?

And why leave inexperienced Yins when Awun had seasoned fighters?

He had a very bad feeling about this. There was more going on here than Richardson could possibly know or foresee. Regardless: Aris' goal was to retrieve Isis alive and unharmed. If he failed at either of those conditions, then others would pay.

House Hiritsu *would* be avenged in its duty to the chancellor.

It nagged at Aris to see the two dead men, because he couldn't begin to speculate as to what caused their death. Not yet.

"Scatter," he said to Raven and Jade. "He's going to drop one of his shadow units on the roof. We won't be here. Meet inside the small building, secondary level."

His instinct was to keep Jade with him—until Raven took off and Jade followed. He stopped himself from calling after them.

Aris melted into the shadows.

Tonight would be the end of a very long search. Of that, Aris was certain.