

"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 TWO

Mako Warehouse, Choi Bay, 12:16 a.m.***Hustaing******Sian Commonality, Capellan Confederation******21 October 3060***

The bloodied, motionless bodies at the back entrance to the warehouse alarmed Force Leader Richardson. He stood over them, one to either side. The VTOL proved to be the diversion it was meant to be and scattered Aris Sung's little rescue party—just the way Richardson had intended.

The Yins had reported several inquiries into the Mako warehouse mid-day—evidence Aris' errand boy—the Zeng that always seemed to elude them—had been at work looking for Isis. Awun assured him the Yins had planted false information—directions within the warehouse that would lead them to one of the storage silos, where two of Richardson's Shadow team would dump several tons of, contaminated bay water on top of them, sufficiently getting rid of the House Hiritsu warrior and his little female protégé.

Too bad Awun wanted Jade Hollister as a spoil of war from their little arrangement. He could fish her out of the silo if he wanted to. Once Isis was in Richardson's hands, he didn't care what happened to these gangs and their little fiefdoms.

And so far, everything had gone to plan—even the Ch'in-Shu and Tien Mu's assurance her people would not interfere with the Fan K'eui affairs for the night.

Yes—it was working.

Except for the two dead guards.

He knelt down between them and leaned closer to the one on his right. Richardson moved the dead man's chin, only slightly aware of the unseeing eyes, and pulled a penlight from his utility belt with his left hand.

"Holy—" Cooper said as he moved in behind Richardson. Six more of the remaining Shadow Guard were stationed inside the warehouse. Seven more infantry were hidden around the perimeter. Richardson had twenty men left.

Moving the man's chin exposed the clean, precise cut across the neck. It gaped open and the blood that pooled inside poured out in a steady stream.

"Who did this? The Hiritsu bastard?" Cooper said in a low voice.

"No," Richardson released the man's chin and glanced at the other one. "It wasn't possible for him to come down from that roof in time to do this. This is a professional's work. From the look I'd say the attacker came up behind them and slit their throats."

"Both of them?" Cooper gave a low snort. "Not both of them. You'd maybe get one dead before the other saw you. There's no way both of these men were killed by the same man."

Richardson reached his hand up to Cooper who helped him stand. His leg throbbed from the still healing wound the Duchess inflicted from the Nakjama. He regained his footing with a hand from Cooper. "Tell the men to be extra cautious—and to keep Sung and his party in their sights. Make sure they're lead down the wrong paths."

Cooper nodded. "Yes sir. You want me to accompany you inside?"

Richardson considered Cooper's limp and shook his head. "No, you stay out here and coordinate the perimeter. Get Harris and Wang down here and then have them come in a few steps behind me."

Turning back to the entrance, and with an uneasy glance at the dead men, Richardson pulled his weapon from his shoulder and readied it in front of him.

It was time to find Isis.



"Damnitalltohell!"

She winced as she felt the glass slice deep into the ball of her left foot. Isis had already stepped on several nails, glass pieces, as well as sharp rocks. And there was that rusted knife—

"Duchess?" David tried to laugh as he hung on her shoulder beside her. "Such language."

"At least you have shoes," she propped him against the wall as she balanced and lifted her foot to where she could see the glass in the dim light of the hallway. It glinted dully and she chewed on her lower lip. She knew she had to pull it out, but was it going to hurt?

Hell yes.

She grabbed at it and yanked really fast.

And nearly blacked out herself.

“Duchess?” David put out a hand to steady her. “Careful.”

She gave him a forced smile. “I was being careful. It’s not my fault these Fan Kans can’t clean up around here.” She took in a deep breath and looked behind them, then in front of them. “Where is everybody?”

Isis didn’t like the sound of her own voice echoing off the rusted, metal walls around her. It felt as if she and David had been limping about for hours. And not once had they even so much as bumped into another living being.

I am not liking this.

David coughed beside her. She’d kept him half-hoisted onto her right shoulder, half walking him around while clutching the Nakjama in her left hand. Her own bruises ached, and the soles of her bare feet stung. She was certain they looked like hamburger meat—but she wasn’t going to think about that right now. She was cold—shivering cold. And her fingers were already numb from the damp. Her stomach growled, her throat was parched, her lips cracked, and the silk robe hung in tattered ruins at her thighs where she’d ripped it up to make bandages for David.

And to top it off she needed to go to the bathroom.

She looked up at the dingy, mildewed lamp above them. *Well at least they’d left the lights on.*

Pulling his hand from his mouth, Isis caught the unmistakable smear of blood on his palm. Either he was bleeding into his lungs or he’d bit his tongue.

We’re not gonna make it. She knew that wasn’t the way to think—but earlier that morning she couldn’t remember what day it was, or what month. Or even what her life had been like before finding herself running about, willy-nilly on a planet she’d never given a second glance to.

“Maybe...” Dave said in a tired voice. “Maybe the Lancers gave up—and—and now the Fannies are hiding.”

That was a nice thought, but not one she wanted to let herself believe just yet. It was easier sometimes to wallow in misery—

though she did have a few points in the past days—weeks?—that she was proud of. Moments where she acted on her own, and her actions were the right things instead of the stupid actions of a spoiled princess.

Spoiled rich kid.

Useless.

One of those moments of pride was shooting Richardson. That had felt good—but only after the initial shock of finding herself held prisoner again by another wacko.

She hoped she'd hit a major organ and he drowned in his own blood. Damned megalomaniac.

"Isis..." David said. She paused and he nearly fell out of her arms.

"David?" she eased him down as best she could by holding on to his arm. Careful not to set the bleeding foot directly on the dirty ground she used her heel to steady herself and then sat beside him. He did not look good—even though she knew nothing would look good in these conditions. "David...don't you die on me."

"You already threatened..." David smiled as he settled himself against the wall. "You threatened..." he frowned. "Oh damn. I forgot what you threatened."

Was loss of memory like loss of blood?

She caught a glimpse of her feet.

Shouldn't have done that.

Hamburger looked better.

Forcing herself not to go all girly and feint, Isis used the shard of glass she'd stepped on and started hacking at the long sleeves of the robe.

"You really hated that dress, didn't you?" David smiled, his eyes half-lidded.

She ignored him as she managed to tear a good bit off and then wrap it around her right foot. With grim determination she hacked at the other sleeve and swaddled her left foot. Once finished she pushed her feet out in front of her and looked at her handiwork.

They looked ridiculous, and the silk would be soaked through in a matter of seconds, but at least they gave her some sort of protection.

She took up the Nakjama she'd set on the ground and checked the cartridge. Two shots left. She needed to make them count.

"Isis," David said in a low voice. "Leave me. Please. Find a way out of here, off Hustaing. Don't worry about me."

"Are you insane?" she gave him a half smile before reaching out to pulled him toward her. They needed to keep moving and find the way out. "I leave you here and the first person I'll see is Jade. Now how do I explain my abandoning you here to her, huh? She'll have me for lunch."

With a grunt she managed to stand, testing the newly damaged foot. It hurt. There was nothing she could do about that part of it except move forward. "Now," she pushed her thick, dark hair back from her face, tucking it behind her ears before reaching down and pulling at his arms. "Come on. Get up."

"I can't," David said.

"Can't couldn't. Now get," she pulled harder and he eventually gave in, slowly pushing himself up to a semi-standing position. "Up."

"Brute."

"Baby," she readjusted herself under his shoulder and started the monotonous limp-walk she'd managed to perfect. "And as soon as I see Jade—that is if I don't shoot her—I'm going to tell her what a big baby you are."



Aris felt Robert nearby and motioned for him to be still in the darkness of the warehouse entrance. Refuse littered the corners along the wall. If the Fan K'eui had indeed set up their headquarters here—the authorities should never have had any trouble finding them.

Not with this stench.

But the stench wasn't entirely of garbage. No—it reminded him of something he'd smelled in his youth.

It reminded him of death.

The Zeng had come to him after Jade and Raven had moved to the secondary entry and showed him the map he'd received from his Zeng brothers and sisters.

"You realize this is all a ruse, don't you?" Aris had been gentle with his opinion. Robert had appeared very proud of what he'd accomplished by scouting ahead and questioning those living nearby.

The Zeng had indeed looked—confused. "A ruse? But these were given to my mentor."

"By whom?" With a shake of his hand Aris had gently pushed down on the man's hand holding the small map. "The Fan K'uei would not hold Isis and David Hollister in the main storage—or inside one of the silos. If they are here, then it is in a smaller area. Some place secure—but not easily accessible. Like," he pointed to a smaller room several hallways to their left. "Here. An office."

Robert had agreed and shadowed him along the hallway, the two of them carefully taking the turns as a team. At first Aris had been apprehensive about Robert's presence, but since his rescue at the hands of the Yins—Aris had had to reevaluate his initial impression.

That point bothered him as well. Robert Cheng had proven to be a gifted ally. Capable of finding things—such as Li Wynn. And he'd been able to evade the Lancers' men several times.

So how had he been captured by the Yins so easily?

This is the thought that occupied the Hiritsu warrior's mind when he motioned Robert to stop. Ahead of them the corridor turned right. Shadows welcomed them as the lights overhead dimmed slightly. He'd heard something ahead—

Gunfire echoed inside the narrow corridor. Aris instinctively dropped flat on his stomach, rolling into the right against the wall, his own weapon poised on his shoulder, his eye focused through the site.

He saw movement, illuminated by the short bursts of fire from the enemy's guns. Simple slug-throwers. He waited until the shooter made a move forward, out of the right-hand corridor in order to get a better look at their target.

Three shots—the enemy fell. More fire came his way and he kept low, waited again until the second shooter emerged and fired again. From the way the man fell Aris knew he hadn't killed him.

Not immediately.

When no more shots were fired Aris listened for retreating footsteps, or any shuffled footfalls of a waiting ambush around the corner. When he heard nothing he rose slowly. Again Robert came from behind him making just enough noise not to alarm the warrior.

Gun still at the ready, Aris approached the fallen men.

Robert shown a light on their faces as the two men looked down. "Yins," Robert said. "I recognize this one."

Aris knelt beside him, again noticing the oversized jacket and Fan K'eui emblem stitched on the shoulder. "Where are the Fan K'eui?"

"Ghosts!"

Aris and Robert started at the voice. Robert shown the light on the second shooter, the one Aris hadn't killed even as Aris moved to kneel beside him.

The man—no the boy's—eyes were wide as his life drained from him, the wound in his chest caving inward. He reached up and grabbed Aris' right elbow. "Ghosts...the wind will kill you..." his voice became a whisper.

Aris narrowed his eyes. Ghosts? Wind? What was Richardson playing at here? Had he sent his Secondary Shadow team in ahead to cull out the weaker players?

These *children*?

"What do you mean by ghosts?" Aris said in a hushed voice.

But the boy was already dead, his eyes staring at something past Aris' head, something on the other side of life.

Robert had moved away, his steps echoing on the concrete floor. "Warrior..."

The Zeng's tone alarmed Aris and he stood slowly as he looked into what the light revealed down the corridor.

He felt Robert's gaze on him even as he heard shooting issuing from the corridors ahead. "The wind will kill you..."

Aris didn't want to believe in ghosts. Nor evil spirits that hovered on the wind. But as he passed by the twenty or so dead men, their throats cleanly, professionally sliced, he was reminded of what he'd seen from the rooftop. Yins and Blackwind Lancers. There appeared to be no discrimination to the killing.

"Warrior...who did this?"

Aris pursed his lips. "My guess is Awun did a little cleaning up—perhaps to clear our way."

"Clear our way?"

Aris nodded as he forged ahead, past the dead bodies. "Toward whatever trap he's set ahead."



Richardson stooped as he heard the short bursts of auto-pistols ahead. The semi-darkness of the warehouse corridors made the noise direction deceptive. Part of the warehouse appeared to be underground—not something divulged by Awun or his map-maker.

And it wasn't really a warehouse like the Fan K'eui leader had called it. It was a two story building, complete with offices, storage silos as well as a boat dock.

Whatever it was—it was filthy.

And what was that smell?

He heard Wang and Harris behind him and raised his arm to signal them to stop. More gunfire ahead. Richardson smiled—he hoped that was the sound of Aris and his little pup dying.

He retrieved the penlight from his left breast pocket, pulled the map from his right pocket and—holding the light between his teeth—examined where he was inside the warehouse.

With what he could see, there was a split in the hall several paces ahead. Sung had been instructed to go right—so Richardson was sure the warrior would go left.

Richardson would go right.

Signaling to his backup with a quick gesture, Richardson continued on with his weapon on his shoulder, at the ready. The split in the corridor loomed closer and he tapped the bud in his left ear. "Richardson to Cooper."

No answer.

"Miles, Stinson—report."

Still there was no answer.

Cooper was supposed to coordinate the men inside the warehouse while Corporal Miles and Lieutenant Stinson were the two Shadow in charge of the warehouse perimeter.

Damnit.

Where were they?

He tapped the bud again. "Evanovich."

"Here sir—are you ready?"

Pilot Evanovich was with the VTOL—their sole means of getting out of the warehouse, Choi bay, and directly to Smithson and Doles. With the Duchess. No matter who else he lost during this mission, he couldn't loose the VTOL.

"Look sharp and keep a watch. I think something's happened to Cooper, Miles and Stinson."

"*Force Leader*," came a familiar voice through the bud.

"Dalamar?"

"*Yes sir—we reached the room where Awun said she'd be—but it's empty.*"

Empty? "Are you sure?"

"*We've looked the entire room over. We've found two Fan K'eui men here. One's unconscious and the other one's dead. They used a needler.*"

Richardson took a deep breath. Trap—the bastard had lied to him. There was no Duchess here. "Dalamar, get your men and move out. Meet up with Evanovich."

"*Yes sir. And sir—*"

“Yes?”

“There’s a lot of blood in here.” He paused. “She might be dead.”

Dead or alive, it didn’t matter to him. As long as he had her body his mission would be a success. So let the Chancellor believe his beloved fiancé is still alive. They could always say she was killed by an assassin.

“Acknowledged. Get to the VTOL—but keep an eye out.” He glanced back at his men. “Let’s move.”

“But sir,” Wang said as they walked forward. “She’s not here.”

“I’m not looking for the Duchess anymore,” he said as he picked up his pace. “He’ll be here—if nothing else to gloat over his betrayal. My new target is the leader of the Fan K’uei. I want Awun.”



“Raven—just slow down.”

It wasn’t that Jade was tired—she was frustrated and angry. So what else was new these days?

Frustrated because the only thing they’d found so far was a lot of dead bodies—both Yin and Lancer. Angry because Raven was running about all over the place with no real direction.

When Raven didn’t respond, Jade stopped and stood in the center of the corridor, directly beneath one of the dim lighting panels. Eventually the woman stopped and turned. “What are you doing?” she hissed.

“I’m waiting on you to get a grip,” Jade hoisted her weapon on her shoulder and pulled the scribbled directions out of her back pocket. Robert had given her a copy just before she and Raven had set off into the secondary entrance. “You got a penlight?”

Hurrying back to her, Raven gave a few subtle insults and handed Jade a penlight. Squinting, Jade said, “We took a wrong turn about two corridors back.”

“What do you mean a wrong turn?” Raven was beside her, looking at the map. “I memorized that map before we stepped in.”

"Well—" Jade smirked. "You need to work on the memory thingie—'cause you're wrong. We should have turned left but we kept going."

"So we have to backtrack."

"No," she followed the line along where they are verses where Robert marked them to be. "We can cut through here," she pointed to a side tunnel.

Raven looked closer at the map. "But that'll lead us into a silo."

"Which is okay, since no one will be there. Then we take that door out of there and head straight, and then right."

Raven hoisted her weapon and turned away, heading back the way they came. Jade shoved the map back into her pocket along with the penlight and then turned to follow her new "buddy."

And she thought Isis was a royal pain.



"Isis..."

She ignored him. He was getting heavier, and heavier, and her feet throbbed beneath her weight as well as his. Isis wasn't sure how much longer she could keep supporting him in the maze.

They hadn't gotten any closer to an exit—and just now she swore she'd seen that same clump of stuff twice before. *I think we're moving in circles.*

This wasn't good.

She paused at the end of the corridor again. They'd already traveled to the right—why not try the left corridor this time? What the hell?

"Isis..."

"Yes David?"

"We're going in a circle."

"I know David—but we're gonna take a different way this time. Something—"

She stopped. Something loomed ahead of her, at the other end of the long hallway. It moved slightly, ambling to the left and then the right. She knew that gait.

Knew the laugh that came down the corridor after her.

Awun.

“Little princess,” he said as he moved closer. Isis stood rooted to the spot. She’d expected find a guard—but to actually run head long into the man you were running from?

If it weren’t for bad luck—I’d be home in a hot bath right now.

David moved in her arms. He looked up. “This is bad,” he said in a whisper.

No, this is eff’d up. Isis took several steps back. David tried to help her but he was bleeding again—something she’d noticed the last time she’d stopped for a rest.

“Oh no, you can’t run little princess,” he said. He wore a leather jacket, leather pants and a red shirt. His hair was slicked back into its ponytail and he held an auto-pistol in his right hand.

“Stay away from us,” she said.

I sound ridiculous. Go me—mighty warrioress. My knees are shaking so hard I can hear them over the chatter of my teeth.

“Where do you think you’re going?” He strolled right up to them, knocked David back, out of her arms. He fell on his back and lay still. The blood glistened on his chest.

Before she could kneel beside him Awun reached down and took her arm and yanked her back to him. He pulled her close to his front and then pulled her hair back, sufficiently angling her face so that she was forced to look up at him. “Cursed princess. You’ve brought death to us—to this world. A demon protects you—House Hiritsu. Yes—I’ve seen him here. Prowling around in the dark corridors. And in his wake he’s left countless Lancers as well as Yins dead.”

She searched his face. Who was Awun talking about? Aris Sung?

“They’re all dead now—in revenge for them killing my Yins—they’re all dead, their necks split open like Sunday pig.” He stroked her face with the edge of the Nakama he had in his left hand.

Nakjama.

Weapon.

She realized she still held a needler in her own hands.

"Uh, uh, uh, little princess," Awun said as he then moved the pistol until the barrel pressed against her temple. "I wouldn't use that little toy if I were you. You see—I have a hair trigger, and if you shoot me, then I'm afraid I'd have to kill you too."

He smiled. "But I will kill you, before your demon kills me."

"I'm afraid I'm going to claim that little reward myself," came a voice from behind Awun.

Isis froze.

It can't be.

Awun abruptly released her and Isis lost her balance on her aching feet. She fell back, her right hand touching David's shoe. She scooted across the cold concrete to be beside him even as her own gaze beheld a ghost emerge from the darkness.

Richardson.

He was there—limping slightly, his leg encased in a metal brace—but he still breathed. He held a weapon in his hands—large enough to take out Awun's entire chest.

Awun's expression shifted. He smiled, and Isis saw the two were evenly matched in height, but not weight. Awun was stockier, thicker throughout his chest, arms and legs—a behemoth in comparison to Richardson's lithe form. "So—are you her demon, little Lancer?"

Richardson shook his head as he approached and then moved himself between Isis and Awun. Isis wasn't taken in by the gesture—she knew if either opponent won, her life was little more than an irritant. "Where are my men, Awun? We had a deal."

The Fan K'eui straightened to his full height, his nakjama now pointed directly at Richardson. "Yes we did, Force Leader," he spat the title out with disgust. "Have you seen the hallways? They're littered with dead men."

"They're Yins. You called the Yins in here and then used your own people to ambush mine above. You're responsible for the Yin lives."

"I didn't kill them." He narrowed his eyes. "You did. And for that, you will pay dearly."

"And you killed my people as well. We had a deal! Instead you take her," he gestured in Isis' direction, "from where you promised me she'd be."

Isis moved closer to David and placed her fingers against his neck. There was a pulse, and he stirred. Moaned. She leaned in close to him and swatted at his face. "David—we have got to move. Now!" she hissed in his ear.

"Uhnnn...."

"I did not remove her," Awun yelled out.

Isis looked back to see the two were still standing, face to face, their weapons pointed at each other's head.

"I did not kill your men," Richardson said. "But you killed mine."

She didn't like the darkness his tone had taken. Richardson was a man on the edge. She pulled at David and pushed at him until his eyes fluttered open. "Get. Up." She said through clenched teeth.

He tried to turn to his left and she pushed and pulled at him until he was standing—sort of. She looked back at the two, still locked in an argument.

"Come on David," she said softly and tucked herself under his arm again. "We've got to hide."

"That's—" he coughed. "That's Richardson. And Awun?"

"Uh-huh," they continued to half-walk, half-run down the opposite hall, behind Richardson, away from the two men. She thought she'd seen a doorway down here a few minutes ago.

Foosteps echoed ahead of them—someone was coming. And from the sound of the pounding, they were soldiers. Isis guessed more of Richardson's men.

Just ahead she saw the door on the right and steered him to it. Together they spun the handle to the left until the door clicked. Loudly. Isis shot a look back to the two—

Just as Richardson fired on Awun. The blasts from his weapon forced the Fan K'eui backwards. Awun's Nakjama discharged, but the red energy burst went wild and flew past them to impact on

the side of the hall to their left. The smell of burned and scorched metal flooded the passage.

Shouts followed from that hall and Isis all but shoved David inside before turning and aiming her needler at the sound of approaching boots.

Two men in uniform—Lancer uniforms—appeared and Isis fired just as Richardson continued to unload his gun into Awun. One of the men fell forward, the shards of plastic slicing through his shoulder and half his face. His auto-pistol slid across the concrete toward Isis. She fired again at the other man but the needler jammed—possibly with smaller shards—or the block was too low for pressure ejection.

The other soldier went down and rolled out of range. Without thinking Isis went down on her stomach, grabbed up the pistol, fired twice at the man before moving back to the door at a crouch.

With a glance at Richardson less than five meters away, Isis went inside the door and slammed it shut. She wasn't able to get the handle spun before it was wrenched from her. In seconds she realized she and David were in a dead end—a round room with single door on the other side. David lay in the middle of the room, breathing hard, coughing. Isis limped to the opposite door and tried turning the handle as she had the other door. It wouldn't budge.

A grating squeak told her the door she and David came in was now open. Turning, she saw Richardson standing there, silhouetted by the frame. Taking small steps in, the brace on his left leg creaking, his gun slung over his shoulder.

Another soldier stepped inside behind him—the one Isis hadn't hit with the needler. He moved against the wall to Isis' right, his weapon trained on her. They were now aiming their guns at one another.

"Shhhh, Duchess. It's all over. The big bad wolf is gone, and now it's time to come home."

She shook her head. She was shaking—uncontrollably. Her stomach growled in hunger, her limbs ached from constant movement or more recent—from abuse. Her feet burned as she stood on them, imagining the cuts as blood soaked the silk she tied around them.

Strands of dark hair had come loose around her face, a larger shock of it directly over her right eye. No. No, no, no. She wasn't going to let it end like this—she'd come too far, endured too much just to become a hostage to the Blackwind Lancers.

Too many people had died. Sacrificed their lives.

A movement behind Richardson caught Isis' attention just as the door behind her clanked and the wheeled handle began to spin. Torn between the two, Isis looked back in time to see Richardson turn and fire just as Aris ducked out of the way.

"Aris Sung!" Richardson screamed out. He fired his weapon again—only it issued a solid clink-chunk instead of firing slugs. Angered, he tossed the weapon aside and pulled his knife from his belt as the gun clattered to the debris strewn floor, and Aris moved to stand in the center of the doorway.



The sound of Richardson's gun giving out of ammunition was moment Aris had waited for. He and Robert had sent he confrontation between Awun—or rather the slaughter of the Fan K'eui. He's seen Isis, just past the two of them, and knew in order to get to her, he'd have to get through them.

He'd nearly shouted out to warn her when the two Lancer soldiers came down the hallway—but to his surprise the Duchess had fired on them herself.

"She's good," Robert had said behind him.

"She just ran out of ammo," Aris had moved in closer as Awun body became a steaming, bloody mass and Richardson turned to chase Isis.

Now he stood face to face with Richardson again—no longer as an uneasy ally—but in his proper place.

As the enemy.

Aris holstered his Nakjama and pulled his own blade from his right boot and hefted it in his hand. Richardson crouched low, as did Aris. The two began to move around each other.

"Isis comes with me," Richardson said in a low voice.

Aris watched him move, noted the way the metal brace on his leg made him a little off balance. It also grated a bit—which might slow him down. Weaknesses Aris could work with.

He was good with a knife, better with a sword. He needed to watch Richardson at first—gauge his strengths. Watch his movements—see which ones repeated.

And which ones betrayed him.

Richardson abruptly thrust forward, jabbing at Aris with the long blade. Aris moved back and turned, his focus never leaving the end of Richardson's weapon, or his stance.

Again and again Richardson attacked him, and always Aris turned away, moving his body away from the blade. Through the assaults he noted the Lancer was weakest on the side without the brace—an old injury? Or perhaps the brace strengthened unused muscles?

He was also aware of the Lancer soldier moving closer and closer to Isis. She looked terrible—mistreated. Dirtied. It angered him to see her like this.

But it also filled his heart with joy.

She was alive!

Richardson lunged at that moment—obviously watching Aris as well. He'd allowed his concern for the Duchess to lower his guard, and take his attention.

Aris twisted as usual, but Richardson appeared to have adjusted for the movement and the blade struck the leather of his utility belt. The clink of the blade's tip against the metal of his sword alarmed Aris—Richardson was too close.

He turned away, slashing out as well, scoring a slice along the Lancer's left arm.

The belt came loose where the knife had cut the leather. Aris yanked the belt free and tossed it away. He felt a little lighter now—the sword the only weight and it was balanced squarely against his back. It was everything he had within him not to draw the sword and end this. The Lancer soldier was closing the gap between himself and Isis. David Hollister lay unmoving, and he wasn't sure if the man was even alive.

Richardson would be cocky now—of that he was sure. He landed a strike, even if it wasn't a blood letting blow.

"You won't win this one, Sung," Richardson said as he hefted the blade from hand to hand. "My men won't let you step outside of this facility with Isis. They'll take her from you. They're desperate to go home."

"Not my problem," Aris said and narrowed his eyes. "But I would like to know exactly what your deal was with Awun."

"Nothing much, really. He wanted weapons, I wanted Isis. It was going to be a simple swap."

"So what went wrong?" Aris moved to the side as Richardson took a step toward him. "Awun become greedy?"

"No—he hired in another gang. The Yins. He must have thought I was stupid and wasn't paying attention. He had every intention of the Yins killing me and my men while he took our weapons as well as Isis." He gave Aris a slow smile. "She's been used, you know."

Aris paused. He remained silent.

"It's true. Awun told me. He used her himself—wanted try out the Chancellor's cow—see if the milk was—"

Aris lunged and twisted coming at Richardson from two sides. It was a move he'd used many times on many enemies on the battlefield—and it always worked.

It always killed.

But he usually wasn't angered the way he was now—whether Richardson's accusations were true or not he would not tolerate anyone talking about the Chancellor's fiancé like a common—

Something burned into his side and he recognized the pain just as his own knife found a home in Richardson's left shoulder. Aris lost momentum and wasn't able to push down on the blade, shoving it far enough down to sever the artery in left side of the enemy's neck.

Instead the two ceased movement—both amazed that the other had struck their target.

Aris pulled his knife free even as the man's blade slipped from his side. The two staggered back and checked themselves.

Richardson's knife had struck Aris' left side, just below the rib cage. Blood streamed down his black shirt and pants and began to pool on the floor. It wasn't a fatal strike, but it would bleed.

Richardson's own wound was meant to be a killing blow—and would have been if Aris could have finished the strike. Instead it only weakened his left side—but there was little blood.

Damn—my strike was meant kill, and instead I could pass out from blood loss.

This wasn't good.

Richardson recovered quickly and charged at Aris again. Aris moved away, moving from the silo to the door and into the corridor. He had to think fast—Richardson was coming after him and he needed to end this quickly—before the Lancer ended it for him.



The door behind Isis creaked even as Aris and Richardson moved through the door to the corridor. She was terrified for Aris—she had never seen him stagger before. Never seen him fail.

But now he looked pale and unsure on his feet.

And the blood—she could see it on the floor where he'd been fighting Richardson, as well as trailing into the corridor beyond.

She felt the air move as the door opened wider, cooling the sweat that now beaded on her forehead. She turned, forgetting the guard to her right.

Jade stepped in, followed by Raven. Jade focused on her brother, lying inert in the middle of the silo floor and ran toward him. "David!"

The advancing Lancer took his opportunity and fired at Raven. She ducked and rolled away from Isis as the guard shifted his weapon's sites and fixed them on her. "Duchess," he said slowly. "Come with me and I won't kill the Hiritsu bitch."

"Jiào nǐ shēng háizi méi pìgu yǎn!" Raven spat at him as she drew up her own weapon and fired at him.

But the guard was prepared, successfully firing off several shots before he dropped down, lowering himself as a target. One shot hit Raven's shoulder—the same shoulder she injured a week ago. She fell back against the wall delivering out a string of expletives.

"You prick!" came a female voice from Isis' right as Jade moved from her brother and launched herself onto the back of the guard.

She began pummeling him with her right fist. "You shot my brother!"

Isis still held her pistol in her hand as Jade continued to pummel the guard. He dropped his gun as he tried to get the crazy woman off of his back.

"Shoot him," Raven said from behind Isis. "Kill him!"

Isis winced as she tried to target the moving man, but he was spinning about, still trying to find a way to throw his attacker from him. Abruptly he faced Isis. A clean shot.

She fired.

He turned.

There was no sound in Isis' ears as the shot exploded into Jade's back. Her arms and legs spasmed as she released the Lancer, her eyes wide as she tried to turn on unsteady legs.

Her expression was one Isis would never forget.

That of surprise.

"Kill him!" Raven screamed again from somewhere far away.

Isis realized she still held the pistol in her hand and brought it up again to aim it at the Lancer. He was turning to face her—bringing up his own weapon and aiming it at her.

She fired, and fired again, and again, and again until there was nothing left in the auto-pistol. Isis hadn't realized she'd been screaming.

And then she was throwing the gun on the ground and limping, stumbling over the dead Lancer to get to Jade, whose green eyes stared at the ceiling where she lay sprawled on her back.

Isis tried to find a pulse, beat on the woman's chest and attempted CPR. She had to save her.

She had to save her!

But someone was grabbing her, pulling her back, talking to her.

"...dead, Isis. Let her go. It was an accident. Just let her go..."

It was Raven. There was blood on her hands, and Isis stared at it, at the blood seeping out from beneath Jade's back. Her life slip-

ping away. Isis' own hands had blood on them. Was it Raven's or Jade's? Did it matter anymore?

"I...I killed her..." was the last thing she said.



The corridor gave Aris a little more room to move, even as images swam in front of his eyes. They had to get out of here. Richardson had to die.

The Lancer struck again and again and tried to grab Aris' arm, but the Hiritsu Warrior ducked beneath him and jabbed his knife quickly and cleanly into Richardson's side, the twisted it.

Unfortunately he lost his grip on the blade, twisting it too far into bone and when Richardson moved, the knife went with him. Aris moved back, nearly stumbling against the body of the other Lancer.

Richardson screamed out loud as shots came from inside the silo.

Isis!

Aris felt overwhelmed with frustration. He reached down for his Nakjama, the one he'd reholstered before.

Only it wasn't there.

The leather holder was empty.

Richardson gave a low laugh as Aris looked at him. The Lancer had the weapon in his own hand. "I took it from you, when you tried to kill me with your little shoulder trick." He held it up, aimed it at Aris. "Goodbye, Sung. I'll make sure Isis finds a new home."

Aris looked around him—there was nowhere to go.

No!

Something shimmered to the right of Richardson—the air moving slightly.

Richardson's smile vanished just as his head jerked back and a line appeared across the front of his neck.

Aris took a step forward but Richardson opened his mouth—blood pooled out of it just as the line in his neck widened and released its own fountain of blood.

Force Leader Erik Richardson gurgled in his throat, dropped the Nakjama and fell to his knees, and then forward on his face.

Aris took a step back, his gaze searching the air around him. This time he'd seen it happen in front of him, not through binoculars, and not the aftermath.

There was *something*, or *someone* else in this corridor with him. And it had dispatched Richardson with trained precision.

Was he next? How could he fight something he couldn't see?

"Aris!"

That was Raven's voice. He'd heard it earlier. Aris moved cautiously around Richardson's body and into the silo.

The soldier lay dead to his left, two meters from where David lay. Raven was on the floor beside Jade. In Raven's arms was Isis.

Oh god no...

Aris ran to them and knelt down. His gaze focused on Jade first—her staring eyes told him she was dead. He looked at Isis and then at Raven.

She shook her head. "She's okay—her feet are in bad condition," she looked down at the Duchess. "Pretty much like the rest of her body."

"Why is she—?"

"Aris," Raven gave him a pained expression. "We need to go. See if Hollister's alive. I'll take care of the Duchess."

He stood slowly, still very much aware of the wound in his side. He checked on Hollister—alive—barely. Taking in a deep breath he pulled the man up by his arms and then managed to stand himself. He was sweating by the time he managed to maneuver Hollister into a fireman's carry.

Raven proceeded him out of the silo, the Duchess half walking, half limping out on her own. Her eyes were open now, but he doubted she was seeing anything. It looked as if she'd suffered a shock of some kind—and he was sure Raven knew what it was.

He glance back at Jade's body before he looked back to Richardson's inert form.

And there, just to the right of the dead Force Leader, he saw the shimmer again. It was still there. Waiting. Watching.

Aris stared at it as well.

And then it was gone.

"Aris, come *on!*" Raven hissed.

He turned, hefted Hollister up, hissed at the pain in his side and then followed Raven out.



The sun was just tipping over the trees as they emerged from the warehouse. The two dead Yins had been removed, and from the streaks of blood leading out to the dock—Aris was sure they'd wash ashore somewhere south.

"We need to get to the VTOL," Raven said. "Richardson said he'd left it nearby."

Aris shook his head. "No, we need to get to the trees and take a look around."

Raven frowned. "Are you okay? You look pale."

"You don't look so great either," he noted the blood on her own shoulder, and then looked at Isis. In the dawning light she looked worse than he'd ever seen her.

It was then he noticed something was missing. "Where is Robert?"

"He was with you?"

Aris nodded. "Up until mine and Richardson's fight."

She shook her head. "Maybe he got out while he could."

"Let's go."

The moved slowly but efficiently beside the building's walls. If there were any Lancers left none were visible. And maybe they knew their leader was dead and had fled into the hills. He saw no sign of the VTOL either and believed they'd fled inside of it.

Once up the hill he laid Hollister down as gently as he could. The man moaned once and as the morning light increased Aris noted the wound in his abdomen. "He's not going to make it."

Raven helped Isis to a nearby tree and froze. "And neither are we," she said in a quiet voice, her tone full of warning.

Faces stared back at them from between the bushes, the tress, the shrubs. He counted perhaps thirty of them. They were surrounded.

He'd left his Nakjama in the warehouse, as well as his utility belt. He had only his sword.

"Warrior!" came a familiar voice.

Robert Cheng emerged from the wall of people and raised his hand. "May I introduce to you, the Ch'in-Shu-Pao and Zengs."

Raven glance back at Aris. He nodded and bowed low.

Everyone else bowed as well.

A diminutive woman in black leather stepped out of the brush. Her face was delicate though her Eurasian features were more pronounced, either by make-up or by design. She nodded to Raven and opened her arms wide. "Allow me to see to the Duchess."

Robert moved closer to Aris and bent down beside David. He called out to a few of the men and then stepped forward, gathered around David and lifted him. When Aris stepped forward Robert stood and put a hand on his chest. "Let them take him. We'll nurse him."

"Jade is dead."

Robert nodded. "I know. I saw her body. We'll retrieve it as well."

Aris watched the smaller woman reach up to Isis and brush her hair from her face. "Little sister, you have been through too much. We will take you home." She gestured to several women who came forward and led Isis away. Raven was motioned to follow and with a nod from Aris, she did.

The small woman stepped toward Aris and he bowed to her. "Tien Mu."

She nodded. "Aris Sung of House Hiritsu." She smiled. "We will take you back to your ship. The war is over."

"Over?"

"Hiritsu stayed the hand of the last of the Lancer holdout. You must take the duchess back to your people."

Robert said, "They're picking Li Wynn up as well." He looked down at Aris' side. "Are you okay?"

In fact, he wasn't okay. For weeks he'd been living on as little as possible, sleeping only in small naps, and resting—never. He felt the aches of the month drive through him at that moment, felt the blood as it continued to trickle down his side. And for the first time he felt tired.

Tien Mu called out quickly to two of her men—but Robert Cheng stepped in as Aris collapsed forward. "I will bear him from here."