

**THE ART OF WAR:
METHOD
AND DISCIPLINE**

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Epilogue

Nonjhi Spaceport
Qingliu, Hustaing
Sian Commonality, Capellan Confederation
12 November 3060

"Capella One is moving—prepare exits," Aris spoke into the mic at the corner of his mouth. He felt a twinge in his side as he turned and watched Duchess Isis Marik walk away from the condemned prisoners—specifically Captain Warner Doles.

Aris' mind still reeled at the speech Isis had delivered to Doles and his men. He knew of Candace Liao's own order for the Lancers to be forever limited to their remaining two battalions—but to then have their 'Mechs stripped away and equipment taken from them... He'd heard the ruthlessness in the duchess' voice when she'd spoken to them. He felt a small swelling of pride as she walked back up the ramp of the *Pearl of True Wisdom*.

She held her head high, her expression neutral, but he knew how much physical pain she was in—and that didn't account for how she was feeling inside. He still did not know what had happened to pull her into the shell in which she now lived; in private, there were no longer smiles. Only a distant look.

Haunted.

There was something her mind would not let her forget. He had done his duty in requesting the physician give him a full accounting of her condition—every part of her—but the physician could not report on her mind.

The report had not been positive. Isis had endured more than any woman could be expected to bear at the hands of mercenaries and surrounded by filth. But he sensed her state of mind stemmed from more than those trials.

He had received last-minute orders from House Master Ty Wu Non. Master Non would return to the *Pearl* later. Aris was to watch over the duchess as well as oversee the checks for lift-off.

When the shadows of the ramp's interior darkened and the eyes of Qingliu no longer fell upon the duchess and her honor guard, Aris watched her pause. She put her hands to her face.

"Move," he said under his breath to the other soldiers in the guard, and reached out to her. "Duchess..."

She looked up at him, her dark eyes round and red-rimmed. Her mouth opened, but no words came out. Her façade had broken, her strength had been diminished outside the DropShip.

He turned to the closest guard. "Stay with us; the rest of you, report back to your assigned stations." Aris turned back to the guard he had ordered to stay. "We're escorting the duchess back to the infirmary—"

"No," Isis said, then took a deep breath. She straightened, but reached out for Aris' hand. "My rooms. I want to go back to my rooms."

He nodded. As long as she wasn't in any physical pain, perhaps he should assign her a guard and return to duty. He nodded to the dutiful warrior beside him. "Please escort Duchess Marik—"

"No," she said in a forceful voice. Both men looked at her. But she looked directly at Aris. "I want you to take me."

His eyes sought hers, and he understood she needed to speak with him.

Alone.

Aris dismissed the guard and moved beside her. Regaining her composure, Isis removed her hand from his and walked. Aris moved just beside her, his shoulders square, his chin high as they traveled through the *Pearl* to the duchess' apartments.

At her door, she gestured for him to come inside. Aris hesitated. There were rules of etiquette he was expected to follow, as a gentleman, a MechWarrior and a member of House Hiritsu. Entering the private chamber of the chancellor's fiancée did not fall within those rules.

She frowned at his hesitation. "What's wrong?"

"I—" he clasped his hands behind his back, just beneath the cape of his dress uniform. "I may not—"

She looked around, frowning, before understanding dawned on her tired features. Her shoulders rounded in exhaustion and she hung her head. "I forget—we're no longer in Qingliu's streets. The rules are back in place."

Aris ducked his head down to her. "Duchess—is there something you wanted to tell me?"

She nodded before looking up at him. "Have you—have you heard anything about David? David Hollister? Or any message from Robert Cheng?"

Aris had served the chancellor for some time, and he knew the duchess' face. It graced thousands of magazines, holo-vids, and other media. Even during the time they had spent together on Hustaing, he had seen her only as his responsibility. Now, in this moment, he looked at her.

And saw her for the first time.

He no longer saw the duchess, the daughter of the leader of the Free Worlds League. Nor did he see the chancellor's fiancée. Just a frightened, lonely woman who truly cared about the young man who had helped her and whose sister had paid the ultimate price. Aris nodded. "I received a message from Tien Mu this morning. David is fine—her people took him to a hospital two cities away. It will be some time before he recovers fully."

He paused. "Jade's funeral was this morning. They scattered her ashes as the day began."

At these words, he saw the haunted look return. She blinked several times, trying to keep her tears from falling, but he could see them just behind her eyes. "I—" she took a deep breath and leaned against the door frame. "I... I wanted to be there."

Aris bowed. "I know. And I took the liberty of letting Tien Mu know that you were detained by affairs of state on the *Pearl*. She understood." He hadn't meant to upset her. "As for Robert—no one's seen him. He's vanished."

She nodded. "I would like to talk to David. One day. And tell him," she licked her lips. "Tell him how Jade died."

"He knows," Aris said. "Raven Clearwater told them. The Blackwind Lancer who tried to attack you killed her. He threw her off his back and then shot her at pointblank range." He smiled. "You're a hero to Jade's family for shooting the man who killed her."

Aris could not guess, from among the things he had said, what it was that brought the next reaction from Isis. Her dark eyes widened. She put her hands to her face, stepped through her door and closed it.

Several seconds passed before Aris moved. His mind sorted through the news he had delivered, seeking a clue to her reaction, but eventually he returned to his duties.



She leaned back on the door as it closed and slid slowly to the floor. Her heart raced, the blood echoed in her ears, and she pressed her hands to the sides of her head. Aris' words hung in the air around her—a lie that threatened to smother her.

Raven had lied. But Raven knew the truth! She'd seen me kill Jade. Why did she lie? I'm no hero. I'm—I'm—

She took a deep breath.

I'm a murderer.

She put her hands down and took several more deep breaths. She should have gone back to the infirmary; she wasn't healed yet, in mind or body. But the doctors there would only numb the pain again, and she would sleep.

Rest was good for the wounded body, but not the wounded heart. Dreams came to remind her of her mistake, of her sin, of her doom. In her dreams she couldn't run. She needed to stay awake and face her pain. Embrace her guilt. Justify it, somehow. Let it remind her she was alive.

And in the silence of her private rooms she spoke.

"I killed—I killed you."

Jade.

If I had never run down that alley—if I'd never followed her into the street or into her brother's shop. If I'd just run the other way—Jade would still be alive.

Isis put her hands to her face. *I killed her. I killed her. Ikilledher. Ikilledher... killedher... killedher...*

She heard Jade's voice in her head—heard the slight accent in her speech. Jade always sounded confident, not afraid. And she'd been so sure of herself. She saw the statuesque blond in her mind. *I took away your life.*

Home. Jade had cried when she saw the blackened ruin of Qingliu. *My being here took away your home, Jade.*

Tomorrow I leave for home.

Tomorrow I will see the sun and moon of Sian. Tomorrow ...

She closed her eyes. *I have a tomorrow.*

Isis let the memory of that terrible moment surface, allowing it escape from the box she'd pushed it into. Holding the gun, trying to target the Lancer, seeing his chest in her site.

And the terrible crack of the pistol just as he spun, trying to dislodge Jade from his back.

She jumped at the sound in her mind, her eyes opening, blinking back tears.

No, no, no. I will cry—but not yet.

I choose when to cry.

I choose when not to.

I—choose.

She took several deep breaths before pushing herself into a wobbly standing position. Dizziness threatened to take her down again, just as it had earlier, while facing Doles.

But that was duty—and one she had relished executing. A message from her fiancé delivered by the very princess they intended to imprison.

A duty.

She looked at the round bed bolted to the floor of her room. She'd always admired it before, and never thought of it as a frivolous thing to have aboard a vessel. In fact—when considering many of Sun-Tzu's rooms on board this ship and other ships—her room seemed almost plain.

But now the red silk damask looked more like blood than rose petals. The perfumed sheets no longer filled her with thoughts of falling cherry blossoms, but forced bile to rise in her stomach. Instead of climbing on top of it to rest as her body begged her to do, she moved closer to the windows and stared up at the stars glittering in the clear, cool night sky.

A sky Jade would never see again.

Aris had said she'd been on Hustaing a month. But the time felt longer, measured by scars when survival had depended on trap-doors. She could barely remember how it started, or how she'd survived.

But I did—I survived.

I lived. Against all odds.

She wasn't blind to that fact any more. The assumption that once her death commandoes had fallen she would die as well seemed right. And in the end—she had been foolish to believe Sun-Tzu would send anyone to rescue her.

David had believed this to be Sun-Tzu's plan all along. To use her death as a means to defend his territories without causing a fuss.

And if so—the pure logic of the decision to allow a symbol of his humanity to die in the innocence of peace was a brilliant plan. Excellent strategy.

Genius.

But that didn't make the sting of seeming unimportant any less harsh.

Her duty was to die for the life of her chancellor. Just as it had been the commandoes' duty to die protecting her. But—but she knew on some base level that that was *her* special purpose as his betrothed.

And it was the Confederation's duty to give its life to protect what Sun-Tzu had built, what he protected. There was no life that did not hold meaning when it came to defending the leader of the Cappellan Confederation.

Not even mine.

If she put things in emotional terms—as she was always wont to do—Jade's death had no meaning. It was an accident, nothing more than the inept ability of a spoiled aristocrat.

But if she put things in logical pockets, understanding that Jade's death was necessary because she was acting in the defense of the Chancellor's fiancée—

No. She'd been defending her brother, not Isis. And then—

She bit her lip hard until she tasted blood.

Pull it together! You've got to get a grip on yourself! Isis licked her lips and swallowed the bile at the base of her throat. Sun-Tzu would call what happened to all those people who tried to save her divine fate, because she was his fiancée.

And where did she go from here? Back to her endless engagement. Back to standing alongside her fiancé.

Because that was her duty. This was the meaning of method and discipline. Sun-Tzu dispensed the method, and the world obeyed because of discipline.

I should have died. But I lived. I disobeyed.

Because I disobeyed, innocent people lost their lives—and yet because I live, the enemy expended resources it could not spare. I was a symbol to the Lancers as a means of survival, but to the people of Hustaing, I am a symbol of loyalty to the First Lord.

But which plan would have been better? Her death or her life?

Isis would never know. Perhaps she could use her brief friendship with Jade to inspire her decisions now. Perhaps she should live her life in the same carefree way Jade Hollister had, to prove to herself Jade's death wasn't in vain. That it wasn't pointless.

Perhaps. Maybe she would live her life for Jade.

She took several unsteady steps to the windows and pressed her hands against the glass. It was cold and she shivered, only slightly aware of the heat of her body as her temperature rose above normal.

I'm a little wiser, a little less naïve. If there is anything I should take from Jade and David, it is to not be afraid. If you want something bad enough, you can achieve it.

And so I will nod and smile, and I will hold my counsel. But I am not a stupid little girl. I now see my purpose in this vastly effed-up universe.

Forgive me, Jade. But the lie about your death does have meaning: you defended the chancellor's princess. They will be proud of you. And they will tell your story to their children.

As I will to my own.

And to the people, meaning and honor is a way of life; your death, and the deaths of all those others, is in the service of the Capellan Confederation.

Your death proves no one can defeat Sun-Tzu.

The truth will die with me. And with Raven.

But I will never forget you.

A shooting star fell in the west. Isis took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Now *I will cry.*



House Master Ty Wu Non returned later than expected to the *Pearl*. Aris sat in the DropShip's command center, his eyes watering from exhaustion as he read over the reports from the battlefield. He would have to scrutinize these soon—see who would be in line for a field promotion or a reprimand.

Aris had received word that Isis was in the infirmary again—she'd been found unconscious on her apartment floor. He'd privately chastised himself for not insisting she return directly to the infirmary; he'd known by her walk as well as her expression that she wasn't well.

He'd resisted the urge to go and check on her. The doctors said she would rest for the duration of their return home.

"Ah— Aris Sung. I thought you would be in bed. Your wound has yet to fully heal."

Aris shook his head. In truth, he'd been reading the reports because he *couldn't* sleep. He'd been having recurring dreams of an invisible creature approaching him, moving 'Mechs out of its way as it zeroed in on him, and in the instant it should strike—

It vanished.

Nothing could erase the image in his head of the shimmering air and the way Richardson's throat had opened in front of him. As if someone had sliced it from behind.

Master Non moved to the desk and sifted through the papers. "Any news from the chancellor?"

"There are a few communiqués. Nothing specific. His decision to relieve the Blackwind Lancers of their equipment seems to be garnering much respect in the Confederation."

Master Non grunted.

Aris looked out through one of the large, thick windows. Stars twinkled against a vast black velvet backdrop. It was a clear night. Cool and crisp with the approaching winter.

"Master Non—"

"Yes, Aris?"

He sat up straight in his chair, his hands folded in front of him, the wound in his side wrenching slightly. "When you gave me permission to search for the duchess, did you send out anyone else? Perhaps someone with black ops training?"

That brought Master Non's full attention to Aris. He frowned, his expression a grand mixture of surprise and humor. "Black ops? To search for the duchess? We were given strict orders not to search; allowing you to go was a foolhardy decision on my part, but the outcome was acceptable. I believe the duchess would not have survived had you not been there."

Aris only half listened to his words. "So—you sent no one else?"

Master Non shook his head. "None. Only you—and of course Clearwater made her own decision."

He did not pursue his question, and Master Non eventually excused himself and retired to his own apartments.

Feeling somewhat lost, and having been undeservedly praised for an achievement he had not accomplished, Aris stood and strolled to the large window. He stood before it, looking down over the lights of what remained of Qingliu. Most of the city was black—a void of death from a hopeless campaign.

I did not save the duchess. I would have fallen had the invisible soldier not acted when he did.

He clasped his hands behind his back. "I will find you, one day," he said to the shimmer of air that had regarded him for that moment and had not attacked. "And I will know your name..."