

"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...

Heaven signifies night and day,
cold and heat, times and seasons."

Sun-Tzu, *The Art of War*

THE ART OF WAR: HEAVEN

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PART TWO

Cold and Heat, Time and Seasons

精神病院, dawn

Outside Occupied Qingliu, Hustaing

Sian Commonality, Capellan Confederation

02 October 3060

She watched him pace back and forth on the other side of the doorless frame. He spoke in fluent Cantonese, some of which Isis heard over the rain as it clanked against the tin awning outside her window.

Lime green paint peeled in scalloped shapes from the walls and ceiling of the room. The floor might have been bright tile once, with colorful blue and green squares, before grime, age and the elements punished it. A single window filtered fading sunlight through a checkerboard of grimy glass panels, some of which were cracked or missing. The storm outside pushed cold air and some occasional drops of rain in through those open squares, chilling the room even further. A small space heater sat in the corner, its red and orange glow doing little to banish the cold.

Isis shivered beneath several coarse blankets. She sat atop a single mattress, the question of its cleanliness the topic of her otherwise clear mind. At least her new escort had allowed her to dress in loose pants and a sweater top. She still didn't have shoes or socks, and she wiggled her toes now and then to make sure they were still there, even though it was getting harder to feel them.

David Hollister moved away from the door and disappeared. He'd proven as interesting as his sister—when he wasn't panicked. He was skilled in a variety of things—one of which was apparently medicine. The stitches in her calf had torn during their escape from the hospital in a laundry truck, and David had produced a MechWarrior's aged med-kit and re-patched the wound with a liquid band-aid. He'd also given her another shot, of which she'd been terrified.

"It's an antibacterial," he'd said in a frustrated voice, holding the syringe back from her with one hand and her wrist in the other when she'd tried to hit him in the face. "You want another infection?"

She'd allowed him to give her the shot directly into the calf. She'd been shuttled from hospital to clinic for almost a week. Apparently the river with its chemicals and bile, a dump from the city, had infected the gash in her leg with all sorts of nasties.

Those loyal to Sun-Tzu had hidden her away from the Lancers' guards when they'd searched the area. Then she'd been transported out of the city limits, supposedly for her own safety. By who—even David apparently didn't know. She knew she'd heard references to Maskirovka involvement, but he'd been very adamant that the Mask had nothing to do with her health or death.

There was apparently a large sum of money over her head—a bounty provided by the Lancers—for her safe return. And that also painted a target on whoever possessed her. Several doctors and a nurse had died, and David suspected gang-related involvement. If David hadn't been contacted directly by Richardson and threatened with his sister's life, he wouldn't have bothered himself with a liability like Isis.

But she knew Jade was still alive. For now.

Isis clasped her arms around her legs and rested her chin on her knees as she stared at her dirty bare feet. Only a few flecks of red polish remained on her toenails—and maybe at any other time in her life she would have fretted over such a trivial thing. But red lacquer and golden dragon decals seemed frivolous. Stupid. Especially next to the risk she posed to the life of a friendly stranger.

Jade may be alive, but, Isis wondered, in what condition? Richardson didn't seem a particularly tolerant man, or a fool. Getting a sister back *alive* could have a variety of meanings—she knew that much from watching Sun-Tzu negotiate.

Finally the conversation ended, and David stepped into the room. Isis hadn't tried to escape from him since her mind had cleared from the drugs. He hadn't restrained her nor had he threatened her again with the needler. And truth realized—where would she go if she did escape?

She'd been running since she arrived on Hustaing, and look what had happened. Two people were in trouble. Li Wynn—she believed him dead. And Jade.

It was time to stay still and fight.

"Look at the bird that flutters and flies about as it tries to wrench the worm from the ground," Sun-Tzu had said once as they sat in his garden in the Celestial Palace. A bird had discovered a prize beside a nearby tree, and her fiancé had noticed one of the palace cats watching it from the tall grass. "And then look at the cougar

who sits patiently in the grass, waiting, watching, listening to the bird as it fusses and chirps, its concentration so fixated upon the worm. Which do you think will eat this day?"

David looked as if he hadn't slept in days. His skin was pale, and his almond-shaped eyes anchored dark half moons beneath them. Shadows haunted his face, and Isis doubted he had eaten much either, though he'd made sure she'd already had two descent meals.

"Richardson?" her own voice sounded soft and small in the room. He moved slowly to the bed and sat on the edge near the foot.

He shook his head. "No—I haven't called him. Not yet," he looked sideways at her with eyes the color of emeralds. He seemed to come to an important decision. "I thought I could count on some help—call in a few favors."

"Favors?" Isis gave him a half smile. "Like?"

"Information. I've had a few contacts tell me where a small group of Lancers are inside the occupied territory—those apparently not working directly with the push to hold the city."

Isis devoured this information. "Push to hold? Are the Lancers in trouble?"

"I'd say so. A few of my contacts have reported their DropShip is gone. I'm sure *that* news has recently reached Richardson—or he wouldn't be buzzing my phone every half hour. They're desperate to find you, and I'm lucky he doesn't have access to NavSat tracking or he'd be able to pinpoint our location," David gave a soft snort. "I apparently hold the key to a lot of things right now."

Isis gingerly lowered her legs, careful not to jar the cut on her calf. Moving as gracefully as possible given the circumstances, she swung her legs off the bed and placed her feet on a floor as cold and unforgiving as a sheet of ice, but she pulled the blankets closer around her shoulders and refused to complain. Instead, she sat on the edge beside him, giving her an equal footing with David Hollister. Something Aris had taught her years ago. "And that key is me, isn't it?"

"Yeah," David said. "The Lancers want you because they probably think having you as hostage will get them off of Hustaing. There are several gangs out there that want you for the money. And I wanted you because you're the answer to getting my sister back in one piece." He smiled. "I'd almost wished it was Sun-Tzu

my contacts found. But I think it's a moot point now to believe Sun-Tzu is anywhere on this planet."

Isis watched him. He glanced at her again.

"Okay, keep quiet. At least I don't think he's here. I do find it a bit off-putting that you're here and he's not. Surely his intelligence would have warned him about the Lancers' possible invasion. Seems a bit fishy that he'd put you in danger and not himself."

"Jade said something like that," Isis said as she looked down at her feet.

"Well, Jade's the smart one. Me? I'm the better looking." He grinned and then looked down at the floor before taking in a deep breath. "Care to tell me what happened?"

Isis looked at him sharply. "I thought you knew."

"No—'fraid not. I raced back to my shop to find soldiers inside, looking for the Duchess Marik. And then I heard the van crank, the back door open and all hell broke loose."

Isis took a deep breath...and told him everything she could remember from the moment her limousine crashed into the side of the hotel. What did it matter anymore if this man knew her story? David listened with intense silence, his gaze never wavering from Isis' face or her gestures.

When she was done she was shaking, though Isis wasn't sure if it was from fatigue or simply recalling all her fears from the past week, or perhaps she hated looking back over her past few decisions and feeling ashamed.

Ashamed for running. Ashamed for not acting. Ashamed for being a victim.

I am the daughter of the Captain General of the Free Worlds League—I shouldn't be running. I should be fighting! I shouldn't be letting my fears of capture rob me of my strengths.

She closed her eyes and put her hands to her face. *I only wish I knew what those strengths were.*

"Are you crying?"

The question seemed so trivial—and yet rang so very true with the way people saw her. *Yes—he'd believe I was crying, wouldn't*

he? Even his sister thought I was weak, easy to control. And perhaps I had been.

At first.

Isis started laughing into her palms, aware of her shaking shoulders. The truth was if she didn't laugh, she *would* cry, and that just wasn't acceptable.

Not anymore.

When she felt a touch on her shoulder she moved her hands away, happy she didn't show him a tear-stained face, but a mask set with anger. "No, I'm not crying. I'm just mad, that's all. I'm mad that Li Wynn's probably dead because of me, I'm mad that Jade's in Richardson's hands—again because of me.

David gave a slight smile, looking so much like his sister. "And you're mad 'cause your betrothed hasn't even shown his face to save you?"

Isis drew herself up, feeling more fragile than strong on the inside, but refusing to show it. She crossed her arms over her chest. "Sun-Tzu isn't about flash or power, he's about cunning and strength. Oh, he's here—maybe only in spirit and the loyalty the people show for him against the Lancers—but he's here. He moves like the cougar." Patient. Passive. But ready. She gave him a forced smile, and hoped with all her heart she was right.

David seemed less impressed. He held up his left hand and moved his index and middle finger together with his thumb, mimicking a hand puppet's movements. "Blah, blah, blah. Sun-Tzu is waiting for the Lancers to dig themselves a hole and House Huritsu to drive them back."

"You seem sure of this."

"I've been outside the city limits, Duchess. I've spoken with those in the know."

She gave him a cryptic look. "You've seen news reports?"

"No, we're under a blackout. No vids in or out. Which is an interesting thing all in itself, wouldn't you say? I might also add that the blackout came *before* the Lancers attacked Qingliu." He put his hands together. "Well, time to call your benefactor, and time to get my sister and get the hell out of here."

His words didn't register for two beats, and then Isis stared at him. "You're really going to give me over to the Lancers?"

"What choice do I have?" David stood and she could see the weight of his sister's situation pressing down hard on his shoulders. "Look, if I really thought your Chancellor was going to try and rescue you, and maybe he would pay good money to get you back, then I might try and stack up a bargain—maybe with incentives to get Jade back." He shook his head. "But I live in the real world, Duchess. Sun-Tzu never had any intention of setting a celestial foot on Hustaing." He looked worried as well as angry, his green eyes unforgiving. "You're the cost of war."

Isis stood up and faced David. Her vision blurred for only a second this time before she regained her strength. "That is a lie. Sun-Tzu would never do such a thing."

David's emerald eyes flashed as he frowned at Isis. "Sun-Tzu wants to dishonor the St. Ives Compact—he wants Candace out of power." He shrugged. "The Blackwind Lancers have given him that ammunition, and once he announces he *escaped* Hustaing, but that his poor, poor fiancé is trapped, believed dead, you don't think he'll use that to incite a push to retake the Compact's worlds?"

She wanted to slap him. She wanted to put her hands around his throat and throttle him until he turned purple. How dare he! So what if Jade had said something similar—at least Jade hadn't been so flippant. Or so obviously opposed to the Chancellor. Sure Jade had disagreed with Sun-Tzu, but this was treason.

She opened her mouth to speak—to chastise him like she would any disobedient servant—when she realized her intention, and felt ashamed. Isis closed her mouth and glared fire at him. She hated that his words touched a small but significant chord within her. It made sense for Sun-Tzu to use her situation to further his *Xin Sheng*. Their cultural rebirth.

The Chancellor knew how to turn any situation to his cause. He was smart. He was...very smart. Isis lowered her gaze from David and looked at the dirty floor. *But is it possible...he did change his mind about accompanying me very abruptly...Aris had seemed confused. And then my guards...so few even if they were death commandoes...*

No.

She shook her head. No. It wasn't true. Her fiancé wouldn't have used her like that. But he would make them pay if something happened to her.

David's eyes grew wide. "Oh ho—is the Duchess finally catching on? You're a commodity, princess. I just want my sister back, and to get us both as far away from the Lancers and Sun-Tzu as possible." He turned and started out of the room. "Maybe I'll get a ship off this rock and head to Lyran space. Or maybe to Outreach—find work in a mercenary unit and that way I can shoot people like Richardson."

Isis knew he'd shut the door and lock it, and she'd be alone and cold, and lost in her own predicament. *Why can't I think of ways to save my own ass? Jade came up with ideas on the spot.* Isis felt a twinge of regret. *And her idea would have worked, if I hadn't panicked.*

"David," she called out.

He stopped and gave a half turn. "I'm not changing my mind, Duchess."

"Who—" she gave him a half smile. "Who were you talking to earlier—before?"

The weight on his shoulders seemed to increase. He looked away. "A contact. He was supposed to keep someone very dear to me safe—he failed."

"What?"

David glared at her. "My life is gone, Duchess. The only other person close to me, the only other one besides my sister that meant more to me than my own life, is dead. Damned gangs are running all over the destroyed areas of Qingliu—he was getting some supplies for us. They cut his throat for his money."

Isis put her hand to her lips. "I'm—oh god—David. I'm sorry."

"Now the only thing left to me is my sister," he looked at her and the gleam of hatred in his eyes frightened her. "And I'm not letting some spoiled little princess or some power obsessed rebel stop me from getting her back. I won't lose Jade. I can't."

He moved through the doorway, slammed the door and Isis heard the click of the lock echo inside her tiny room.

Convention Center, mid-morning
Qingliu, Hustaing
Sian Commonality, Capellan Confederation
02 October 3060

The October cold seemed to be a portent to his future, one he'd thought promising only days ago. Erik Richardson, Force Leader of his unit of the Blackwind Lancers, adjusted the focus on his binoculars, zeroing in on movement west of their position outside of the destroyed convention center. His unit had encountered six of these pointless assaults over the past several days. At first there didn't seem to be any real purpose or goal Richardson could piece together.

The first attacks were little more than irritants—a hit here and there as the Lancers searched the city for the Duchess. Before being reassigned, DeShaun's lance had come across several small groups of kids and teens with knives and guns, many bold enough to demand their surrender before disappearing into the rubble. Yesterday several of his soldiers went after a sniper and managed to kill one of them.

The next morning, two of Richardson's men were found dead near the Maskirovka headquarters; their hands and heads removed. Two hours ago, Cooper had found the heads at the Convention Center, their hands stuffed into their gaping mouths like discarded sets of gloves.

These had been found just before Captain Doles called.

Richardson had been late for his morning check-in. Of course, the Captain had demanded an immediate progress report on finding the Duchess. Richardson had looked at the heads to his right, batted away the flies swarming around the rotting meat, and decided he had more pressing business than sharing his present predicament with an unsympathetic Captain.

So he'd chosen to be untruthful. "My contact's sent a signal—we're close, Captain."

"I'm so sick of hearing that, Richardson," Doles' voice still held the familiar graveled irritation, but it was also tired. Worried. "We need leverage. And we can't let anything—and I mean anything—get in our way of finding the Duchess."

"I understand, sir," and he'd disconnected, his gaze still held by the staring eyes of his former soldiers. He wasn't going to let some petty kids with guns and knives stop him.

Several hours later here he was, watching another group of vigilante locals sneaking around the Convention Center perimeter. He tightened his focus on the binoculars. *What are they trying to do?* Richardson refocused the zoom and ignored the cry of his belly. Less than an hour ago he'd received word of the loss of their DropShip's. One failure after another was killing his men's morale. They were stranded after House Hiritsu seized the DropShip, unable to call out, unable to receive messages in.

There hadn't been an obvious landing of forces from the Chancellor, nor were there any obvious signs of help from the Compact. Scouts had already declared the HPG station too heavily protected by House Huritsu.

They were running out of supplies as well. Food, ammo, and fresh water. A waste of manpower, forced to search for such things. Raiding supermarkets and having to defend water trucks while they tanked up at local fire hydrants. Precious moments spent surviving—moments that could be better spent looking for the Duchess.

They were spread too thin.

We're trapped.

Yellow sparks to the right in the shadows of a building caught his attention. He heard return fire from his right flank. Snipers. Again. That was all it was. No real pattern, and no plan. Just random fire. Bogeys set to keep them busy, preventing them from their search.

But why?

"Sir?"

Richardson pulled the binoculars away and blinked down at the soldier standing at the front wheel of his Hetzer. "Yes? What is it?"

"You have a call, sir."

His heart skipped. *Please*, he begged the heavens, *not more bad news.*

"It's David Hollister."

**Unidentified Sedan, Liao Parkway
Qingliu, Hustaing
Sian Commonality, Capellan Confederation
02 October 3060**

This time she only pretended sleep.

Years of living with Sun-Tzu and his more than suspicious nature made her cautious when David had brought her next meal. She knew he'd called Richardson—that much of it she'd overheard. Did he really think she couldn't speak Cantonese?

That—and David was a rotten liar.

"I've contacted a friend, back in Qingliu," he'd said and looked her straight in the eye, then glanced to his left. He had contacted someone—but not a friend. "So, I need you to eat up before we head out."

She'd sniffed the bowl of noodles and vegetables and caught the whiff of something that wasn't seasoning. When she was sure David had moved away from her door, Isis dumped the contents into the nearby toilet. It disappeared into the black, murky water below, and she'd scrambled as best she could back into the bed and pretended to eat.

Now they were on the deserted highway coming into Qingliu. David had carefully placed her into the passenger's seat up front and then made sure she was comfortable, but not restrained.

No—he honestly didn't see her as a threat. *And why should he? I'm drugged again.* Isis' head was leaned against the passenger window, her face averted from David's, obscured by her hair, which was definitely in need of a good salon. She opened her eyes a hair's breath and watched the rubble buildings go by under a threatening sky.

Rain beaded on the window and sailed to her right as the wind took it along. Her thoughts raced, searching for some plan of action. She couldn't turn and ask him what his plan was—then he'd know she was wide-awake and might try to bind her again. And that she wasn't having any of. No, she was better off if believed subdued.

What would Jade do?

Oh, that was easy. *Jade would never have let herself get into this situation. She'd have thought of some way out without getting injured, or sick, or puny. No, leave it to me the princess to be the one to be rescued.*

I'm tired of it. And the only way I'm going to feel better is to help get Jade out.

She kept her breathing even; aware of David's glances her way.

Then why are you faking it now? Why are you thinking of running again? Yes, there it is, in the back of your mind. Isis gritted her teeth, trying to keep herself still as she battled with her subconscious.

She wanted Jade free—it wasn't fair anyone else should suffer because of her. But she also didn't want to be anyone else's captive. It was not only getting old, but being in the hands of the Lancers was surely a death sentence, if not a very unhealthy one.

No—she couldn't let herself be taken by them and used against Sun-Tzu. But when was he coming? When and how was he going to free her?

What to do?

She thought of Aris Sung again. What would Aris do? Never mind that he would never be in her position. But how would he handle a situation like this? Stuck behind enemy lines, hunted, and used like so much currency?

Aris would wait. He'd be patient, he would wait, and he would take his opportunity and strike. Isis closed her eyes. She would be like Aris and listen; she would be the cougar in the grass, no longer the twittering bird.

She would wait.

Hollister Printing, evening
Qingliu, Hustaing
Sian Commonality, Capellan Confederation
02 October 3060

"Aris, I'm tired of waiting."

Aris Sung kept his gaze focused on the remains of the printing company, though his ears and nose kept pace with the world around them. He'd positioned Raven and himself along the building's edge after a cursory investigation of the rubble. Not much left, of that he was sure. If there had been any trace of the Duchess' whereabouts, it wasn't to be found here.

Or at least, not physically.

He'd also noticed a great deal of movement amid the gangs in the area. If they noticed Raven's or his presence, Aris couldn't tell. Something else held their attention. He needed to know what.

With a quick raise of his hand to silence Raven's next outburst, Aris lifted his face to the cloudy sky and smelled the rain. He recognized oil, though not the more acrid smell of 'Mechs, but that of smaller ground vehicles. Tanks. And on the wind he heard the distant crack and snap of rifle fire, as well as the blades of a V-TOL nearby.

And—something else. Something familiar, a shadow just to Raven's left beyond the debris of the printing company. If his companion hadn't been standing directly beside him, he would have suspected Raven had attempted to sneak up on him again.

"Aris..."

He glanced at Raven. She'd unsheathed her sword and was looking around, searching for the other presence as well.

With two hand signals he directed her to flank right and then at an angle around Aris' back. He was choosing to be the bait to lure out whomever needed desperately to die.

He kept his right hand on his needler, his left on the hilt of the knife at his ankle as he knelt down behind the rubble of a destroyed wall. Seconds later, he recognized the shadow and spoke its name. "Robert."

"Warrior," came the familiar voice of Robert Cheng.

"You risk much," Aris turned, his needler in hand. "Seeking me out, why?" He saw Raven move in the shadows behind Robert and gave her a signal only she would recognize. Stay. Guard. Be prepared.

Robert was crouched on his knees. Rain or sweat glistened on his face in the waning evening light. Fresh bruises decorated the left side of his head. "I have found her."

Inwardly Aris felt his heart skip, but he kept a practiced, outward appearance of calm. "Her?"

Robert glanced to his left and his right before speaking in a low voice. "Isis." The young Zeng still missed Raven lurking in the shadows behind.

Aris narrowed his eyes at Robert. He wasn't going to allow him to lead them off into another ambush. "First—what is happening? There are more than just the Zengs and the Yin moving about Qingliu."

Robert nodded. "Yes. Three other rivals from Choi-bay have entered the city. They're targeting the Lancers, moving in small cells for short strike-and-run exercises. One of the opposing members is my cousin, White Cheng. They've been watching and spying on a unit of Lancers that have taken over a building near the convention center."

"And Isis is with them?"

"No," Robert stiffened as the noise of fighting 'Mechs drifted in with the wind. House Huritsu forces still pressed the Lancers in—hemming them tighter and tighter within the city. The Zeng member nodded to the devastated building around them. "The owner of this building—" he hesitated before continuing, as if searching for the right word. "He did things for us—for the Zengs. Found us things. Printed things. Sometimes he smuggled items into the city for trade."

"Drugs?"

Robert shook his head. "Weapons. Sometimes medical supplies not readily offered in the free clinics. In exchange we gave him—secrets."

"Secrets? On what?"

But Robert only smiled now. The expression did not reach his eyes. "If I told you, then they would no longer be secrets."

Aris felt the corners of his lips curl into a smile. "*Jing-tsai.*"

"This is no joke, Warrior. Neither is the information I discovered on your Duchess," Robert said as he pointed to the building again. "He has her."

"He? The owner?"

Robert nodded. "The Lancer leader is called Richardson. He has David Hollister's sister, Jade. There is to be a trade."

Aris processed the information quickly, burning the names to memory. "Hollister is trading Isis for his sister. There are other offers?" Though he hadn't heard anything of the sort, Aris knew how the gang networks operated—if there was a deal to be had, they would know of it.

"The Yins are offering a substantial fee of money and supplies to whomever finds the Duchess and delivers her alive. They see profit in forcing the Lancers to pay for her."

"*Guay,*" came Raven's voice in the darkness. "Dirt, to treat the Chancellor's fiancé like chattel."

Robert froze, his eyes wide.

Aris held up his left hand, moving it from the knife. He was going to have to have a little talk with Raven about her temper. "Please, tell me more. There are others interested in Isis as a commodity?"

"Treason," Raven said again. "The Chancellor would have them all put down like dogs if he knew how they treated his beloved." He heard her spit in the darkness. "*Luh-suh.*"

Robert searched in the darkness behind him, but did not see Raven. "This is true, beautiful lady, but only if the Chancellor were to capture them. All of them see profit at the Lancers' expense. They know the Blackwind Lancers are trapped. House Huritsu with its might is the hand of the Chancellor—the Lancers won't make it off this world without leverage."

Aris felt his heart skip. And that leverage was the Chancellor's fiancé. Would Sun-Tzu do what was needed to safeguard his future bride? If the Lancers presented Isis alive, held her in front like a shield, House Huritsu might then be powerless to stop them

from leaving—if ordered to protect her life. But there was now the question of the State—leaving the Lancers to retreat back to safety might no longer be an option. No matter what else the cost.

But the Lancers would grasp at whatever straws were left to it. And any gang in the city capturing the Duchess would prove its worth in power, and be set in a strong bargaining position. No matter which side prevailed on Hustaing. “They don’t intend to allow this exchange to take place.”

Robert shook his head. “And David Hollister’s life is forfeit. Many of the gang leaders believe he should have brought her to them immediately, instead of being weakened by his sister.”

“Where is he trading her?”

“We’re not sure yet—we’ve been tracking their movements, making them aware of us, and of the Yins as well as the Yellow Dragons. I came here hoping to perhaps find a sign of David—to warn him not to meet with the Lancers.” Robert looked genuinely worried. “It would mean his and Jade’s death.” Another pause. “I owe the Hollisters.”

Aris recalled Robert mentioning he’d delivered for them part-time.

“Can you show me where Richardson is?”

Robert nodded. “I can show you, but I can’t do anything. I’m a Zeng—and now it’s a battle to see who can possess the Duchess first. They might even make an offer to House Huritsu.”

“*Liou coe shway du biao-tze huh hoe-tze du bun ur-tze,*” Raven said again, and this time she stepped out from the shadows, her own needler aimed at Robert’s head. “You wouldn’t dare trade the life of the Chancellor’s fiancé.”

“Raven, please,” Aris stood in a single fluid motion and gestured for her to put her weapon away. “Robert is not the enemy. Neither are any of the gangs. It is simply up to us to find Isis and retrieve her before anyone else can use her.”

Robert stood as well and nodded. “I will show you where Richardson is—but then my help is at an end.”

“You do this because I saved your life?” Aris said.

“No, I do this because no matter what gang I belong too, I am still loyal to the Chancellor. I am a Capellan son.”

Aris didn't hide his surprise at this answer, and allowed himself to be momentarily impressed. Usually gangs held allegiance to no one other but their other gang members and to no other authority. But people fell in with gangs for different reasons, and perhaps Robert's reason for being a Zeng was even more different than Aris would believe. Aris had once been faced with just such a choice, after all. And he'd fallen in with a gang, of sorts.

House Hiritsu.

"Follow me," the Zeng member said, and moved away from the remains of Hollister Printing and the convention center.

"It's a trap," Raven said as Aris passed near her.

"Perhaps." He gave her a thin, sober smile as he reached for her arm and guided her to reholster her weapon. Raven was here by choice, after all, as well. She was a subordinate. She must be reminded.

She holstered her sidearm, and Aris nodded. Once.

"Perhaps it *is* a trap," he admitted. "But a trap is less of a surprise if one steps into it prepared."