

"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 Moral Law causes the people to be in complete
accord with their ruler,
so that they will follow him regardless of their lives,
undismayed by any danger."

Sun-Tzu, *The Art of War*

THE ART OF WAR: THE MORAL LAW

by Phaedra M. Weldon

PART ONE

Qingliu, Hustaing
Sian Commonality, Capellan Confederation
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Isis Marik shivered in the September chill as she crouched behind several larger chunks of rubble at the foot of the enemy *JagerMech*. Her breath was visible in the afternoon light, though the sun now hid behind the hulking machine. She wrapped her arms around her chest and watched several Blackwind Lancers surround the bread truck from which she'd emerged. The smell of yeast and flour still lingered in her hair from when the fresh baked loaves tumbled on top of her during their desperate run.

The young infantryman who'd tried to save her stepped outside the smashed truck, his hands and arms held high, a strange smile on his face.

"Infantryman Li Wynn, House Hiritsu," her rescuer, now turned decoy, said simply. "And I was just thinking that you look nothing like a dragon."

Dragon?

Too many images tussled about in Isis' mind. A confused blur of memory, mixing with the present.

Her cheek throbbed from where she'd hit the limousine door when her car caromed into the hotel's lobby, and that pain now spread quickly into a dull ache behind her eyes. The smell of lubricant and burned fuel from a nearby Hetzer assault vehicle filled her senses. Her nose and her eyes watered, and a swift wave of nausea overwhelmed her. She felt the vibration of battle through her high-heeled shoes from the now cracked and debris-strewn pavement—more of the Blackwind Lancers were on the move.

She was cold.

She was alone.

And she was terrified.

The emotional battle warring within was one of indignation spiced with fear. Li Wynn had explained to her in hurried details his plan for her to escape capture as they switched clothing in the back of the stolen bread truck.

"They're after the Chancellor, my lady. They think he's inside this truck—escaped from your car. From a distance they may think I'm him. I don't think they know you're here." He had given her a half smile then as he'd pulled on her paramilitary-cut jacket. It had been an ill fit. "That should give you time to escape. Get as far from here as possible."

She hadn't been able to hide her own temper at that point. "Well he's not here and he won't stand for my being treated like this. And killing my guards was an unacceptable act of aggression. Who do these people think they are? I demand—"

Isis had turned toward the front of the truck, her intentions true... but unsafe. Li Wynn had grabbed her arm then and pulled her back to him. She'd stumbled over the piled loaves of bread and the movement had brought her close to him.

They stood face to face, he several centimeters taller than herself. And in his eyes Isis saw a fire burn—the same one she'd seen in so many of Sun-Tzu's people. A fire of dedication. Of self-sacrifice.

This man would give up his life freely for his Chancellor. As he would now for her.

Li Wynn had reached up to gently stroke her hair from her face, never touching her skin with his hand. "If you step out of this truck and announce yourself as Duchess Marik, fiancée to Sun-Tzu, then you give them leverage. They will take you away under guard and keep you hidden. You will be used against his Supreme Being, a tool to be traded. They would not be gracious with you, my lady.

"I cannot allow that to happen."

A voice had come loud and clear through the bread truck's walls and cracked glass. "You in the truck. Come out with your hands up. Make any further attempt to escape and you *will* be fired upon."

"What do we do?" She had looked to Li Wynn. The thought of being taken and hidden away terrified her even more. *My life is in danger.*

"I do not wish harm to come to you, Duchess," Li Wynn's own expression softened.

He smiled at her.

And then he was gone, stepping away from her, leaving a vacuum where his warmth had fed her own.

Li Wynn had handed her the ball-cap and she'd stuffed her hair beneath it. He had instructed her on what to say. "Man is a protective creature. Especially of those he perceives as weaker than himself. Once their attention is no longer focused on you, Duchess, you must run. Run as far from here as possible. Seek shelter and do not let the enemy find you. Once the Chancellor hears of the attack, he will send soldiers to find you."

He'd smiled at her then, as he'd not a care in the world, or any fear the enemy would gun him down in the street.

And the sergeant in charge had reacted as Li Wynn had said he would. Protective of her, as long as she looked the weaker part. She had cringed inwardly as she held onto him, her shaking an honest reaction to fear, though the source not as the soldier believed.

When he released her, she took note of his uniform, of the beige material with ivory piping. Noticed the insignia on his sleeve.

A hatchet upon a yellow back. As long as she remained here on Hustaing, cut off from Sun-Tzu and his soldiers, this was the symbol of danger for her.

Now she watched as the Sergeant ordered Li Wynn restrained. Their treatment of him was rough and Isis bit back her own protestations. For the moment, it seemed she was forgotten. Best she remain so.

Isis locked gazes with the Hiritsu infantryman across the way, happy to have his name. He narrowed his eyes at her, and she could almost hear his unspoken command.

Run!

Isis looked about at the deserted street. The building to her right was little more than its skeletal structure, a frame with no picture.

Run? She had never run from anything.

Run to where?

Careful, though her feet were unsure in the stone rubble littering the pavement, Isis backed away, keeping herself hidden and scrunched down behind the larger pieces of building. She continued to glance up at the *JagerMech*, fearing at any minute it would pivot its torso and cast its monitors down at her.

Cracked and broken glass faced her from the shops on either side. The vibrations caused by the 'Mech's approach had done their work and the shop proprietors had either fled or now cowered inside to watch the interchange. To her right were several specialty shops, all selling leather and hand-made expensive clothing, though a hole had been torn through the glass windows of the corner department store where Li Wynn had driven through with the bread truck. The store's sign hung by its wiring. It popped and sparked where the power still coursed.

Isis saw an alley opening several meters behind the 'Mech. *Don't alleys travel from one block to the next? Maybe if I can slip through there I can find someone on the other side that can help me.*

She moved slowly at first, glancing back to make sure the sergeant and his men weren't following. Her heels were unsteady on the cracked road and small stones. Li Wynn was nowhere to be seen and she felt her heart sink lower into her chest.

I am alone.

Two more vehicles came through the rubble, their linked tires crushing the concrete as their weight pulverized anything in its path. Isis ducked behind a crushed car. Her heart beat harshly against her rib cage. She was close to crying but scolded herself to keep quiet.

Her cheek throbbed and the pain behind her eyes intensified. The Duchess realized with growing fear that she was ill-trained to handle what was happening to her. There was no one to turn to—no one to show her the way.

She heard voices and took several deep breaths before moving to the car's front grill and peering around to see what was happening.

Soldiers followed alongside the new tanks, jogging in the direction of the Hetzer.

She was still close enough to hear the soldiers speak. Too close.

"Sergeant Richards," one of the men said as they approached. "We found the limousine believed to have been carrying the Chancellor. The guards inside are dead, and there was no sign of Sun-Tzu. We tracked the bread truck here."

"You believe whomever was in the limo took the bread truck?"

The soldier nodded.

Richards shook his head. "We already checked. The Chancellor wasn't inside—only a decoy dressed to appear like him. Took some woman hostage. The decoy's been taken prisoner. We've been played the fool."

"A female hostage?" The soldier looked around. "Where is she?"

Richards narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"We found this inside."

Isis felt her heart stop when she saw the soldier hold up her purse. Isis cringed. *Damn.*

The captain took the expensive leather bag.

"We found identification inside. It belongs to Duchess Isis Marik."

The Sergeant's reaction was immediate. He turned and looked to the leg of the *JagerMech* where Isis had hidden after she'd hugged him, apparently grateful for his rescue. When he didn't see her, his expression hardened. He clutched harder at the bag as he barked more orders.

"Find her! She won't be far. If we can't have Sun-Tzu this day, then we shall have his whore."

Whore?

Indignation turned to panic as the soldiers fanned out in several directions. Her position, scrunched down by the car, would soon be revealed if she didn't move quickly. If they caught her, Li Wynn's sacrifice would have been in vain.

Touching her sore cheek, Isis turned and made a break for the alley. She heard the clatter of boots on pavement and expected a voice to shout at any second, having spotted her and her pitiful attempts to be a mouse.

Once she was between the two walls, Isis straightened and started at a dead run, the clack of her heels bouncing against the buildings' walls. Metal trashcans were piled up in small heaps to either side of her and she pinched her nose at the smell of rotting refuse.

She could see the street up ahead of her. People were running back and forth, their expressions panicked. One woman carried a

small, crying child just as Isis felt the vibration of an approaching BattleMech. Her heart reached out to the mother and child—now she understood their terror.

Isis slowed her run and tried to straighten Li Wynn's white shirt before she emerged, though she was aware of the dark smudges decorating it. *I've never been in a city during an invasion. So much fear—I can smell it in the air. Their own people in such pain—and for what? Sun-Tzu? Me?*

Another assault vehicle moved past the alley's exit. Or it could have been the same one from the other side for all Isis knew. Either way, the sight of it made her stop in her tracks.

"Stay where you are!"

The voice froze every muscle in her body. Yet the Duchess had never been one to follow orders. She turned, pivoting on her heels to see an infantryman approaching, his weapon held up high, its barrel trained on her.

Her heart thundered against her breast and her cheek throbbed painfully as she held her arms up. *Stupid, stupid. How could you let yourself be found so easily?*

Isis looked back at the alley's exit. More people moved back and forth, some running, others screaming. None of them gave the darkened space between the two buildings even a glance.

To her right was a triangle of three trashcans. Their lids were set precariously on mounds of what looked like material. Clothing perhaps?

Then she caught sight of something else she'd not noticed before.

A door.

"I've found her," the soldier spoke into a shoulder mic as he took steady but calculated steps toward her. He was less than two meters away and his aim at her never wavered. "Advise on transport."

I could run for the door—surely he wouldn't shoot me. Not if he knows who I am. But what if the door's locked? Then what?

"Keep your hands where I can see them!"

The abrupt voice caught her off guard again and Isis found herself raising her hands even higher. The soldier closed the distance.

What do I do?

"Hold her—restrain her if you have to," came a voice from the soldier's communicator. It was the voice of the sergeant. "I want her alive. Don't let her out of your sight."

He was close. Very close. Isis could see his face, see the freckles over his nose. He was young, a boy really.

Her choices were becoming nonexistent the longer she stood still. *Do something*, she warred with herself. If she ran, he'd shoot her. Wounding her would definitely prove an adequate way of restraining her.

Then what? There would be no chance of escape. But...maybe if she allowed him to capture her, and then perhaps she could talk her way out of—

As the soldier closed the distance to less than a few centimeters, the door Isis had been looking at opened abruptly. From her left to her right, slamming directly into the soldier's face with such force it knocked him backward.

Two terrified looking young women in business suits charged out as the soldier fell backward. The two women took one glance at Isis but did not see the soldier.

"Come on!" one of the women said and grabbed at her arm, pulling her away and toward the alley's exit. "There are soldiers with guns in the building!"

Isis couldn't believe her luck and ran with the women toward the street, leaving the soldier to struggle from his prone position behind the door, somewhere near the trashcans.

Once at the street, the taller of the two of Isis' rescuers, a statuesque blonde with intense green eyes and the features of a Capellan heritage, looked to her left, then her right.

Isis saw—as well as felt—an approaching tank from the right of the street. Several assault vehicles approached from the left. Across the way were several more shops, a printer, a storefront grocer and another street between it and a corner bakery.

Cars were left abandoned in an irregular pattern along the street. Two blocks down a hydrant had popped loose and water shot up nearly ten meters into the air.

"This way," the blonde said and Isis followed as she led them across the street and into the printer.

No one lingered inside behind a front counter and Isis was assaulted by the pungent smell of isopropyl alcohol and printing ink. The blonde appeared to know where she was going and led them behind the counter and to the back.

Printing presses as large as the assault vehicles outside continued to run, their paper carriers having long ago run out of fresh paper to print on, idling, as if their operators had just stepped away for a minute.

In the back was a loading dock. The metal door was closed. In front of that sat a white van, its front end facing them. On its side read the name Hollister Printing in blue and burgundy letters.

The blonde motioned for Isis and the other woman to stay put. She moved to a side door with the glowing words EXIT above it.

The other new companion, a woman with long brown hair the color of Isis' own chestnut tresses, turned to Isis and offered her a hand. "I'm April Torsten."

Isis returned the handshake. "Isis Marik." She winced. Giving out her real name to a total stranger probably wasn't the smartest thing to do. But it was second nature to her to be open and honest and helpful whenever she could be. She was still uneducated to the subtleties of subterfuge she'd witnessed within Sun-Tzu's palace as well as his court.

"You have the cunning of a chimpanzee," Sun-Tzu had told her once after she'd inadvertently insulted a guest.

No, she shouldn't have said her real name. And she feared that slip would be a problem later.

But April didn't seem to notice. Or if she did, she didn't care. "That's Jade Hollister by the door. We were in a meeting next door, doing work for a design firm." She shuddered and Isis realized then that April, as well as herself, was shaking. Though Isis doubted it was from the cold that came in through the shattered front window. "We heard this crash, and saw a bread truck pile out of the store windows across the street."

Li Wynn, Isis thought. But she remained quiet and nodded.

"Then the 'Mechs came." She put her hands to her face. It looked as if she were going to cry. "I'm sure running like this isn't such

a good idea. 'Mechs don't usually look where they're going and we could get trampled. But I have a four year old daughter in a daycare four miles from here and I don't want to leave her there." April turned dark, hazel eyes to Isis. "That's where we're headed."

Isis thought of the woman clutching the crying child, running past the alley's exit, and nodded. She also thought of Li Wynn's final words. *Run as far away as possible.* "I'd like to help," she volunteered. Four miles away from here in any direction would be a good idea right now.

Jade returned from the door and introduced herself. "Coast is clear. I say we take the van and head over to the daycare. That way we can grab Sylvie and get the hell out of the city before we get stuck here. I'm not too happy about being in the damned center of things – and I have no idea why these brutes are even here." She gave a half smirk then looked around the back area. "I just don't know where Dave is."

"Dave?" Isis said.

"My brother. He owns this printing company." She moved to a side desk that appeared to be where the shipping and receiving was handled. Jade opened a drawer and pulled out a set of keys. She looked at Isis. "You have anywhere you need to go?"

Isis shook her head. *No. Just away from here.*

"Good," she held up the keys. "We're going to take the van, pick up April's daughter and get as far away from this area of town as possible. I'm pretty sure if we just surrendered we'd be okay – but you know, I'd rather be at home in my bathtub sucking down a nice wine when I'm invaded." She gave Isis a quick grin. "You're welcome to come with us. I have lots of wine."

The Duchess stared at Jade, amazed at the woman's calmness. She'd led them from the alley and into this building, and now she'd come up with an avenue to take, a path to follow – and with a bit of humor.

Jade had made a decision. *When was the last time I had made a decision, other than what shoes to wear, or what perfume to put on?*

Those things seemed so trivial in the wake of her present predicament. She wanted to help since these women had saved her from certain capture. Even if they didn't realize that.

Isis glanced at the keys and thought of the bread truck. Jade believed they'd be safe in a company truck. Li Wynn had thought the Lancers wouldn't shoot at a bread truck.

He'd been wrong.

"Bad idea," Isis heard herself say.

The two women looked at her. "Why?" April asked.

"Because I saw them fire at the bread truck. They are looking for someone—and if we take a white van like this, then I'm sure they will target it."

Jade sighed and lowered her shoulders. "That might be, but we've few options at this point. I don't see Dave's sedan. I can only hope he and Troy got out before the 'Mechs came." She pulled a cell from a shoulder bag Isis hadn't noticed before and dialed a number. After several minutes, she shook her head and returned it to her bag. "There's no signal. Don't know if that's from the brute-squad as well—something like jamming transmissions."

April touched her friend's shoulder. "I'm sure the two of them are out of the city. Are there any other vehicles in here?"

Shaking her head, Jade paused and then looked at Isis. "I'm sorry—what was your name?"

Before Isis could respond, they heard a loud crash from the front door and all three women turned.

"Soldiers!" April hissed. She looked at Jade. "Why don't we just surrender? We've done nothing wrong. If we keep running, they might shoot us."

Isis glanced from the door to the front and back to the two women. She did not want to surrender to the soldiers. Nor did she really want them to know who she was at that moment either by confiding in her predicament.

When she saw Jade hesitate, Isis spoke up. "If we let them take us, it might be days before we're released – at least until they find who they're looking for. If we hide," Isis hesitated. *New ground here. Panicking. What do I say?* "If we hide, we could still maybe take the van and get away from them and to your house. We'd all be out of the way."

Oh god that felt weird to say. Isis took a deep breath. *But I did it!*

April narrowed her eyes. "You said the van would be dangerous."

Loud noises came from the front.

Jade seemed to come to a decision, and from the look of enthusiasm on her face, Isis assumed the statuesque blonde was more ready for excitement of a chase than sitting in a room somewhere. "Hide!" she hissed.

All three women ran for hiding places.

Isis scrunched down into a ball and tried to make herself as small as possible behind the larger of the two presses, closest to the front door to the office.

Soldiers came inside, one at a time, each taking up a position near the doors. These men were dressed in beige and ivory and wore the sigil of the Blackwind Lancers.

Richards followed them in, a rifle at his hip. A familiar looking soldier walked at his side. This was the one that had stopped her in the alley.

She could hear them speaking in low tones.

"You sure you saw her come in here?" the Sergeant asked of the infantryman.

The young man nodded. "She was with two other women, but it was her. She's still wearing the ball cap and white shirt."

Isis looked down at the shirt. She reached up and removed the cap and shoved it beneath the press. Her hair immediately fell over her shoulders and into her eyes. She pulled it away, tucking it behind her ears. She would need to change her clothes. Soon.

A soldier approached Richards. "Sir, the van is empty. But there is an unlocked door beside the dock that leads out to another alley."

"It's possible they ran out that way." The Sergeant rubbed at his chin. "McNally, you and Piper take a unit and comb these three blocks. I want every building searched. I want her alive. If the Chancellor is here, she could lead us to him."

The soldier hesitated.

Richards narrowed his eyes. "You have a problem?"

"Sir...shouldn't we be looking for Sun-Tzu? Isn't it possible he's using the Duchess as a decoy while he escapes?"

"And leave his claim to the Free Worlds League behind?" Richards glanced around. "Now move!"

"Yessir."

The Sergeant turned to the familiar soldier. "I want you and your men to—"

"Sir!"

Everyone turned back to the front where another uniformed man appeared. "Sergeant Richards, a man claiming he owns this place is at the front."

Richards nodded and looked back at the soldier. "Take your men and help McNally and Piper. Find her." He then moved away and strode back to the door to the front of the building.

Oh no. Isis peered from her hiding place behind a press. The man claiming ownership had to be Jade's brother, Dave. Had Jade or April overheard the Sergeant from where they hid? What would Jade do? Isis could only hope she wouldn't reveal their presence to protect her brother.

Isis moved carefully from where she was to look for Jade and April. April had tucked herself near the back doors behind a large cutter. She saw Isis and waved for her to come to her.

Afraid her heels would clack against the concrete floor, Isis slipped them off and tucked them beneath the press before crawling on hands and knees closer to April.

Isis knew the information about Jade's brother might change the woman's mind about escaping, but she couldn't help but be afraid something would happen to him. "April, I just head them talking about—"

But April cut her off. "Jade's crazy." Her expression was less than happy, the corners of her mouth tilted down.

"Where is she?"

April pointed to the van. "She's snuck into the back of the van."

Isis frowned as she looked around the cutter to the back dock where the van sat silently. From her vantage she could see the vehicle's rear door was open just a bit. Maybe she hadn't heard the news of her brother's arrival.

"Why'd she sneak back into the van?" Isis bent down to shift again, the concrete cold against her bare feet.

"Said something about it being the safest place since they've already looked there."

Isis nodded to herself. The logic made sense, and if they remained where they were, she and April would soon be found. Sergeant Richards appeared to be unwavering in his determination. The Duchess shivered, realizing her fingers were nearly numb from the cold. She still wore little more than a white shirt and slacks.

And now bare feet.

"You really think if we surrendered to them they'd hold us away from our families? We haven't done anything wrong. If we keep running, they'll shoot us because they'll think we have done something wrong. I mean, all this because they're looking for someone?"

"Those soldiers are Blackwind Lancers," Isis explained. "They're the ones invading Hustaing in hopes of taking the Chancellor."

Thoughts of her rescuer returned. What was to be his fate? What had he sacrificed in order to let her escape? Would Li Wynn die because of her? Or be tortured?

"So?" April fixed Isis with a harsh glare. "What does that have to do with me, or you? Or Jade? The Blackwind Lancers have done nothing but wreak havoc since they arrived, butting in where they're not wanted. This is my world, not theirs. I have a right to go where I want and do what I want. I'm no criminal."

"It has nothing to do with you," Isis said. She knew at the moment it had everything to do with her own presence. "But those men—" she nodded to the three soldiers, one of whom had now started his own second search of the room, "—are coming closer to where we are. We have to move from here."

When she looked back at April, the brunette had narrowed her eyes at the Duchess. "You think if they find who they're looking for, they'll leave?"

One of the soldiers, a short man with cropped red hair, started around the delivery end of the press, where the printed sheet exited. That position would give him a great view of the back of the cutter in a few seconds. Several more steps and the two of them would be visible.

Isis moved away, hunching down around the other end. The van was only a couple of meters away. Keeping her cold fingers balled into fists, she straightened up long enough to find the locations of the other two men.

One remained by the door leading to the front. The other assumed a casual stance by the back door. If she moved quickly, at the right moment, Isis realized she could remain invisible to both of them.

Jade appeared in the van's driver's window. With a wave of her fist she motioned to Isis to run.

"Stop!"

Isis ran. Her bare feet made small, slapping noises against the concrete. She focused on nothing but the open door of the van as the soldier by the door took off at a run toward the voice of his comrade.

Jade yanked Isis into the van by her arm. "Where's April?"

"We found her!" said a voice from outside the door.

Isis felt her heart sink. Had they seen her running to the vehicle? Now she and Jade were trapped inside. Richards would have his prize.

But when she looked out through the van's windshield, Isis saw two soldiers flanking April. They held her by her arms as the soldier by the front door joined them.

"Oh, damn," Isis muttered. She moved to the back of the van.

Jade grabbed her arm. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Out there. They've got April."

"April gave us the distraction we need to get out of here and get her daughter. Don't worry – she'll be just fine."

No. Isis stared into the woman's incredibly green eyes. *Not if they think she's me.* She suspected the soldiers believed the young woman to be herself. They possessed the same build, the same hair color and length. April's life was in danger.

"You don't understand—" Isis began.

But Jade cut her off with a finger to her lips. "They're leaving."

The three soldiers were half dragging a fighting April to the double doors toward the front. "I haven't done anything wrong!"

And to Richards.

"Now's our chance." Jade turned and jumped out the back doors.

Isis moved to the edge of the van's back to watch the blonde as she ran to the exit door and slapped a red button on the wall with her open palm.

An incredibly loud screeching noise caused Isis to push herself further into the van toward the driver and passenger seats. The dock doors shook and began a tortured ascent. Cold air rushed in as a crack of light from the outside appeared.

Jade was back in the van and slammed the two doors shut. Isis moved out of her way as the blonde scrambled into the driver's seat, cranked the engine and threw it into reverse.

She was going to leave her friend? Isis wanted to protest, but Jade turned in her seat and gave Isis a determined look. "Hang on."

It wasn't enough warning. Jade jammed her foot on the gas and the van burst to life, backing out of the building and down the concrete ramp to the alley. Isis grabbed the back of the passenger's seat in front of her with both hands.

"Shit!" The van came to an abrupt stop. Isis lost her hold on the chair back as the van impacted with something. She was thrown to her right and slammed her head into the side of the van's metal wall.

Stars whirled and pinwheeled in front of her eyes. She lay on her back and waited for the accompanying dizziness to go away.

"I think I just ran over a soldier."

Isis shook her head to clear it. She thought she'd heard mirth in Jade's voice.

"You okay back there?"

Isis nodded and put her hand to the side of her head. She managed to crawl to her knees and work her way between the seats as Jade put the van in gear and headed out of the alley and back to the street. The Duchess pulled herself up and shakily sat in the passenger's seat.

The street Jade chose appeared deserted, both of pedestrians and 'Mechs. Jade paused the van only long enough to look to either side then turned left. Isis hung on to the dashboard for dear life, grateful of this woman's help, but also wishing she'd slow down just a bit.

"We shouldn't have left April," Isis said softly. She worried the Sergeant would be angry when he discovered she wasn't Duchess Marik. What would happen to April?

That's two—two lives sacrificed for me. Two more souls whose fate is tied with my own.

"We had no choice," Jade said as she continued her frenzied escape through the streets. "Okay, about what you said—that these guys are looking for someone. Who?"

"Th-the Chancellor," Isis managed to squeak out as Jade rounded a turn on two wheels. "He was scheduled to visit Hustaing today."

"The Chancellor? You mean Sun-Tzu Liao?" A scowl crossed her face. "Well, what the hell kind of reception did that asshole think he'd receive? I mean, he starts off with—" Jade stopped abruptly, and her expression softened. She glanced at Isis and forced a smile. "I'm sorry. I hope I didn't offend you."

"Offend me? With the kind of day I'm having?" Isis didn't feel offended, but informed. She knew Jade hadn't intended to say anything flattering about her fiancé. *Better to just keep my identity a secret for right now.*

"What I don't get is why they'd take April into custody like that. Did you get a load of the way those soldiers acted?" She shook her head. "We'll be at the daycare in less than ten minutes—as long as we don't run into anymore distractions."

Isis nodded. She kept quiet, mulling over where or how Jade could have gotten such a twisted view of her fiancé.

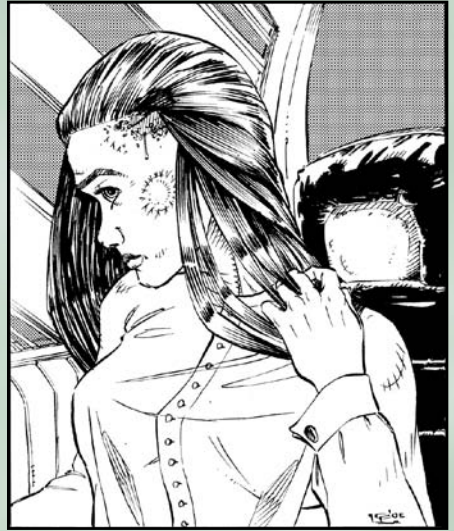
"Hey, turn your head to your left."

The Duchess blinked at Jade. The blonde's expression was less than gracious, her eyes wide. Had she recognized her? And now needed a profile? Isis did as she was told and braced herself for the denouncement.

"You're bleeding. Sorry about that. Looks like I've added injury to that bruise on your cheek." She sighed. "We'll get you to a hospital and take a look at it."

"No," Isis said almost too abruptly. "No, I'm fine. Let's go get April's daughter." *Get me anywhere that's miles away from the Lancers and Sergeant Richards.*

Jade's gaze lingered on Isis for a few seconds. She nodded. "Afraid of doctors? Me too. But you might want to get that looked at—just in case. It looks pretty nasty." She pointed to the passenger floorboard at Isis' feet. Jade's shoulder bag lay in a crumpled heap. "Reach in there and grab some tissues."



Isis did as she was told and pulled out a fistful of tissues. She put a hand to her head where she'd slammed it against the van. The white tissues came back crimson and her stomach twisted at the sight of the blood.

Her blood.

She cursed at her own weaknesses and forced herself not to faint. *Head wounds always bleed more and look worse than they are, isn't that right?* She shivered and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Cold? Me too. It's got to be close to forty degrees out there. And what's with your clothes? Where's your coat? What were you doing when the Lancers attacked?"

"I was..." Isis wasn't good at making up things on the spot. Lying just wasn't her best skill. She'd done it earlier – but wasn't sure what to say now. "I was delivering bread."

"Oh, you were in the bread truck when it was shot at? The one you were talking about?"

Isis nodded. That much was the truth.

"Oh, wow," Jade grinned. "I bet that was insane. Is that how you got that bruise?"

Isis nodded again, not really trusting herself to speak.

"So your day's been about as messed up as ours."

Isis thought of Li Wynn and April Torsten. *There are those that are having it worse than me.*

"You don't think they'll do anything to April, do you?" Jade said as she kept the van moving. "I'd hate for something to happen to her."

"I—I don't know." It was the truth. She wasn't sure what they would do. Evidently they believed they had her in custody. But Richards would know better.

He would see the truth. And then what would happen?

And what if Jade knew her brother, or who Isis assumed was her brother, was also being held by the soldiers? What would Jade do? Turn the van around and go back for him?

She should tell Jade her brother was in possible danger. If she didn't, what little trust was still possible between them would evaporate, and right now, Isis needed Jade to help her stay out of enemy hands.

I need to do something.

Sun-Tzu's recent condemnation of her father came to her at that moment. She could only assume her present situation brought this memory to her now. They had been in the garden, discussing her father's treatment of her. Pink cherry blossoms had danced in the breeze.

His voice had been calm and smooth, yet sharp beneath. "You may be content to play the tides, chasing the ebb and flow of your father's displeasure, but I assure you that we will not. The Capellan people make their own way, Isis. What is stopping you?"

His words followed her now as she looked at Jade. Here, on Hustaing, she would need to make her own way. But she had no idea if her next choice would be a step closer to safety.

Or darkness.

"Jade..." Isis began. "There's something you need to know. Something I overheard the soldiers say about your brother..."



Lance Sergeant Erik Richards glared earnestly at the brunette brought before him. The print shop office was warm and the lights were still on, the fluorescents overhead illuminating the woman's features with glaring clarity.

This wasn't her.

He didn't need to smell her perfume to know that Duchess Marik did not stand before him. Oh, they resembled one another, but this woman didn't have the contrasting beauty of Isis.

Or the haughtiness.

He looked at the soldier behind their captive. "Where did you find her?"

"Behind the larger of the machines back there." The man handed his Sergeant a baseball cap and a pair of high-heeled shoes.

She was here. *Had been* here.

She made a fool of me!

Richards took the cap and heels and set them carefully on the desk. Familiar perfume came from the ballcap and he ran a finger along the top button.

"Why did you run from us?"

April looked at the soldiers to her side and then at Richards. "I panicked. We both panicked."

"Both?"

"Jade and I."

Richards looked up from the ball cap and into April's eyes. "Jade? What about the Duchess?"

April shook her head. "I don't know who the Duchess is. Jade and I were running back over here to get out of the way of the soldiers and we bumped into Isis."

He sat forward. "Isis – Isis Marik? Then she was with you? Where is she?" Richards asked, reining in his temper.

April shook her head. "She's with Jade I guess." Her eyes widened. "She's a Duchess? Is she who you're looking for?"

"You didn't recognize the Duchess Marik?"

The woman looked confused. "Who?"

"The Chancellor's fiancée."

April's mouth formed into a perfect O. "No. She told me her name was Isis and I thought that was a nice name. We were all running because we were scared for our lives." She took a step closer. "I have a daughter. She's four. I don't have anything to do with this. Can't I go pick her up and take her home?"

"You will," Richards smiled. "As soon as you tell me where the Duchess is."

A grating noise began from somewhere in the back. The men around Richards scrambled as he grabbed April's arm and pulled her with him.

The back dock door was lifting and the white van, silent until now, roared to life as he and his men stepped out. They aimed their rifles.

"Do not fire!" Richards ordered and his voice echoed over the roar of the van as it backed out at a tragic pace. "I want her alive!"

More soldiers scrambled out of the van's way as it caromed backward and then squealed tires as it speed forward down the alley.

Richards turned to the man on his right. "Track that van, but don't fire on it. I don't want any 'Mech jockeys trying to be a hero. We don't want the Duchess killed, giving Sun-Tzu that much more ammunition to go to war."

"Yessir."

Richards turned back to April. "Is Isis alone?"

"No, Jade's with her. Jade Hollister. Her brother owns this place."

He thought of the man he had under guard in the manager's office. "Are you sure she's with the Duchess?"

April nodded. "Jade had the van keys. She'd ducked into the van, and Isis had run in after her."

The Sergeant saw a plan coming together. "Do you know where Jade might be taking the Duchess?"

"I'm not sure she knows who's with her any more than I did," April shrugged. "Jade might take her to get my daughter. They talked about going to Jade's house and having a glass of wine."

"April, give this soldier here the address of your daughter's day-care as well as Jade's home address. We'll make sure you're reunited with your daughter, once we have Isis in our hands."

The brunette nodded hesitantly, a mother worried for her child. She would do anything he asked of her.

And so would Jade Hollister—once she knew they had her brother.

As April and the soldier turned to leave, Richards touched her shoulder. "April, tell me...does Jade have a phone?"

To Be Continued...