

"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

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PART TWO

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Isis grabbed hold of the van's dashboard as Jade made another ninety-degree turn down a side street. They had traveled four hectic kilometers away from Hollister Printing. Along the way, the number of Blackwind soldiers along the road and sidewalks hadn't decreased, though the city seemed less damaged along this path.

The ache between her eyes intensified with every brace-for-impact she put her body through while just staying upright in the chair. *Where did this woman learn to drive?*



"Hey, might want to grab a few more of those tissues from my bag. You're still bleeding," Jade said as she glanced sideways at Isis. "You sure you don't want to stop in at the hospital? It might be a bit crowded there with our new guests and all, but—"

"I'm sure," Isis said, then flashed a cardboard smile. She reached down for the bag during a straight stretch of road and pulled out a bigger wad of white tissue. They passed over a bridge and Isis looked out over the rushing water of the river below as she pressed the tissue to her head. Smoke drifted up over the cityscape, a tell-tale marker of where the heaviest fighting between Hustaing forces and the Blackwind Lancers still raged.

Were any of her fiancé's people among them? Were they searching for her?

"Okay," Jade began as she reached to touch a white screen on the dashboard's middle console. The screen lit up beneath her pink lacquered nails, displaying a monochromatic grid of streets.

A small bright green triangle moved quickly from the bottom of the screen to the middle following a center street.

A red rectangle with the word “KidsKare” glowed two streets over.

“We’re nearly there,” Jade grinned, then brought the van to a stop at a red light—the first one she’d yielded since they’d fled the printing company. “Now, what was it you were going to tell me?”

Isis swallowed. She knew she had to tell Jade about Richardson and her brother Dave. But she was also afraid she’d lose her only ally—her only means of protection and escape from the Lancers.

The sun peeked through the buildings, glinting off the hood of the van. The winter chill still sieved through the window on Isis’ right and she shivered. *You have to tell her. It’s the right thing to tell her.*

I am a Duchess of the Free Worlds League. I am the fiancé to Sun-Tzu Liao. I’m supposed to do the right thing.

Right?

Isis closed her eyes and listened to the thundering of her heart against her chest. *And what happens if I don’t? What happens if I keep quiet and then she finds out after something terrible happens to him? What would Jade do if she finds out I kept the information on her brother to myself?* She opened her eyes and looked directly at Jade, as she had always been taught to do when speaking. “When we were hiding in your brother’s shop, I overheard Richardson and his men talking.”

“Richardson?” When the light changed Jade started the van forward. “Who’s Richardson?”

“He was the one in charge of those men.”

“How’d you know that?” Jade glanced at Isis, though her expression did not betray any suspicious thoughts.

“B-because I heard them call him Richardson.” Isis couldn’t remember if that were the truth—if she’d heard it there, or back where they’d run down the bread-truck. The events since the limousine crashed were becoming fuzzy. Confused.

“Well?” Jade said. “What’d you hear?”

Deep breath. She's not going to kill you. It's not your fault her brother came back into the shop. "I heard them talking about—"

Something buzzed inside the van. Isis grabbed hold of the door handle and looked around wildly. Was it an alarm? Had the tactical computer on the console detected the enemy?

"Hey, relax," Jade said and nodded to the floor at Isis' feet. "Grab my phone."

Phone.

Oh.

Flustered and embarrassed at her panicked reaction, the Duchess bent forward again and rummaged inside the leather bag until she found a small, palm-sized phone, the same one she'd seen Jade try in the lobby of her brother's shop. The world spun as she sat back and moaned softly in response to the pain behind her eyes.

She bit her lower lip and forced herself to focus on the I.D. screen of the vibrating object. The readout said April Torsten.

April? Was it possible the Lancer Sergeant had let her go when he'd discovered she wasn't the Duchess? No, Isis didn't believe that for a second. *If nothing else, April would prove to be a small source of information on me. She'd been with me. Spoken with me.*

He'd keep April close. Isis stared at the still ringing phone. *This isn't April calling.*

"Oh for crying out loud, answer the phone."

Isis looked at Jade. What could she say? What *should* she say? She didn't want to answer it.

Jade started to say something and then stopped, a perplexed look on her face. Then she shook her head. "I don't even know your name. But anyway, just answer the damned phone."

If she didn't answer it, Isis feared Jade would become suspicious. The Duchess nervously pressed the answer button. "Hello?"

"Jade?" It was indeed April's voice and Isis felt overcome in a wash of relief. Maybe Richards *had* let her go.

"Thank goodness you're okay," Isis heard herself say. She nodded to Jade, indicating April sounded fine. "Jade and I were worried."

"Isis? I really need to speak to—"

There was a small shout that sounded like "Hey!" to Isis. Then...

"Duchess Marik."

Isis' blood ran cold as she recognized the voice. Richardson. The buzzing in her ears intensified. *Don't faint, don't faint.* She glanced at Jade who appeared to be squinting at something down the road. What should she do? If she spoke to him, Jade would know immediately it wasn't April anymore, wouldn't she?

I could hang up, right? He doesn't know where we are.

"I know you're there, Isis. We also have your location pinpointed." He sounded smug. Isis hated smug.

"How?" Her voice quivered just a bit. *Damn! Why can't I sound as confident as Jade? Or as seemingly calm?*

"Your friend April told us where you were going. I also have the brother of your friend in custody." There was a pause and Isis heard muffled talking. "Need I continue, Duchess? It's very simple—you surrender to us and we release Mr. Hollister, as well as April. If not, their life expectancy could abruptly shorten."

Isis swallowed. *You knew this could happen. Li Wynn had warned you. You should have told Jade sooner.* She put hand to her head. The skin was sticky where the blood had finally started to dry. *What do I do? I don't trust this man to keep his word. What if I do surrender and he doesn't release Dave and April?*

I don't want to be a prisoner. He can't do this.

He could in all truth. Isis understood the rules of war, as there weren't any. None that were clearly defined. She knew she was a political figure, a pawn to be used by either side. And Richardson would use her against Sun-Tzu. She didn't want to be a burden on her fiancé. That was something she never wanted. Li Wynn had seemed certain they would barter her. It would weaken the Chancellor.

He would come for her. She was certain he was already preparing to look for his fiancée and it would only be a matter of time before he came to Hustaing and found her.

"What's she saying?" Jade asked. "Hey, you look really white. You're not going to—*oh hell!*"

Isis pitched forward as Jade drove the van to an abrupt stop. The sound of rubber scraping against asphalt whistled through the van's walls. Luckily Isis had put on her seat-belt and wasn't actually thrown *into* the dashboard. She did drop the phone and heard it clack into the floor at her feet.

"What the hell is this?" Jade sounded upset.

Isis looked through the windshield in front of them. Her jaw dropped.

The street continued on through two intersections—ones that were perhaps crowded on less exciting days—and on toward a six-story building directly in their path. Lined up in front of that building, which Isis estimated was half a kilometer away, stood a line of two 'Mechs, four tanks and a front row of thirty or so armed soldiers.

Isis glanced down at the console. The daycare was evidently in the lower half of the six-story building. And completely surrounded. "Why don't the soldiers show up on your tactical?"

Jade slowly turned an amazed expression to Isis. "Tactical? What do you think this is? A 'Mech? That's a navigational system for men like my brother who get lost often and hate asking for directions."

Oh. Most of the vehicles Isis had traveled in had tactical computers, defenses for the occupant's protection. It was an honest mistake.

Other vehicles that had been traveling along the road stopped as abruptly as Jade had—many were backing up or pulling forward and turning around.

Isis looked down at the phone at her feet. She could hear a tiny, metallic voice filtering through the small earpiece. She reached down for it as Jade pulled the van forward and turned it around as well. "Wouldn't want to be left out," the woman muttered.

After putting the phone back to her ear, Isis could hear Richardson giving orders. "—follow them—don't let that van out of your sight. I want her and I want her alive."

She disconnected and clutched the phone in her hand. Jade maneuvered the bulky vehicle around and then pointed it in the direction of a side alley. Isis looked around to see how the Blackwind Lancers' sergeant was keeping tabs on them. She didn't see any-

one close by, only other pedestrians hurrying out of the way. She was beginning to think he lied.

"Why would they have a daycare surrounded like that?" Jade was musing as she carefully drove the van through the alley. She expertly maneuvered around debris, as well as trash and a beaten dumpster.

The van's console showed a one-way street up ahead, going south, away from the six-story building. A two-story mall sat in front of the six-story, directly in front of the line of soldiers and 'Mechs. "There's really nothing of major importance in there. Nothing governmental. A few shops. Maybe a law office or two. There *is* a D.O.T. branch there, but hey, I wouldn't argue if they took that over. Make those idiots inside wait for a change."

Isis closed her eyes. *Tell her, tell her, tell her...*

"It just seems like overkill. It's almost as if they're waiting for someone important. Maybe it's that person you said they were looking for."

Tell her!

"It's—" Isis opened her eyes. "It's because of me. They're trying to find me." There. It was out. She'd said it.

"Right, dear. And I'm the Chancellor's fiancée."

The Duchess widened her eyes. "No, *I'm* the Chancellor's fiancée. I'm Duchess Isis Marik."

Jade laughed. It was a pleasant sound, but out of place. She stopped at the alley's exit, looked both ways and then drove the van forward across the side street to the next alley. This narrow passage wasn't as crowded and was apparently used as a throughway in the neighborhood.

Jade looked at the console. "Looks like we might be able to go through two more blocks and then west on the main interstate. I think I can get us out of the drop zone here and back to my apartment in about a half hour."

"What about April's daughter?"

Jade gave Isis a scathing look. "You see that blockade? I'm not stupid enough to try going through there. The Lancers have their own agenda and I'm not part of it. And besides you talked to April, right? She's okay. She can go get her daughter. If they want the

Duchess and she's stupid enough to be on Hustaing with the Lancers looking for her, then so be it. The quicker they find her and get off of Hustaing the better."

Frustrated, Isis sat forward. "Jade, I really am Isis Marik. I was in that bread truck because I was running for my life. A Hiritsu infantryman named Li Wynn sacrificed himself by switching clothes with me so I could get away from Sergeant Richardson." She held up the phone. "That was him that called, not April. They took April because they thought she was me."

Jade's grin widened. "Okay, I'll play along. So you're Isis Marik. Fiancée to Sun-Tzu Liao. And you're here without your boyfriend—why?" She shook her head. "No way are you *that* woman. I read the tabloids. I know my net-news. The Duchess is a spoiled rich girl with no real purpose except to *maybe* unite the Capellan Confederation and the Free Worlds League. And that's a big maybe. I mean, look how long that asshole's strung her along. Fifteen years now?"

"Ten."

"Same difference." Jade paused the van again at the end of the second alley. Jade hissed. "Damn! Two tanks headed this way."

"They're watching us, Jade. We have to get out of this van," Isis said. She tossed the phone into Jade's bag and pulled the bag from the floorboard. Another slight wave of dizziness and nausea made her head swim and she grabbed the dashboard. "They know this van. They'll find us and then they'll have you too."

"I think you hit your head too hard." Jade eased the van back into the alley, twisting in her seat to look out through the back windows. "But I will agree that the van's probably not the best ride. I'm sure those soldiers back at Dave's shop have identified it. You might not be the Duchess, but I'm sure they're not too happy with me running over that soldier like that. I mean, technically that's a hit and run."

Tell her about Dave!

Jade grabbed her bag from Isis' lap and hit the release on her own seat belt with a loud click. "We need to find another ride." She opened her door and stepped out. Icy wind flowed in, brushing against Isis' cheek.

Isis got out as well and braced herself against the brick wall with both hands, gasping as her bare feet touched the cold pavement. She shivered uncontrollably in the cold as dizziness came again—

only this time it was worse. *What is wrong with me?* Her teeth clicked against one another in the cold wind as she closed her eyes. That made things a little better.

Jade's heels clicked on the concrete as she moved around the van. Isis felt her hand on her shoulder. "Look at me."

Isis did as she was told. Jade looked into both of the Duchess' eyes. "You're showing all the classic signs of concussion. I know because my brother got clobbered by a falling box of paper. He was lucky he didn't break his neck. Look, I don't know if it's from that nasty gash up there, or the whopper of a bruise across your cheek, but you don't look so good."

Isis looked into Jade's green eyes. She looked radiant, beautiful. The Duchess felt ugly. Battered. Bruised.

A chirping noise filled the alley. Isis' eyes widened as she looked at the purse on Jade's shoulder. It was the phone again. She watched Jade take it out, check the ID and then shake her head. "It's April again. I'm telling her she can go get her own daughter."

Isis reached out to Jade. *Don't answer that phone!*

"Hey April, you're not going to beli—" Jade stopped and listened.

Isis pulled her hand back and took a step away. The asphalt under her bare feet burned.

Jade's lips thinned as she turned away from Isis and faced the alley's exit. She pressed her left hand to her left ear as she listened intently to the voice in her right.

A gust of wind pulled at Isis' hair, moving it into her face. *I should run.*

Jade abruptly turned and stared wide-eyed at Isis, the phone pressed white-knuckled at her ear.

I should really run. Now!



Sergeant Richardson disconnected and dropped the compact phone back into his fatigue jacket pocket. The air outside the

Hetzer was cool, fresh. The atmosphere inside had grown hot and smelled of sweat as it moved quickly along the city streets toward the daycare building.

With a glare at his head up, the Lancer touched the mic on his shoulder. "Peller."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you located the van?"

"Negative, sir, we're still looking."

How difficult was it to find a van with the words "Hollister Printing" on it? Richardson gave the man his new orders and then leaned back in his command chair. He wasn't completely confident the Hollister woman would do exactly as he requested, but he was certain he would have the Duchess within the hour.

Miss Hollister's brother remained in their custody within Hollister Printing, guarded by several of his men. He should shoot the prisoner—a casualty of war. But there was little else in the way of leverage he held against the woman helping Isis should his men be unable to retrieve the Duchess from the van.

So far the Chancellor's slut had managed to evade them; she was more cunning than he'd been led to believe. Isis Marik had been raised in a world of political deception and power posturing. Yet it had been so easy for her to make a mockery of him.

But when he did get his hands on her, she would pay for it. All of it.

"Sir," one of the tanker crew, Lance Corporal Perron, turned to him. The young man paused as he listened to the communication he received through the bud nestled within his right ear. "Lance Sergeant Darryl Baton says his men are in position around the building."

Richardson nodded. "How long before we're there?"

"Fifteen minutes, sir."

"Once we arrive, take up position in the building's front, but with only the tanks I requested."

"Yes, sir."

Lance Sergeant Richardson felt the corners of his mouth pull into a small smile. He thought of Miss Hollister's silence once she'd learned

the caller hadn't been her friend April. He trusted her love for her brother, as well as her friend and her friend's daughter, would win out over the hatred he suspected she now harbored for being used.

Used by the Duchess that is. A lie placed carefully here and there and Miss Hollister would turn on Isis and deliver her to him.

First, she would hand over the Duchess in exchange for Mrs. Torsten's daughter, and then when Isis was secured, he would give over the brother.

But not until then.

If at all.

The day had begun bad, but would end well. When he had the Duchess Marik in his possession, he would force her to tell him where the Chancellor was hiding on Hustaing.



Barefoot, shivering, ignoring the searing pain between her eyes, Isis turned and started to bolt from the alley. There had to be somewhere she could hide. Be safe, until Sun-Tzu found her. And if she were away from Jade, then maybe Richardson would release Jade's brother.

And April as well.

But something grabbed at her hair and yanked hard, pulling several strands from the scalp. Isis yelled out loudly as she twisted around to her right, facing Jade. The pain from her scalp was nothing compared to the punch the blonde woman delivered to the Duchess' midsection.

Isis doubled over as all the air was forced from her lungs. There wasn't enough time to pull any back in. She couldn't breathe, she couldn't move. But she was aware of Jade's hands pulling at her, half-dragging her back to the van.

"Nice try," Jade said in a harsh tone. "But you're not going anywhere."

Breathing was like pulling air into her lungs through plastic as Jade's hand grasped the back of Isis' neck. Isis heard the doors to

the van open and was pushed face first inside. Her thighs slammed into the back bumper as the top half of her body pitched forward, her hands going out to prevent her face from smashing into the van's bare metal floor.

The entire time she tried to tell Jade she was sorry, but there wasn't enough air. Instead she could only cough and try to pull in air, great gulps of it, as Jade climbed inside the van as well and began pulling Isis further in by her arms. Isis tried to push her away, tried to move out of the van.

"You knew," Jade kept saying over and over. "You knew that son-of-a-bitch had my brother and you never told me."

Isis collapsed on her front, her hands bracing her against the van's floor as Jade pulled the van doors closed behind them. She still couldn't pull enough air into her lungs to answer. She wanted to explain why she did what she did. She had to convince Jade she'd never wanted to hurt anyone.

Instead she saw stars before her eyes, her body still stunned and hurting from the blow.

The blond reached beneath the driver's seat and pulled out a flat, rectangular tool box and rummaged inside. The only illumination came through the windshield and two side doors.

Isis pushed herself up to her knees and pulled in air. "Jade..." another burst of air. "I'm...sorry. Please..." she coughed again.

"Shut up," Jade said as she grabbed something out of the box. She turned and shoved Isis back down on her front, then grabbed at her left arm and pulled it painfully behind her back.

When Isis felt the rope encircle her wrist, her struggles to escape increased. "Jade...please, no..."

But Jade was on top of Isis now and pulled the Duchess' right wrist to the back, binding the two tightly together. "Just shut up."

Truth... Isis struggled to pull her hands free. *This is the truth. You should have known.* "I was afraid. I was..." Isis stopped when she realized her words were coming out in sobs.

Jade knotted the rope and moved over to Isis' legs. The Duchess tried to fight but Jade was fast and had her ankles bound together tightly. "Jade, please don't do this. Please..." tears fell over her cheeks as she realized just how helpless she'd become in a matter of minutes.

When she finished, Jade sat back on the van's floor, her gaze taking in Isis' bound form. "What? Were you going to just leave my brother in their hands? You think that's right? Playing with people's lives like that?"

Isis tried to speak around the sobs. She felt like a little girl again, afraid to cry but unable to stop the tears. She felt an overwhelming shame press on her shoulders. "No...no. I'm scared, Jade. I'm—this wasn't supposed to happen. I don't want them to lock me away."

"You want my brother locked away?"

"No..." Isis tried moving her wrists. They were bound too tightly. "Please Jade. I need your help. I can't...please don't give me over to him. I tried to tell you, but you wouldn't even believe who I was."

"I know." Jade sat back and tossed a ball of twine to the side, as well as the small pocketknife she'd used to cut it. Her shoulders lowered and a bit of the tension, the anger she'd shown, sieved away. "Richardson threatened my brother's life, Isis. He threatened a four-year-old girl. Their lives rest on me giving you to him. This sucks!"

Isis sniffed and nodded. Tears ran down the bridge of her nose, making it itch. She had to convince Jade she'd never intended this to happen. Somehow, she had to prove she could be trusted again.

Li Wynn's words came back to her, and they frightened her now more than the first time she had heard them. Maybe if she explained what she feared was in store for her if she were captured. "The Blackwind Lancers attacked Hustaing on the pretense of capturing Sun-Tzu. But my Lord never left the Pearl of Wisdom. I came here alone," Isis faltered. "I—I'm just something Richardson can use as leverage."

"Yeah, you're leverage, all right," Jade said. "Especially once they learn Papa ain't here." She shook her head. "I doubt you'll ever see Sun-Tzu or he you once the Lancers have you."

Isis felt her heart lurch in her throat at that thought. "Please." The tears came again unbidden. The ache behind her eyes echoed the ringing in her ears. It would be so easy to just surrender, to lay back and close her eyes.

"This just isn't fair!" Jade said and slammed her hand into the van's side behind her. "I'm not a part of this. I'm nobody, same as

my brother." She glared at Isis for a few minutes. "And to be honest, you're a puppet in this same as me."

Jade stood, bent at the waist in the cramped space and kicked the back of the driver's chair.

Isis flinched, remembering her own temper in front of the Chancellor, something she'd tried hard not to do since coming to live with him during their engagement.

She was a representative of the Free Worlds League and should be more mature. "Isis, such tantrums are for those that do not see into the wisdom of patience. All things bend to one's will with time, and carefully placed pressure. Perhaps one day you will understand that if you act like a child, you will always be treated as such."

She had been angry with him then. Mainly because he'd spoken such words before Ion Rush and Aris Sung. Had they been alone, perhaps she could have handled the insult better.

Isis shifted her position to her right side. Her hands were growing numb as she tried to twist them free. She watched Jade sit back down and put her hands to her face. Jade had been a friend, an ally in all of this.

Think, think, think. Remember how you counseled Sun-Tzu. How can I help Jade, and show her I can be trusted?

First she had to know exactly what it was Richardson had said. "J-Jade—what did he say? What exactly does he want?"

"He wants you." Jade spoke through her fingers, her voice muffled. She pulled her hands down. Her eyes red-rimmed. She fixed Isis with a paralyzing gaze. "I'm supposed to trade you in for Rebecca—April's daughter. And if I come through on the bargain, then once you've been," she held her hands up and made quotation marks in the air, "'secured,' then they'll release my brother."

Isis tried to sit up, but the bindings made it awkward. The dizziness didn't help either, and she managed to prop herself up on her right elbow. "Jade, you can't trust Richardson. There's no guarantee he'll release Dave, even once he has me. I'm sorry for this. It's my fault and I admit that. But let me help you make it better. You need to find a way to get Rebecca back as well as your brother."

Jade looked directly at Isis. "You help? Don't you think you've helped enough?"

"I know how men's minds work." Which in a small sense was the truth. She'd watched Sun-Tzu well enough to know when and when not to approach him. Mostly. How to help so that he believed he'd found the solution to his own problem and when to stand up and be noticed.

She feared there would be a day when she would say too much. "What were his instructions?"

"I'm supposed to leave you restrained in this van in front of the daycare. Then once he has you, he's supposed to give me Rebecca and then call and tell me where to find Dave."

Isis shook her head. "Don't give him that power. I'm the only leverage you have with him at this point. And you have no proof that he even has Rebecca." Isis shivered. The metal floor was cold against her thin slacks and shirt. Her teeth chattered sometimes as she watched Jade.

Her friend/captor narrowed her eyes. "So you say I should call him back and demand proof?"

"Don't give me to him right away," Isis remembered conversations with Sun-Tzu as she considered Jade's plight. Giving advice had always seemed easy. *But why is it I never heed it?* As she lay bound on the cold floor of the van, Isis constructed a plan to get Rebecca back, as well as prove to Jade she was trustworthy.

Jade listened patiently, sitting beside Isis and speaking only once the Duchess was finished. "I turn myself over to him and demand I leave with Rebecca before I give him the location of the van."

Isis nodded.

"Only you won't be in the van because we're going to get a different car."

The Duchess nodded again. "But only if you think you can get in and out of the daycare without Richardson stopping you."

Jade looked thoughtful. "Your plan might work—there *is* a way out: a service exit in the basement that leads to the waterworks near the river." She tapped her lower lip. "If I could convince Richardson to let me see Rebecca and maybe be alone with her, I could get her out of there through that tunnel."

"And then you still have me to negotiate for your brother." Isis tried to shift her position again. She wanted to ask Jade to cut her

loose, but didn't want to break the tenuous bond she'd re-established on their friendship. "I can be in the sedan ready to move the moment you guys show up."

When the blond beauty didn't respond right away Isis said, "Please trust me, Jade. I never intended to hurt anyone. Please let me help you get Dave back."

"I'll think about it." She grabbed the knife and cut the twine around Isis' ankles. "I'm keeping your hands bound for now. I still don't trust you won't just bolt on me."

Isis was happy to move her legs as Jade helped her into a standing position and maneuvered her into the passenger's seat. Jade then pulled the seat belt over her waist and chest, making Isis feel even more a prisoner.

"I'm not going to risk you hitting your head again just in case we're spotted and I have to make a few hasty turns." She cranked the van and peered sideways at Isis. "I'm going to try this, Duchess. You'd better be right about Richardson."

Fifteen minutes later Jade spotted an abandoned sedan closer to the daycare building. There were plenty of abandoned cars strewn about the streets, but the sedan was the first to have a set of keys in it. It was a Seraphim Mark 7, something Jade insisted would have cost her six month's rent on the down payment alone. Isis watched from her seat through the windshield as Jade checked it out and then nodding, came back to the van. "Looks good. The only problem is getting it to the waterworks where the opening of the access is."

Isis tried to shift in her seat to face Jade but couldn't. "Please, Jade, let me drive it. I'll follow you there, and I'll wait for you and Rebecca."

"You can drive?"

Isis frowned. "Do I look that helpless?"

Jade smiled for the first time since learning Richardson had her brother. "You look pretty helpless right now, and you sure as hell don't look like a Duchess."

Isis held up her chin. "I can drive all manner of vehicle, thank you. I can even drive a tank if I need too," which was the truth, somewhat. She could at least make a passable attempt.

Jade narrowed her eyes. "I bet you could do lots of things if you put your mind to it, Duchess. But I can't...how can I trust you? You didn't trust me enough to tell me about Dave.."

"I just met you and April – and I was being chased," Isis insisted. She was going to lose this one and only opportunity to regain Jade's trust if she wasn't careful with what she said. "I admit it was stupid. But I was scared, Jade. I still am." She took in a deep breath and became acutely aware of the twine around her wrist and the belt holding her to the seat. "The way I see it I'm faced with either death or as the captive of a rogue unit desperate now to either find Sun-Tzu or use me to prevent an invasion of the St. Ives Compact."

Jade's eyes widened. "Invade St. Ives?"

"In retaliation," Isis nodded. "Look what they've done. They've attacked a Confederation world, knowing the Chancellor had included this world on his tour, with the slight hope of capturing him. But he's not here—I *am*. I'd say Sun-Tzu has plenty to be upset about, and he'll use this attack as leverage against Candace Liao. I'm terrified, Jade. I came here as a guest, and now I'm running for my life."

Jade stared ahead through the windshield. The sun had started to set behind the cityscape. Smoke still billowed from various locations, twisters of death and destruction. "Okay, I'll give you this." She released the seat belt and pulled the pocket knife from her hip pocket and opened it, but before cutting the twine, she held the knife to Isis' throat. "You screw me on this, Duchess, and something happens to my brother or Rebecca, and I'll hunt you down myself."

Isis swallowed. Nodded. She couldn't ask for anything else.



The sedan drove as smoothly as its reputation claimed. Isis enjoyed the heater best of all and focused the vents on her frozen and battered feet. As she turned the wheel, her eyes rested briefly on the harsh red stripes on her wrists. She didn't blame Jade for her caution, or her actions.

And Isis intended on proving to her new ally that she could be trusted.

She sat in the sedan, parked along a side street across from the waterworks, a clump of red-brick buildings surrounding several pools of churning water. Tons of water was pumped in from the river, filtered, sifted, cleansed, and then distributed through pipes to the city.

The plan was for her to follow Jade to the waterworks and hide the car. Then Jade would drive the van to a location near the day-care but she would go through the single-story mall nearby, alone, to Richardson's pre-arranged drop point in front of the building.

Jade hoped she could convince Richardson to let her see Rebecca before she told him where the van was. Then she could sneak Rebecca out and the three of them could escape and find Dave's friends to help them free him.

Jade had mentioned perhaps driving to Dave's house to regroup before rescuing him.

Isis had asked, "Wouldn't they be watching Dave's house? Especially once you double-cross Richardson?"

Jade's answer had startled Isis. "Oh, he'll definitely try to do that. But no one has Dave's real address. He always gives out a PO box across town as his address, and then gives his company's address as the one on reference there. All the expenses are handled through a corporation name that Dave handles. We'll be safe. And my neighbor's a nurse. He can give that head of yours a cursory once over without going to the hospital."

Isis thought Dave sounded like a wacko. Then again, Isis was thinking along Sun-Tzu's line of suspicion that those who don't conform must be hiding something. Why go through all that trouble to keep one's home secret from the government?

Unless you were hiding something.

Isis dismissed the thought. Maybe, maybe not. Right now, all she needed to do was watch the gate of the waterworks and have the car ready when she saw Rebecca and Jade.

But again their conversation before Jade's departure in the van came back to Isis. After double-checking the plan, Jade had paused and frowned at Isis as she looked in through the driver's window of the sedan. "Why *are* you here? Why would you come to this world alone?"

With a shrug, Isis had said, "My fiancé asked me to come in his place. He and I were assured my safety was their top-most priority."

"And you believed him. You believed Sun-Tzu. You don't think his intelligence would know that the Blackwind Lancers would attack if he visited here?"

Isis hadn't liked the question and she'd leaned her head to the right side, her chestnut hair falling over her shoulder. "What are you getting at?"

"What I'm suggesting is you might want to take a harder look at *why* you're here and Sun-Tzu isn't."

Isis had liked the implications of that statement even less. Sun-Tzu loved her. He would never want any harm to come to her.

He would come for her. Isis was certain.

She pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose. The headache had eased somewhat, though sudden movements still made her dizzy. Exhaustion pressed harder on her shoulders the longer she sat still.

And it was warm.

Too warm.

Something hard banged on the driver's side window. Isis opened her eyes, unsure how long she'd had them closed. She was disoriented for a second and blinked several times to refocus her vision as well as her thoughts.

Sedan. Jade. Rebecca.

The knocking happened again but not as loud. She turned and looked through the driver's side window and up into the face of a young man. His eyes were black and almond shaped. A large weapon hung casually over his left shoulder. On his head he wore a cap, displaying the sigil of the Blackwind Lancers.

"Miss? Are you okay? I'm going to need to see some I.D." His voice muffled as it carried through the glass and his eyes widened as his gaze took in more of Isis' appearance. "Ma'am, are you okay?"

The cut! Isis put her hand to her temple. The blood had dried and matted in her hair. And her cheek was sore to the touch. She gave the young man a weak smile. "I'm fine," she said clearly, though her voice quivered nervously.

The soldier tried the door. When he found it locked, he stood back and ordered her to open it. He hadn't raised his gun.

Yet.

Isis glanced back to the waterworks, then to the young soldier. She'd promised Jade she wouldn't run.

But if she opened the door—

"Miss," the man said again, his voice holding a bit more caution.

Isis chewed on her lower lip. *What do I do!?*

You run as far from here as you can, Li Wynn said in her mind.

She looked down. She had a vehicle. She had a way to flee.

Take it!

But I promised Jade!

Run!

The soldier's eyes widened even further as Isis put the car into drive, released the brake, and gunned the engine. As the sedan shot forward, the soldier pulled up his weapon and fired.



They didn't see her at first as she emerged from the front of the mini-mall across the street. Richardson wasn't sure what Miss Hollister looked like but he recognized the defiance with which this woman walked. It was the same he'd witnessed in her brother when Richardson had questioned him.

What he saw knocked him back in his chair. He had believed the Duchess a beautiful woman until he took in the statuesque blonde.

He sat in the forward chair of a Hetzer, watching her on one of the monitors. There was no sign of the van, no sign of Isis Marik. What was the young woman doing?

"Shadow One, move into position to flank the young lady. Escort her here," he said into his mic. He watched his men move from their positions, emerging like ghosts from behind trees, bushes and smaller buildings.

Miss Hollister didn't flinch when she noticed the soldiers closing in around her. She paused only long enough for two of them to flank her and gave little resistance as they each took an arm and led her across the street to the line of infantry.

Richardson stepped out of the tank into the brisk setting sun. Jade Hollister was even more beautiful close up. He saw the hatred in her eyes as well and noted the stiffness in her stance. "Where's the Duchess?"

"Where is Rebecca?" No fear. Not even a quiver in her tone. Impressive.

Richardson nodded to the building behind him. "My men have the children secured in their classroom."

"I don't give you Isis' location until you let me see Rebecca."

"You'll have to trust me."

She gave him a crooked smile. "Then you'll have to trust me as well. Trust me that even if you find the van, you won't find Isis."

Richardson's jaw worked back and forth, grinding his teeth. So the Duchess was no longer in the van.

As if on cue, the leader of Shadow Two reported in. "Van found sir. It's empty."

Richardson acknowledged his men and told them to continue to search the area. He pursed his lips as he studied the Hustaing native. "You didn't obey orders."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I have no love or hate for the Chancellor, or his fiancée. But I don't trust soldiers who attack innocent citizens on a fool's hope. I have no reason to trust you."

Richardson didn't really care, wanting only the revenge he planned to extract from the Duchess. At this point, unless they found Isis and interrogated her, their search for the Chancellor might end up yielding nothing.

And Major Smithson would be less than pleased. "I will let you see Rebecca, but if you don't give me Isis' location, I will shoot both of you, as well as your brother."

Only the slightest reaction told Richardson his threat was received. And perhaps believed. Until Isis was found, Miss Hollister was a viable asset.

She nodded and Richardson turned to escort her through his men to the building behind them.

Gunfire broke the relative silence of the afternoon. Everyone turned and looked in the direction of the river.

Richardson yanked his mic from his shoulder. "Shadow Two, who the hell is firing? Shoot them."

"Sir," came Shadow Two's leader, Lieutenant Alden Cooper. "It was Corporal Wellington. Seems there was a woman in a Seraphim 7 parked near the waterworks. Wellington said she looked badly beat up, but when he offered to help her, she nearly ran him over driving off."

A badly beaten woman parked nearby. The Lancer Sergeant frowned. Why would a wounded woman run from...

But the answer came to him just as Miss Hollister started to bolt.

Isis! They were working together! The woman had turned his own puppet against him.

"Grab her!" Richardson barked as three of his men grabbed Jade.

He couldn't press the communicate button on his mic fast enough. "Stop that sedan! Cooper, head up the apprehension. Don't fire on the sedan. I repeat, don't fire on the vehicle. I believe our target is inside. Don't—"

"Sir—" Cooper's voice interrupted his commanding officer.

Richardson's throat constricted. He knew by the tone in Cooper's voice something had already gone wrong. He pulled his lips thin as he replied. "Report, Shadow Two, where is the sedan now?"

"Sir, I'm sorry. Two of the tanker teams were under orders not to let anyone exit from the vicinity of the building. When they saw the sedan racing out, they pursued it and fired on it."

"Is the Duchess alive?"

There was a pause. "Unknown, sir. The report I have is that the sedan's rear exploded—they hit the gas tank—and it careened off the bridge into the river."

Richardson took several deep breaths. With the speed of an auto-cannon's fire, the situation had blown out of his control

again. At least with Isis in his possession they might have found the Chancellor's hiding place—if he was even on Hustaing.

And if he wasn't—then her death would give him the moral backing to openly invade the St. Ives Compact!

"Shadow One, recon with Shadow Two. Handle the excavation of that sedan. And if her body's not there, then dredge that river until you find it." He took a long, deep breath. "Don't come back until you have her burned, charred body in your hands."

To be continued...