

BE NOT AFRAID OF GREATNESS

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***Robinson City, Robinson
Draconis March, Federated Suns
2 April 3039***

A cool breeze, mingled with the scent of an approaching spring storm, ruffled pink and white cherry-blossoms from a nearby row of trees bordering the farthest corner of the KidsWorld parking lot in Robinson City. Pedals drifted by like oversized snowflakes as Teagen Reeves narrowed the focus of her binoculars. She tracked the approaching groundcar while sitting in the passenger seat of her brother's taxi.

"Well now that's a sweet ride," her brother Joss said in a soft voice. He was three years older than she was, with the same light lilt in his voice their father had once had.

Teagen shook her head slowly as she watched the ground-car park. "Avanti? Too risky."

"No, it's perfect," Joss said. He was leaning closer to her from his position in the driver's seat. He didn't have binoculars, but they weren't necessary to see the target. Teagen liked her toy because of the things it showed her beyond what the naked eye could see. "Better resell. And the parts are worth a hell of a lot more than the sum."

She gave him that. Joss knew his cars, having collected them since their dad left him his vintage Westline Fastback. Which still sat in their chop shop. Without a motor.

But Teagen knew her specs too—and this thing screamed "go away," from its low-profile tires to the pings and whistles displayed on the binoculars' readout. "Joss, I think this one's military, or he's into more gadgets than me."

"He firing up on the grid?"

"Sparkling like a celebration day kid's toy." Teagen narrowed her eyes as the Avanti driver's door opened.

Joss gave a low chuckle. "You can handle it."

Teagen zeroed in on the clothing. Dark green trousers and jacket, signature starburst on vest, golden spokes across his chest as he turned. "Military. Leftenant from rank insignia." Teagen pulled the binoculars back from her eyes but didn't lower them. "Looks like dad's uniform."

"What? That spook you?"

"No," Teagen said, and she heard and felt him shift beside her. "Seems wrong to take this guy's car. I mean—he's going inside a kid's toy store. And besides, it's going to rain soon. Look at those clouds over the mountains." She was stalling, and she knew she was. Only Teagen didn't know *why*.

But Joss' mind was already made up. He wanted the Avanti. "So? The military will just issue him another one. They can afford it." Which may or may not be true.

Teagen had heard the rumors for years of the impending war between the combined forces of the Federated Suns and Lyrans Commonwealth against the Draconis Combine.

For ten years the universe had waited, and for ten years, nothing foretold had happened. Many of her friends and most of her family refused to believe it would happen either.

Most people Teagen knew often voiced their disappointment with Hanse Davion and his inability to vanquish their ancient foe, the Dragon.

What bothered her most, especially after growing up on her father's stories of the Second and Third Succession Wars, was that no one, or at least no one on Robinson, seemed to care.

Unless they were a Sandoval. The Duke was as always ready to strike against his people's enemy.

Teagen was all for it, as long as it didn't interfere with her business.

She refocused her attention on the soldier as he moved a briefcase to his trunk and locked it. With a glance back, the young Lieutenant went hurriedly into the toy store as thunder gave a distant accompaniment to the afternoon.

"Well, I say go." She tossed the binoculars into the back seat and opened the passenger's door. She wore black, leather gloves, dark shades, and had tucked her hair up into a black, Robinson Buccaneers baseball cap. "Radio Lee. Tell him to be ready. If this thing's lojacked it'll take me a few extra minutes to disarm."

"Lee? What about Mick?" Joss arched one eyebrow. "I know you and Lee got this new thing between you, but you can't leave Mick out of everything."

She pursed her lips. There wasn't time to talk about the fact she disliked Mick. Didn't trust him. With a shrug, she turned away.

The wind felt chilled against her cheek as she moved hurriedly across the parking lot to the silent Avanti. Teagen secretly hoped the thing wasn't tracked. Deactivating a track was time-consuming, and she'd read the man's body language to mean this was to be a quick stop for him.

Perhaps even an impulse buy. He wouldn't be in the store long.

Getting inside the Avanti wasn't difficult—she'd perfected her art years ago. The difficulty came a beat later as her body tensed, listening for the screaming alarm she suspected would come standard on the sedan.

When no alarm sounded, she took in a quick breath, slid into the driver's seat, noting the still new aroma of leather, and reached down to the small open area beneath the ignition.

Hotwiring a car wasn't a rare skill, nor was it one her father had taught her. Joss' friends had been good at stealing cars during their high school days, and being the only female in the group—a default member due to Joss' popularity—she'd picked up on it. Over time, they'd become quite good, and by the end of graduation, had created an adequate night-shift job capable of sustaining their daily utilities.

Though questionable in its pursuits, thieving put food on their tables and clothes on their backs. Children of Robinson were expected to enter the Battle Academy, and if not, then some respectable, nearby college for a less than preferable education.

Media and a long history of the defense of the Draconis March convinced the populace that joining the military was the more respectable choice after High School.

All but Teagen, who had never taken the tests, had failed their entrance exams into the Robinson Battle Academy. And maybe their present occupation was little more than a rebellion against a society that touted the greatness of war.

Being a MechWarrior had never been her dream, though she was sure it had been Joss'. Though she admired her father's history as a Warrior and defender of the FedSun, she wasn't interested in actually fighting any war. War was just something any child of Robinson grew up with, living within the Draconis March.

War was simply an acknowledged way of life.

The total time it took to open, wire and start the car was little more than two and a half minutes. With a thumbs up at her brother waiting in his taxi, Teagen slowly drove the Avanti out of the parking lot and onto the freeway. Joss would stay behind with his light flipped to off-duty so he could watch to see what happened when the owner stepped back outside.

She didn't think this particular snatch would go badly.

But then again, Teagen had been wrong before.



The traffic along Robinson City's major thoroughfare was light heading south where she and the others had their shop. She did notice an increase of presence with the Robinson Police Department, all heading in the opposite direction.

It was nerves that told her their target was KidsWorld.

It was experience that told her to get the damned Avanti off the freeway and away from the notice of the Robinson P.D. as soon as possible. She wasn't sure they were looking for her, but why take chances?

After taking several detours on the secondary roads, into areas where there weren't enough people to notice an Avanti sedan much less care, Teagen pulled the car over onto a service road and phoned Lee.

"Tay," her brother's best friend answered. His usually carefree tone seemed less so to her. "Where are you?"

"Over near the southern loop." She checked her chronometer. It was half past three in the afternoon. She'd been on the road fifteen minutes—not a good thing to do with a stolen car. Luckily no one could readily see her now. "You heard from Joss?"

"Just that you were bringing out a sedan. Mick and I are ready—"

"Lee..." Teagen frowned. Another brisk wind whipped the leave-covered branches of a poplar tree in front of her. The sky had turned a monochromatic gray over the mountains near the spaceport. The spring storm was nearly on the city and the smell of rain

came through the Avanti's open driver's window. "I've got a bad feeling about this snatch. Did Joss tell you it's a military car?"

"Yeah. So? We've stolen military vehicles before. What's the problem?"

The feeling settling in her stomach twisted into a Gordian knot. How could she tell him about a feeling only? Or explain it? Yeah, Lee was right. They'd stolen bigger, more expensive craft from the military before.

But this time...this time something felt...

Well...wrong.

Had it been because the guy'd been wearing a uniform so similar to their father's? That the sight of that very uniform still made her feel warm inside—even if the pension from her father's death in battle had done little to further her or her brother's futures?

No. There wasn't any one thing. It was only her gut, and the knot now permanently entrenched for the long haul.

She gave a short sigh. "Look, do me a favor—just check the vids. Have Mick monitor the local Robinson City P.D. channels."

"Tay...what's up?"

"Trust me on this one. I'm going to try to get the sedan to the shop. But if I can't get through, clear out." With a press of a button she disconnected and slid the small phone into her jacket pocket.

Another gust of wind picked up a stray piece of gold paper and flipped it over the sedan. She pulled the sedan back out into traffic and moved along the lesser roads heading south.

After twenty minutes of inching through earlier than usual rush our traffic—those just getting off of work mingled with those wanting to get home before the storm hit—Teagen repeatedly rubbed her palms on her jeans as her stomach tightened with every minute spent out in the open with a stolen car. Nausea kept her on the edge of her seat as she constantly looked in her rear view mirror. She kept the window down—allowing the cold, stormy air to keep her focused.

She was now three kilometers from the turn that lead to their shop.

The building was nestled in a grove of cypress and pine trees behind the house she and Joss had inherited from their grandparents. Just three more blocks and she would be at the turnoff.

One street away, Teagen encountered a roadblock. She leaned out driver's window.

Flashing pinpoints of red, amber, blue and white formed a line across the entire roadway. Teagen saw men in uniform—both military and police.

Her rational voice said it could be anything. Escaped convict, robbery or license check.

A longer inspection revealed it definitely wasn't a standard license and registration check either. People were being asked to exit their cars.

The military's presence here ruled out armed robbery or escaped convict. That really wasn't their jurisdiction.

Stolen military property was.

Panic threatened to seize her, make her useless. She sat perfectly still, her hands clutching the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white. They had to be here because of the car.

But why? As Lee reminded her, they'd stolen military vehicles before. What made this one so different?

Now was no time to panic. Dark clouds continued to gather above the city, overcasting the bright spring afternoon, now turning to afternoon. The LCD over the radio read nearly four. She was twenty cars back and several men in military uniform with two leashed dogs began walking down the row of cars.

The smart thing to do was to abandon the car. Just get out and leave. She'd used gloves and her hair was pulled up in a baseball cap. There shouldn't be any trace evidence—or at least any easily found.

But then, her exiting and abandoning the exact make and model of the car stolen would red flag her presence even more. Whatever she decided, she needed to do it soon.

No one had come up behind her, so Teagen wasn't boxed into the lane as of yet. She eased the sedan into reverse and backed up slowly, using her rearview mirror as a guide. She glanced at the soldiers. None seemed to notice the car's movement.

To her right was a restaurant. A seafood place she'd never been in. Teagen hated fish of any kind. Still careful—and sweating profusely in the afternoon's cooling breeze—she maneuvered the car into the right lane, and then turned into the parking lot.

Just to make sure her odd movements didn't trigger any patriotic nerves of those still in line—those who might observe her movements as suspicious—Teagen parked the sedan in a slot near the front door, shut off the engine and got out.

A quick glance at the now stalled traffic showed no one was watching her. With another glance at the restaurant, Teagen slid back into the car.

Her phone chirped. "Hey." ID said the caller was Joss.

Thank goodness.

"Teagen," her brother's voice was hushed, a hoarse whisper. "Get rid of that car. Now. Just walk away and get home."

"Where are you?" She kept a close eye on the uniformed boys and girls near the roadblock. It wouldn't do for one of them to hike it into the parking lot. "Why? Is this thing lojacked?"

"No—yea—no... look, the Lieutenant forgot to arm it when he went inside." There was a pause.

"You know this how?"

Another pause. "The police questioned me, searched my taxi. Luckily I'd tossed your binoculars into another car's open window or those alone would've sent me to the station."

"What's up with this car?" She looked around at the dashboard. She opened the glove compartment. Nothing out of the ordinary. Drycleaning ticket. Movie ticket stubs. Teagen looked down at the passenger side floorboard.

French fries here and there. She looked on the floor behind her. There were more french fries, a half eaten cookie, and what appeared to be several fast-food toys. "Is it a prototype of some sort?"

"No," Joss answered. "I don't think it's the car, Teagen. I think it's something he left in the car."

She sat up straight as she recalled watching the young man put something in the trunk.

The briefcase.

Shit.

"Look, Teagen, I'm serious. Leave the car. Wherever you are, just leave it."

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the shop. But I'm not sure they didn't follow me."

Teagen twisted in the seat as she looked back at the roadblock. No uniforms yet.

"Teag." Mick Wu had the phone.

She didn't like Mick very much—trusted him even less. His parents were reportedly Cappellan washouts. Ex-patriots who sold out to the FedSuns years ago. Or so Mick liked to think. That was the story he told everyone.

Teagen had never really cared. It wasn't Mick's heritage that bothered her. It was his personality.

Slime.

"You got this car everyone's so hot after?"

A shiver traveled down her spine. "Yeah. You know that."

"Duke Sandoval's just given a special report on the vids."

Teagen frowned. What would Duke Aaron Sandoval be doing giving a special report—unless they'd finally gone to war?

A small part of her hoped that's what all this was about, some larger, world-shattering event, and not about the theft of one Avanti Sedan.

Or a briefcase that now shined in her memory like a light in a dark cavern.

She couldn't stay here. Not parked this close to a roadblock. Joss was right. Abandon the car and run like hell to the shop.

But curiosity had her in its cursed clutches. Their desperation to retrieve the car had to be due to the briefcase. It was the only thing she could think of that the owner left inside.

Locked in the trunk.

"What's the report about?" she asked.

"Apparently the gridlock traffic is due to some communications technical glitch. Looks like the planet's on a blackout due to it—can't get HPG signals out till they've fixed it. They've also closed the space ports."

Damn.

"This isn't a technical glitch, Teagen. You know that."

She nodded, knowing he couldn't see her. "Yeah, I know that."

"Joss keeps telling me to tell you to ditch the car and get home. Me? I think we need to take a look at it—see what all the fuss is about."

As much as she hated to admit it to herself, Teagen had to agree with him.

Teagen cranked the car. Like most restaurants, she was sure there was a back exit. Some small road that bled out onto a secondary one into the neighborhood behind it. "I'll take a look myself and get back to you."

"Alone?" Mick's voice raised a notch. She wasn't sure how, but he'd managed to sound even slimier. "We split profits evenly, Reeves. Whatever you find we all have a say."

She didn't answer, and instead ended the communication.

Teagen eased the sedan around the back and turned right down a roughly paved road. The sun was gone completely behind the clouds. Lightening cracked the sky before her as she crested a hill that overlooked Robinson City.

There was a small motel near the city's borders, yet tucked far back enough to be out of the city's view. She and Joss used to hide there sometimes, when a particular fence got too risky.

If Joss thought about it, he'd know that's where she'd be. And hopefully he'd leave Mick behind. The situation could get out of hand, if it hadn't already.

Teagen tossed the phone into the passenger seat. If she was careful, and remembered all the back roads her father had taught her, she could easily avoid any more roadblocks.

Once to the motel, she could pop open the trunk and have a look at what was inside. Thunder followed along her path as she thought over what it could be the military was so up in arms about.

Something so important that they would close down the space-ports and cut off communication off-planet.

And something valuable enough to get Mick Wu's undivided interest.



Phobos Motel was little more than a long, narrow building nestled away from the main road near a grove of pecan trees. The rain had just started as Teagen checked in using a phony name, though one Joss would recognize, and cash.

She had to jimmy the trunk lock in the rain. The cold water pelted at her face, whipped about by the wind. She was glad she still wore the cap over her hair. Two jerks and the trunk popped open.

The light from the lid illuminated a good-sized silver briefcase slid to the back against the rear seats. Teagen leaned in, grabbed it. The weight surprised her first and as she moved quickly to the door of her room she guessed it contained a personal computer.

Two low wattage bulbs inside shade-less lamps bathed the room in an eerie, dim light. Sticky, matted green and brown shag covered the floor, and Teagen wasn't sure the brown was part of the original carpet color.

The walls shone oily with faded floral wallpaper, and if she looked at them in the light just the right way, she noticed traces of something splattered across the surface.

After locking and dead-bolting the door, Teagen set the briefcase on the bed in front of her and pulled out her small, leather case. Inside were six silver, slim tools she'd acquired in trade several months ago from a dealer whose latest acquisition belonged to a police officer.

He'd had to unload the car real fast.

Unlocking the thing wasn't as easy as she'd hoped. As the storm rallied on outside, the rain beating against her window, Teagen picked at the lock. It finally gave, but the face of the lock itself was badly damaged.

She doubted the thing would ever lock again.

Inside was a computer, as she'd expected. There were two folders, each with dates on them. On their fronts was the symbol of the Federated Suns, a red sun, yellow burst and sword thrust upward.

A small feeling of pride swelled within her as she thought of her father.

There was a small pistol nestled to the right, still in its holster. She checked the clip and found it fully loaded. There was also a military I.D. Lieutenant Adrian Robertson. He was handsome with blue eyes and high cheekbones. The information said he was married with a small daughter.

Which explained his rush inside of KidsWorld.

And his mistake.

Had it been her birthday? Had he forgotten? And in a rush neglected to set the car's alarm?

Setting aside the I.D., Teagen glanced through the papers in their folders.

Much of the language made little sense. There were numbers, listed regiments, some names she recognized while others she didn't. Battalions and more numbers. And there was the ever-present list of 'Mechs and their Warriors.

Her father's preference had been the *Locust*, able to cover great distances quickly. He'd piloted several others, but he'd always bragged about his pride and joy.

It was the 'Mech he died in during the Fourth War.

With a sigh, Teagen set aside the folders and opened up the computer. It was time to start using those hacking skills she'd been working on.

She gasped aloud when the screen flared from black to on. No security. Not even a thumbprint security pad. The monitor simply came on displaying several open documents.

It was as if he'd simply closed it and allowed it to go to sleep without setting a password before running in the store to get his kid a toy. Teagen was shocked at Lieutenant Robertson's negligence with something that was obviously important.

And yet she applauded him on his dedication to his child. She was sure he was sweating his preoccupation at the moment.

Teagen's gaze tracked downward.

And as she read, her heartbeat increased.

Names came to the surface: Wave One, Four Axes, Operation WINTERSCHNEE. Operation STURMHAMMER.

Years of listening to her father taught her how to read the information before her. Teagen nearly fell off the bed as the realization of what she had in her hands hit her.

These were the detailed plans for the Steiner -Davion attack on the Combine.

April 16, 3039.

Today was April 2.

The first wave was scheduled to hit Vega, An Ting and New Mindham. This was within the first of the Four Axes. Next they would push onward to thirteen more worlds.

Including Atlais.

Nashira.

Thestria.

Operation WINTERSCHNEE, under the command of Nondi Steiner, would hit Alnasi, Alrakis, Altais, Kessel, Konstance and Vega. Operation STURMHAMMER would give way to five more worlds before Wave Two pushed into Al Na'ir, Ashio, Nirasaki, and Murchison.

The Third Wave would concentrate on Altair, Deneb Algedi, Dieron and Styx.

She paged down continuously, scanning the major points, unable to stop reading, and yet knowing somewhere deep down that the more she knew, the more she entrenched herself in danger.

It was nearly eleven before Teagen pushed the computer away and stood. She nearly tripped over the second bed and put her hand to her forehead. With an angry sob she turned on the Vid and found the local news.

"...tonight though many of those stranded in Robinson City are keeping a positive attitude."

The camera switched to a middle-aged couple dressed in matching sets of clothing. Teagen recognized the background as Terminal A at the Robinson City spaceport. How often had she said goodbye to their dad there?

"....Well you know, I believe the Duke's doing what he can," the male was saying, a crease between his thick, dark eyebrows. "It's not his fault those Blake wackos can't keep the HPG units working properly. Seems to me if we'd just stop targeting the Combine and just get rid of ComStar—"

The man was abruptly cut off. The scene switched to a young woman. Blond. High cut skirt. "I'm not upset, not really, though I am a bit concerned that he'd shut down the space ports when the only thing being reported is a glitch in communications." She shrugged straight perfect shoulders. "I think there's something else going on."

The screen switched back to the anchor. Teagen glanced at the open computer, unsure whether to toss it out the window or close it.

"It is rumored that vital, military information was stolen this afternoon, and the Robinson police, in conjunction with the military, are desperate to get it back. We've been given reports of road-blocks and more intensive security checks being implemented throughout the city. In other news relating to the over-priced ticketing at the space—"

Teagen switched it off and hung her head. She was in trouble—damn big trouble. Yeah, they were missing information all right. And if this information got into the wrong hands—Combine operative hands—then things would go to shit really fast.

And it wouldn't matter that Teagen Reeves didn't have anything to do with that, or didn't intend on stealing the information, just the car. If she were found with this information, then not even her brother would ever find her.

Unless they accused her brother as well.

Damn.

She had to get rid of the computer. But how? Where? Teagen grabbed it up and set it back inside the briefcase, along with the papers and I.D. She kept the pistol out, just in case.

She had to have some way to defend herself.

Maybe it was listening too well to her father, but if there were anyone in the city loyal to the Combine, now would be his or her chance to give aid. If they found her and the briefcase, then they'd just as soon kill her and take it.

Tossing it into the dumpster was no good. Neither was wiping the hard drive—if they found it that way then they'd be certain she'd read it. Or sold the information before wiping it.

"I am so fucked," she muttered out loud as she stuck the pistol into the back waistband of her jeans. She had to do something.

Teagen grabbed up the briefcase and went outside. After locking the room, she set it back in the Avanti's trunk and drove to the nearest convenience store.

With cash she bought several small chains and a pad-lock. Luckily the cashier didn't pay attention or didn't care about her purchase. Teagen tossed the items into the trunk with the rest and drove back to the motel.



Her tentative plan was to just lock up the briefcase, wipe it down, and leave it and the car in a parking lot. If the police were looking for the Avanti, surely they'd discover it in a parking lot in a public place and find it and the briefcase.

And maybe they'd see that everything was there—minus the pistol—and not pursue her.

Or at least, she hoped so. Or her plans for a future would come to a rather abrupt end.



Mick and Lee were in her motel room when she got back. Seeing their car parked behind the office and not in front of the room made Teagen suspicious. Why park so far away? The rain had slacked up to a drizzle, and the lot was little more than mud and crunched asphalt.

She left the chains, lock and briefcase in the trunk and went up to her door. It opened before she could slide her key in.

Mick stood there, his hair plastered to the sides of his face. His shirt and jacket were wet as well. Lee sat on the farthest bed, his expression glassy, and his complexion ghost-like.

"Where's Joss?" she asked as Mick stepped back to allow her into her own room. "And how did you get in here?"

"Same trick as usual," Mick said in a sly, ultra-slimy voice. "Cash."

Teagen moved to the far side, near the bathroom. She looked at Lee, but he never looked at her. His hands were behind his back. She looked back to Mick. "You didn't answer my question."

"Did you find anything in the car?" Mick asked.

She narrowed her eyes. "No. Just kid's toys. Mick," she put her hands on her hips, feeling the weight of the pistol at the small of her back. "Where is my brother?"

"Joss isn't coming," Mick said as he reached up and scratched his nose. "He didn't feel up to it."

Lee made a noise. It was then Teagen saw the rope binding his wrists. She moved toward Lee. "What is with the bondage, Mick? And where the fuck is my brother?"

"Stay where you are!" Mick moved quickly, producing a needler from inside his jacket. He aimed it directly at Teagen's chest. She stopped, keeping her back away from Mick.

There was nothing she could do to avoid getting hit with a needler, especially at this close range. Teagen held her hands out to her sides. "What is going on, Mick?"

"Money, Teag. Money. And the promise of a future off this fucking rock." He gave her a slow smile. "I figure with the information I got from Joss, you have the car the military's look'n for, right? And knowing you—you found whatever it is they're looking for inside."

She matched his smile with one of her own, though she didn't feel it. A glance at Lee told her he wasn't feeling well. He was listening to one side, and looked ready to faint. Had Mick shot him? "Is that right?"

"Yeah. And Lee here—when Joss refused to cooperate—he knew about this place. See, he and Joss were really close. And I always knew Lee had a thing for you," he smiled again. "I got friends coming, Teag. And they're gonna pay me a small fortune for what you found."

"When did you decide to strike out on your own, Mick?" Teagen needed to buy time. If Mick had friends coming, and they wanted what she'd found, she was sure they were somehow connected to the Dracs.

And if they were allowed in and got hold of that briefcase, none of them would leave this room alive. And the Steiner-Davion assault would stand in jeopardy.

"No cut, then?" She gave him a sly look. "After all, it was me that took the car."

He held the needler steady. "What did you find? Show me."

"Your buyers didn't tell you?" thinking fast, Teagen reached behind her and put her hand on the pistol.

"No, just that it was something vital to them."

She chewed on her lower lip. More than likely whoever these buyers were, they were guessing at the information the military was tracking down. Which might give her an edge in this situation.

"Okay," she smiled. "The only thing I found in the car was a gun."

"A gun?" He looked confused before noticing her arm movements. He strengthened his aim. "Pull it out slowly—with your left hand."

"Sure, Mick," she pulled the pistol out slowly, cradling it awkwardly with her left hand. Mick knew she was right handed and using the gun with her left would be difficult. "See? This is it. I can only guess the gun is worth something?"

He lowered the needler long enough for her to pop the gun up in the air catch it with her right hand and aimed below Mick's belt. She fired twice, shattering both knees. He yelled out and fell back, the needler bouncing out of his grip.

Quickly she snatched up the needler as Lee came to life. He struggled against the ropes as Teagen moved behind him to unknot them.

"Neat trick," Lee said as he finished loosening the last knot. He pulled hands around front and rubbed his wrists. "Joss is dead."

"I know," and this was the truth. She'd known it the moment she'd seen the car parked away from the door. Joss always parked two spaces to the right of their room—a signal that it was he and all was clear.

Teagen just didn't want to believe it.

Mick writhed on the floor, tears streaming from his eyes. His moans were going to attract attention if the gunshots hadn't already.

"Who did he call?" Teagen asked as she grabbed a towel and started wiping things down.

"Some friends of his," Lee took the needler from her and pulled a small bag of small blue pills from his jacket. She recognized them as a popular upper. He dumped them out on the floor beside Mick. "A little insurance so the police suspect his injury comes from a bad deal."

Nice thinking. Teagen shoved the stolen pistol back into her waistband and carefully gathered up the spent bullets, prying one from the doorframe with a pocket knife. She then gathered up the casings and motioned for Lee to follow her out the door.

Lee remained standing over the moaning and writhing Mick. It was then Teagen realized she'd nearly severed his left calf at the

knee. Mick's foot was turned backwards where the force of his fall had twisted it.

"Lee, we have to go. Someone had to have called in the gunshots."

He nodded absently. He clutched the needler tightly in his right hand. "He killed Joss. It's not right he lives, Teag. He was going to betray us," he pulled his gaze away from Mick to her. "I don't know what it is you found, but if he got his hands on it, he was going to betray us all."

"Lee..." Mick said in a tight voice. "I can make a deal...I can get us all off planet...we don't have to—"

Teagen jumped when Mick's blood splattered across her face, each drop a tiny warm pressure against her skin. Lee had fired the needler directly into Mick's face. Skin, cartilage, and blood exploded over Lee, as well as the floor and surrounding furniture.

Lee shoved the needler into the back of his pants. "Let's go."

Teagen remained where she was. Lee put a hand on her shoulder, then put himself between her and the body. He tucked the index finger of his right hand beneath her chin and lifted her face. She locked eyes with him as she started to shake. "We couldn't allow him to live. He would've ratted us out. But you're right, we have to go now. We have to get to Joss' body." Lee swallowed, the rims of his eyes red. "We have to bury him."

Yes. They should go. Mick killed Joss. He deserved to die.

She could almost hear the distant sound of a siren.

If they could hold out till after April 16, none of it would matter. The war against the Combine would finally begin.

She would find her brother's body, and then she would bury him beside the grave of her father.

Once in the Avanti, they drove several kilometers to an all night diner. She parked the car in the back and the two walked silently into the deserted diner.

The floors were dingy white and the bar was chrome and red tile. The stools had lost most of their seat covering, as had the booths. The smell of grease thickened Teagen's stomach as she slid into the booth and looked out at the dark night.

At the traffic along the highway moving, like strings of precious jewels.

Lee told her what had happened. How Mick had knocked him in the head and tied him up in the back room. Mick had then shot Joss in the thigh and questioned him while he slowly bled to death.

Lee knew the code for parking, but he'd lied to Mick. So Teagen was forewarned.

Teagen decided then not to tell Lee what she'd learned. She only told him that there was a briefcase in the trunk—one that had important information on it that couldn't get into enemy hands.

It had to go back to the military.

"And that's your plan?" Lee asked as he picked at a plate full of fries. "Just drop it off and hope someone finds it?"

She shrugged. "I don't know what else to do."

He looked about the place. "I have an idea."

She watched him stand and talk to the waitress. Money changed hands and he disappeared behind the bar. Ten minutes passed before he returned, a single sheet of white paper in his hand.

He carefully laid it on the table beside her untouched food.

Teagen read the note carefully:

I may be a thief, but I am a patriot too. I return this to you, together with my assurance that I have not copied or passed on the information it contains.

She looked up at him over the note. "You think this'll work?"

"Just put that pistol back in the briefcase with the computer. We've got a clip back at the house that'll replace the spent bullets. You picked them all up, right?"

She nodded. The R.C.P.D. may not investigate the death of a drug dealer, but the military would certainly examine the gun, and know it was recently fired. And if they found Joss' body, things could get even worse

Lee continued. "We leave the car somewhere public, like you said, and then we phone it in." He punctuated his next words with finger taps to the scratched tile tabletop. "We make sure they find it."

The waitress set the bill on their table and Teagen reached for her wallet. As always, the flap opened to a picture of her father instead of her I.D. He was there, dressed in his shorts and boots, his coolant vest over his shoulders. Behind him were the lower legs and feet of his 'Mech, the *Locust*.

She took out the photo and held it up, thinking of her brother. Teagen flipped the picture around and read the back out loud. "To my joy, Teagen Molly. May the flame of the sword of the Federated Suns stand tall."

"Your father was a patriot, wasn't he?"

Teagen nodded slowly. Though she'd never wanted to fight, she knew in her heart on this day she had fought a grander war on a smaller scale.

She didn't pilot a 'Mech, nor had she donned a uniform. She did believe in her home, and in her world.

After replacing her photo, she paid the bill. On the way back into town she turned to Lee. "Ever wanted to just go somewhere? Off of Robinson?"

"Yeah. You got an idea?"

"My dad had a place on Mallory's World. Been thinking about technical school." A war was coming. There was little time to prepare. "Been thinking of honing up on my mechanical skills."

"No one can disassemble an engine like you," he grinned but never took his gaze from the road. "Want to hop over there. Just us?"

"Yeah," she settled back in the cushy leather chair. "Oh, and I think you should call in the anonymous tip."

"Any reason why?"

"No," she shook her head. "I just like the idea of being the silent patriot."

Lee laughed. It was a nice sound. "A patriotic thief. Now who's ever going to remember that?"

The End