

# Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 1 Number 8

Page 1 – THE USUAL SKEPTICS by Melodie Corrigan. Melodie Corrigan is an eclectic Canadian writer and a nature lover with strong family and community ties. Her stories have appeared in *Litro UK*, *FreeFall*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Six Minute Magazine*, *Mouse Tales*, *Subtle Fiction*, *Emerald Bolts*, *Earthen Journal*, *Switchback*, and *The Write Time at the Write Place*. Find her at ([www.melodiecorrigan.com](http://www.melodiecorrigan.com)).

Page 5 – THE PRICE OF OIL by Liz Sawyer. She writes, “I have had other stories published involving the protagonists of this story. I am married, with several cats and no kids. I am also retired Air Force and a recently retired paralegal residing in Northern California. The first 'Ti and Ian' story, “Change of Plans,” will be published in *4 Star Stories* in the next month or two. The second, “Beginnings,” was published in *Nebula Rift* in April, 2014 (it may still be on-line in the archives); the third and fourth stories are out for consideration. (“Oil” is number 5, just to keep 'em in order).”



# THE USUAL SKEPTICS

by MELODIE CORRIGALL

“Before we were asked to choose months, we never fought,” Maggie said, pummeling the bread dough and whipping it around to give the other side a whack.

“Bullshit,” her husband replied. He grabbed the newspaper in an attempt to exit the ring before the bell for the third round. In their years together, after a few determined punches, they had always found a way to compromise. This time there was more at stake than in any previous match.

“Never fought like this,” his wife called after him, wiping flour from her eyelids and tossing the dough back on the counter. “The kids aren’t speaking to us and every time I step out the door someone pulls me aside to promote their favourite month.”

“They don’t want to miss your baked goods,” he called back.

“They can buy some to freeze for later when we share a month.”

Wilbur poked his head back around the corner. “I’m not giving up February,” he said. “I won’t give up snow.”

“Go to the indoor winter park they promised if you want snow,” his wife said. “I’m sick of shoveling and sliding about in it. I’m sticking to summer months.”

“Yeah, who’d want to miss mosquitoes and black flies?”

“I’ll buy a gauze tent.”

The moment the front door slammed shut, Maggie leaned under the counter and pulled out the sherry bottle. She’d bought drinking sherry—

Australian—for cooking. Plopping her ample bottom on the kitchen stool, she poured six ounces into her measuring cup and sighed.

Initially, Maggie had been optimistic about the research project. But her husband, who had an annoying habit of being right, had been skeptical about the “chance of a lifetime” from the get-go. She now recognized there were problems but still the chance to choose which of the twelve months you wanted in your year, with the possibility of repeats, five Julys, two Augusts etc., made her glow. Finally, she had power over her destiny.

Maggie loved summer and would have blossomed in some southern clime if she’d had the chance. There was no such thing as too hot—well perhaps hell was too hot but being a non-believer, that didn’t concern her.

She didn’t waver in her choice of months. The day she and Wilbur had signed on, she’d made her list: two Junes and Septembers, and four Julys and Augusts. Ditch December, she hated Christmas.

No sooner had she set her pen down, than Wilbur sailed onto the porch, face as proud as a maple waffle, and dropped down his list, with not one summer month.

“What’s this about?” she said. “What about the cottage?”

“Forget the cottage,” her husband had crowed, doing a little two-step. “The cottage is nothing but sweeping sand off the porch, putting up screens, being eaten alive by mosquitoes, and hearing your sister brag about her wretched

kids.”

“They aren’t wretched.”

“No but her bragging is.”

Now, after three months of talk, try as they might, she and Wilbur could not agree and tonight was the final town meeting. By midnight, all consent forms with selected months had to be in the Company’s hands. Lakeville, which had never been a fast moving community, was spinning.

As usual she and Wilbur insisted they wouldn’t budge an inch but she knew in the end their love would trump sun or snow. Hopefully, their compromises wouldn’t result in them only being together for half the year.

When Mayor Tipper first announced that Lakeville had been selected for the Months of Choice research project, the three general responses were skepticism, delight and, from a few old timers, fear.

Having experienced many dashed hopes from other can’t fail projects some Lakeville residents like Wilbur were skeptical about deals too good to miss. They circled the idea like dogs around a suspicious bone, speculating why Lakeville had been chosen.

Since the highway bypass had been built ten years earlier, only relatives and salesmen turned off to visit the village. The library and post office were long gone and the general store had been downgraded to a couple of counters in the gas station, which eventually had also disappeared.

A few frail voices chirped out their fear about the proposed Month’s project. As Mavis from the feed store put it, “We’re rats being led into a black hole with no up elevator.” This got some laughs. “Black holes don’t have elevators,” Arnold Buckle shouted, “We’ll use a ladder.”

A representative from the Company dazzled the crowd with his sound and light show in support of Mayor Tipper’s announcement. The

Company man explained that the research project (all hush hush) offered everyone over 18 living in a contained area the opportunity to choose which months they wanted to live in for the next and subsequent years.

Once chosen it was “a life sentence” as Wilbur, who always read the small print, put it. Unless they all chose the same months, Lakeville residents would never all be together again. “Not all bad news,” Maggie admitted thinking of Arnold Buckle.

It was obvious from the get-go, residents would not all choose the same months. Even families could not agree, and struggled between their personal preferences and the possible separation from loved ones. Teenagers wailed about not having a vote on the most important decision of their lives.

Thirty-six people took the limited time offer and went through the painless Erase Short Term Memory session followed by relocated to another town—like in a TV program. Those who signed on to the Erase session, including Bill Buttons from the computer store, weren’t heard from again. Maggie hoped things had turned out well for them. Rumor had it another seven had escaped under the wire, minds intact.

From the moment the town signed on (\$500 sign up bonus per person), from dawn to dusk, choice of months was on everyone’s minds. Common wisdom was that although July could be muggy and buggy, it would be popular with everyone (except a few diehards like Wilbur) and that February, which was cold and dark, would be as quiet as the grave.

At the initial community meeting, while unable to reveal the name or location of the first research town, the Company representative assured Lakeview residents the chosen community was reveling in the experience: 79% considered it 8 on the 1 to 10 scale.

Lakeview residents had to take his word for it because they couldn't talk to anyone from that town. The project was top secret, reminding Maggie of reports of alien sightings. You suspected there was something to them but government experts insisted they were not serious. Still all but a few naysayers had signed on the dotted line and fences had been erected around the town and outgoing e-mail blockages were in place "until everything is settled."

With the promises of vacations to Disneyland or to a country of choice, (you wondered where they got the money), sound and light shows, lectures and parties, the council and the Company got the town onside. After signing on and separating the wheat from the chaff, as Wilbur put it, those in the running had eight weeks to decide on months, sign on the dotted line and then it would be out of their hands.

Those who had opted to stay hunkered down and considered their options. Until autumn's chilly winds forced the windows shut, you could hear the conversations build into heated discussions, then, at most houses, boil into out-and-out battles. Those planning marriages were having second thoughts and those who were married, were checking out divorce lawyers.

Maggie's sister, who coached the girl's basketball team worried, "We'll never win the provincial cup with players coming and going."

"Forget it," Maggie said. "We won't be able to leave town anyhow after the schedule is in place." In the excitement that was part of the small print that folks forgot.

"It'll be like in Brigadoon," Maggie's mother said. "Everyone dancing and singing.

"That was a film." Maggie protested. "No



amount of changing months is going to make this town sing.

“I know,” her mother said crossly. “But when they made the movie they couldn’t imagine the technology we have now.”

“So?”

“Maybe there are singing inserts they can put in people’s heads.”

Finally, it was the big night. Everyone was as edgy as game show contestants. Maggie was putting the last touches on a family favourite—buffalo stew—when her son Terry threw open the kitchen door, “Mom. We’re cut off.”

“Muddy shoes,” her mother shouted. “I just washed the floor.”

“Forget mud,” her daughter said, shoving her brother out of the way. She shook her I-pad at her mother. “We can’t get on line. They’ve cut us off.”

“Nonsense. Something’s wrong with your I-pad.”

The noise of a pounding human herd galloping down the street drowned their discussion. “They’ve put a barrier up outside town,” Mr. Beanman shouted.

The die was cast. At the meeting that evening, there was a riot of discussion. “Why didn’t you tell us?” they cried. The Mayor tried to field questions; he was on his own. The Company representative had excused himself on the grounds that he was making a presentation at lucky town Number Three.

Finally, the meeting hall door was locked and folks shuffled to their homes, Wilbur and Maggie hand in hand. After drinking their customary hot chocolate, they climbed into bed and made love, still not revealing if and how they had compromised.

The next morning, Lakeville was rewarded with its five minutes of fame. From Iceland to the Bahamas, people heard about the mysterious

meteorite that had hit the town leaving nothing but a black hole.

The Prime Minister returned from his holiday in Crete to respond to the emergency. On a national broadcast, he made sorry noises and urged people not to go near the contaminated site. The leader was effusive in his thanks to their partner, The Concept Company, for volunteering to clear the area as part of their Healthy Earth Initiative. The media dropped the story after three days and the usual skeptics suggested alien involvement. ❖

# THE PRICE OF OIL

by LIZ SAWYER

They had taken a vacation, sun and sand to replace the turmoil of the months following the death of the Commander of the Outworld Security and Intelligence Agency. Or, rather, the circumstances surrounding his death. They enjoyed three days before the message arrived, sending Ti Stuart and Ian Makanda, the newly appointed Commander and Vice-Commander of OSIA, back to work.

The computer's alarm caught Ian about to cook breakfast in their spacecraft's galley. He scanned the automatically decrypted message, then read it again, slowly. He returned to the galley, turned off the stove—he was a gourmet cook, and insisted on the old-fashioned equipment—emptied the pot of coffee, and prepared a new one. While it brewed, he used the computer to run some calculations and send a message. As soon as the coffee was ready, he poured a cup, and took it into the bedroom.

*“Wake up, love, duty calls,”* he sent through their mental bond.

Ti opened one emerald green eye as he activated the wall screen, the second as he sat on the bed next to her, and offered the cup. She scooted up, shoved her shoulder-length curly red hair away from her face with both hands, then brought them down to envelope Ian's around the cup. Her head

raised as his lowered.

“Come back to bed,” she murmured against his lips. Her hand lifted, caressed the full beard framing his sharp jaw, thumb rubbing next to his Roman nose and mustache, and beneath one of the sapphire blue eyes she could drown in.

“Like to, but—” He moved the cup closer.

Ti caught the aroma, inhaled deeply and let a smile play around her mouth, rounding the sharp cheekbones.

“Solatteria Blue. What's the catastrophe this time?” was asked only half-facetiously.

Ian's smile was for the question. The Blue was the rarest coffee in the galaxy, saved for special occasions.

“Read the message.” He shifted slightly as Ti's attention turned to the screen.

Her eyes widened, and she forgot the coffee. “One oil refinery destroyed, another threatened and...am I reading that right?” Incredulity filled her voice. “The first threat gave a day and time for destruction?”

Ian nodded, summarized the rest of the message. “The refinery was scoured by the local explosive ordnance team the day before, locked, and guarded. It exploded exactly as specified.”

“Where'd it happen? Spindletop.” Ti shook her head. “Not familiar. The next

threat's also given a date and time."

"I had the computer calculate the travel time between here and there. Next TOD's in four days." Her mental "*Huh?*" brought the explanation of "Time of destruction. We can arrive with a few hours to spare if we leave now. I've alerted the tower to send the pre-departure team. I also sent a message to Spindletop giving our estimated arrival. I'll start the departure checklist, you..."

"...secure everything. Move so I can get up."

Ian took the untouched cup, let his hand linger on hers before he stood. "The sacrifices I make for the job."

Ti grinned as he left the bedroom, then she was up, tossing jeans and a sweater onto her lithe body. She didn't bother with shoes, as her petite size—5'4" without the usual stilettos—didn't matter in private. What did matter at that moment was making sure everything was secure aboard the *Calypso*. A few loose items in the bedroom and bath waited until she finished her morning ablutions. She ignored the small gym, as they hadn't used it, and went into the lounge, eyes scanning as she walked through. All bottles and glasses were protected in the cabinet behind the bar; the bench was fastened to the piano bolted to the far bulkhead. She scooped several pillows off the bolted-down couch and chairs, and tossed them into an equally anchored chest, while a vid case went into a cabinet, the door locked behind it.

Stopping at the dual computer stations, the separation between lounge and galley, Ti

sent a message notifying OSIA headquarters of their destination. The message from Spindletop had bypassed HQ on a special frequency every Outworld leader had, but rarely used. She also made sure both chairs were locked in place.

Final stop was the galley, where she freshened the coffee cup Ian had left on the counter. After a deep drink, Ti secured the almost-never-empty coffee pot, returned the breakfast items to their compartments in the refrigerator, the pan to its cabinet, and made sure the stove was off. A final scan of the areas and, "*All secure,*" she told Ian.

*"Dep team's arrived. Enjoy your coffee."*

Ti grinned, took the cup, and sat at her computer. She'd use the time needed to get the *Calypso* ready for departure to start researching Spindletop.

A gentle movement of the craft startled Ti just as "*Strap in,*" came from Ian. She grabbed for the cup sitting on the desk, surprised to find it empty. A glance at the computer's clock told her nearly an hour had passed.

Moments later, "*We're cleared for priority departure,*" caused Ti to tighten her seat belt.

The take-off was, as always, smooth and fast, with Ian angling the craft sharply up, and out of the atmosphere. Five minutes later they were in hyperspace. Ian walked into the lounge-galley from the cockpit.

"What've you found out?"

Instead of answering, Ti just gazed at the tall—6'2"—leanly muscular man wearing jeans, and a tee shirt. She kept the thought of how lucky she was behind her personal mental shield.

Ian Makanda, gourmet cook, jazz pianist, and computer genius. A quiet man, he had twice saved her life, had killed more than once, and not just in hot blood. He stood as straight now as when he had been a Terran Fleet fighter pilot. The widow's peak of black hair had grown longer since his forced retirement from the Fleet, now just brushing his collar, and trimmed with silver at the temples. He was an empath and telepath, and they shared a mental bond.

A half-smile lifted one side of Ian's mouth as he stopped beside Ti, let a hand curve around her neck. With her hair in a ponytail, she didn't appear half as dangerous as he knew she was.

He had watched her kill two men barehanded, receive a serious knife slash to the arm, then prepare to take on a third man—him. He had discovered she was a telepath when he turned her over to the drug dealer she was trying to take down. Three years earlier. They had been together ever since.

"Well?" he asked.

She tilted her head so as to capture his hand as she looked up. "Just admiring the pilot."

The half-smile became a full one. "Got four days to discuss the message."

"To quote a certain someone, like to, but—" She lifted her head, continued speaking as Ian picked up her cup, walked into the galley, grabbed his cup, poured them both the rest of the Blue, and started another pot of coffee, regular this time. "Not much on Spindletop. It's a small desert system. Only export's the oil they sell to the Fleets and Earth. They also trade for grains,

meats, and special desert clothing. Terraforming didn't work, no one's sure why. The message said we'd be briefed on a possible reason for the threats when we arrived. I did find rumors of a new refining process, but there've been such rumors off and on for years."

Ti sat back, accepted the newly-filled cup, and savored a swallow as Ian sat at his station opposite her. "There's something about those threats. Why would someone be that...." She shook her head. "I don't know. Arrogant? Stupid?" She saw the expression on Ian's face, and lowered the cup. "What?"

"I'm not sure." Both words had stirred a memory. When it surfaced, he tried to push it back. "A possibility," he finally said, knowing that Ti needed the information even if it turned out to be irrelevant. "McBride." He referred to their assignment at the Edwards Terran Fleet Test Flight Facility on Earth two years earlier, when they had gone undercover to stop the sabotage of the Cobra, the Fleets' newest fighter. McBride had been one of the six saboteurs arrested. "I was hacking into the access codes, carefully because I expected at least passive alarms. There weren't any, either active or passive, and I remember thinking that the saboteur was either arrogant, or stupid, or both. McBride was both."

"Agreed, since he's serving a life sentence in a Terran prison. You also said he claimed he was working for TATT. Yes, I know." She raised a hand, forestalling Ian's protest. "You said it was crap, that the Terrans Against the Treaty wouldn't be satis-



fied with sabotage when they could blow things up, the bigger, the better. Like last year, when Torin claimed he was acting on behalf of TATT, then blew up the main Boeing plant producing the Cobras.” Ti had to stop while she blinked back the tears. Torin had been OSIA’s commander, had recruited Ti. “I knew Torin. He was no more a terrorist than I am, so why did he make such a claim? Terran Security said it was crap, and that wasn’t just to counter the fact that it happened on live, Earth-wide vids.” Ti leaned forward, her gaze holding Ian’s. “You included McBride’s claim in your report, with your belief it was crap. It wasn’t in Security’s summary, and it should’ve been. Even if everybody thought it was crap, it should’ve been investigated. It hasn’t. Now Spindletop. One refinery destroyed, a threat to destroy another. Sounds like TATT to me.” She sat back, drank some coffee.

“They were violent,” Ian agreed, “but the leaders were arrested fifty years ago. Any still alive are in prison. Most of their followers either died while resisting arrest, or are also in prison. This is an attempt by a few Terran fanatics to get the terms of the Treaty changed when it comes up for renewal in a few years, and that’s all.” He spoke harshly because he was no longer sure he was right.

“The Terran Uprising, 2114. It took Earth five years to recover from the ‘attempts by a few Terran fanatics’ to change things.” The words were softly spoken, but they struck Ian as hard as Ti had meant them to. She shifted, straightened in her

chair, her voice becoming brisk. “You could be right. After all, a lot of Terrans call the Treaty charity, and hate the Outworlds because of that. Maybe they’re claiming it’s all a plot by some Outworld fanatics to turn friendly Outworlds against Earth.” Ti shook her head, not needing to tell Ian just how few friends Earth really had among the Outworlds. “It could be a lot of things. One thing it isn’t is pirates. Trade ships, yes, but why would pirates destroy the source they prey on? That leaves who? You said ‘most’ of the followers were arrested. It’s been fifty years, time enough for them to recruit, reorganize, and reemerge.”

Ian knew Ti was right. He couldn’t close his mind to the possibility of TATT reemerging just because it seemed impossible. “It is unlikely to be pirates. At least, the pirates you and I are familiar with.”

Ti nodded agreement. As a Terran Fleet fighter pilot, Ian had flown against pirates for twenty-five years while she had investigated—“Damn!”

Ian raised an eyebrow.

“Stacey. She’d know about any new pirate activity. Let me draft a message, then we’ll drop out long enough to send it.”

Stacey Dana was head of The Source, a quasi-legal outfit that gathered and sold information about anything to anyone willing to pay. In a universe with computer technology that had been restricted until recently, and was still limited, The Source thrived. Stacey, and Ti were close friends.

“It could make us late to Spindletop,” Ian warned.

“I think it’s worth it.”

“Make it quick,” Ian said as he headed to the cockpit.

Five minutes later, he took the craft out of hyperspace for the seconds Ti needed to send the message from her computer. The hyperspace computer told Ian their arrival at Spindletop had been delayed by four hours, but they would still arrive before the second threat’s TOD.

During the next four days, they researched Spindletop, TATT, and pirates. Their findings were reviewed over Ian’s lasagna supper the night before their arrival at Spindletop.

“Pirate attacks are up throughout the Orion Spur,” Ti began, after savoring several bites. “Mostly against small systems whose economies are heavily dependent on trade. A couple have been so badly hurt they’ve had to get loans from the Swiss Bank until they recover. But no attacks against the systems themselves, just the trade ships.”

“TATT’s leaders are still in prison,” Ian said after a sip of wine. “Their families, those who were identified anyway, are being monitored by Terran Security. Some just disappeared. Most probably changed their names. I managed to trace a few.” He shook his head. “Some people have no imagination. For instance, Lucas Johns became John Lucas. Last heard of on Mariah VII.”

Ti’s fork stopped halfway to her mouth. She carefully lowered it back to the plate while keeping her gaze on Ian. “Home to one of the most fanatical pirate groups around. That is not good.” She sensed reticence in Ian’s mind. “You have something worse.”

Ian returned his fork to his plate. “Maybe. Just found it this afternoon, can’t confirm it yet. But—I started wondering, and accessed the records at Alcatraz.”

The ancient Earth prison had been reopened specifically to house the leaders of TATT. Security had been increased to such a degree that it was rumored to include an electronic net encircling the island underwater fifty yards off-shore, and a force field covering the island itself. True or not, access was only through one very narrow corridor, and strictly enforced, as one tourist boat had discovered moments before it exploded, killing 175 people.

Terran Security had not apologized. “An escape?”

Ian shook his head. “A cessation of entries. Each inmate’s record is detailed down to the time they go to sleep, and the time they wake up. What they eat at meals.” He gave Ti a quick cynical smile. “Even the times they use the john.” The smile disappeared. “Four died there. Dates, times of death, causes, everything recorded. There are six where the record just stops. Same date, same time.” He picked up his wine glass, kept his gaze on it. “If it were me, I’d’ve continued the entries, varying them a bit, then kill them off. Different dates, different reasons, anything but the abrupt stops. Then again, the on-line security was pretty good. I guess no one anticipated the use of Oseeah’s command codes.” He swallowed some wine, replaced the glass on the table, and smiled at Ti. “Which I only needed for the last wall.”

Ti returned the smile, lifted her wine

glass, and saluted Ian in appreciation of his simple statement. The smile disappeared as she sipped her wine, and considered his words. “Six TATT leaders unaccounted for. They could be dead under circumstances nobody wants investigated. They could’ve been transferred.” She stopped when Ian shook his head.

“No new inmates, individually or in any grouping, into any Terran prison during the six months before or after the cessation,” he told her. “Same for any prison in the Sol System or on any planet even remotely friendly to Earth.”

“Their families?”

“Traced three. Everyone’s where they’re supposed to be. The others had already dropped out of sight.”

“Stace told me once she hadn’t had any luck getting anyone onto Mariah VII. I wonder if she’d be willing to try again. I’ll send a message soon’s we get to Spindletop.”

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Spindletop’s Chief of Police, Naomi Jackson, and the Chief of Refinery Security, Michael Chambers, met them at the spaceport.

“Competent, but nervous,” was what Ti’s limited empathy sensed from each of them.

“Nervousness is normal, given the circumstances. But there’s something else about Chambers. He’s worried about something,” Ian added, knowing Ti relied on the strength of his empathy when they met strangers, especially in situations like this one.

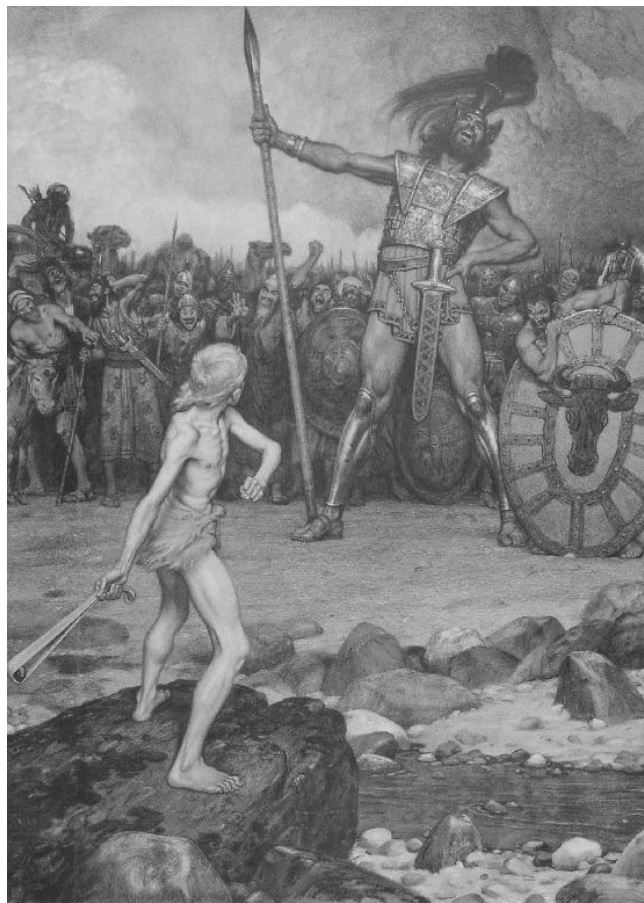
“Cut it close,” Jackson said after the introductions, “but on the right side. We’ll go to Midessa, that’s the targeted refinery,

brief you on everything when we get there. Skimmer’s over here. By the way,” she gave Ti and Ian a wry grin, “welcome to Spindletop.”

She led them to the police skimmer, made sure they were settled, Ti in front with her, and Ian and Chambers behind them. Notifying Tower, she took the skimmer airborne.

“The refinery’s half an hour from here,” Jackson said once they were in the air lanes, and she had given the autopilot their destination. She then unlatched her seat, and swiveled so she was facing Ti. “Closer than the others, but not close enough to endanger the town. We’ve got—”

“Dispatch to Chief,” came over the comm. “Explosions at Midessa. Some emergency equipment already on scene, waiting



for the evac and shut down, more responding.”

“Heading straight there. Keep me advised,” Jackson ordered as she swung the seat around, latched it, accelerated, and activated the skimmer’s lights and sirens, all in one seemingly continuous movement.

“Evac?” Ti asked.

“TOD was 4:00 p.m. It’s only,” Jackson glanced at the in-dash display, “1:30. There was a full shift working til two, when we were going to evacuate. Nearly 500 people.” Her voice turned defensive. “With Powell gone, we have to make up the shortfall, so Midessa’s been running around the clock. Always personnel in there, including triple security. Since Powell blew up exactly as scheduled, it was decided it would be safe enough. They were all told to keep their eyes open.”

“Chambers is angry,” Ian told Ti.

“Something else, maybe—no, can’t get it. Too much emotion from him, and Jackson’s adding to it.”

“It’s okay,” Ti replied, knowing how difficult it still was for Ian to open himself to others’ emotions. “Nothing to be done now, anyway. Let’s see what happens after we arrive.”

What happened after they reached the Disaster Command Post, saw the destruction, and got confirmation of the mounting casualty figures, was that Chambers led them to an out-of-the-way spot, and confirmed Ian’s empathy.

“I know who it is. At least, I think I do,” Chambers began, his voice full of controlled anger. “Up to Powell, I thought Adams just wanted to take my slot when I

retired. When I found him in Powell’s main processor after the bomb squad’d been through, he was doing what I was; the place was my responsibility, and I just wanted to double check. We left together, and he was with me ‘til it exploded. Something about his reaction bothered me, so I dug into his background.”

Chambers shifted his gaze from Jackson to Ti and Ian. “He’s been part of security for five years, bright, dependable. I promoted him when my assistant was killed in a skimmer accident a year ago. I didn’t find anything. I had no grounds, no *proof!*” Chambers stopped, took a deep breath before continuing. His head raised, eyes looking past them at the flames rising from the ruins.

“He’s been all over Midessa since the threat. I followed him, tried not to make it obvious I suspected him, hoped he’d slip up. He was supposed to stay here while I went to the port. Commander here says he left just after I did.”

Jackson relieved Chambers, then ordered a quiet search for Adams, and his skimmer. She, Ti, and Ian started for Adams’ residence, when Dispatch again interrupted their plans.

“Permian Security just acknowledged the alert,” Dispatch advised. “Adams left there about ten minutes ago. Told Chief Watson he wanted to check the place himself, make sure it was okay. He spent about half an hour, mostly in the main processing unit, by himself. He told the Chief it looked fine, and he was going on to Drake. Chief wants to know if he should send his people

in, search the place, and Drake's Chief wants to know if he should take Adams when he arrives or—

"Tell Drake to do nothing! We're enroute!" Only the terseness of Jackson's words betrayed her anger. "Tell Permian's Chief to empty the place and secure the unit, nothing more! Alert Lt. Williams, have him deploy EOD to Permian, and meet us at the hanger." She slewed the skimmer into a tight curve—

*"Adams is Assistant Chief of Refinery Security," Ian reminded Ti, "so, since all four of us should be at Midessa, his checking Permian is reasonable. If he isn't aware Chambers suspected him, he'd set explosives at Permian, do the same at Drake, and get the hell off planet before blowing them both. If we beat him to Drake, and he sees us, he could suicide in, setting off Permian using a dead man's switch." Ian's colloquial name for a specific type of remote control make Ti shiver. "That's what I'd do. In fact, I wonder if he used a remote for Midessa. He could've been monitoring Tower traffic, knew we'd arrived. His own form of welcome. Something else I'd've done. If he's allowed to land, he'd have the remote for Permian with him, could still set it off before he's taken. Might save Drake, but—"*

*"Sometimes I hate your practicality. Run Adams' background. Anything related to TATT. Start figuring out how to jam his transmissions, and take control of his skimmer. And check out that skimmer accident."*

Ian touched his wristband, connected to their ship, activated the mini holo-keyboard and holo-stylus, and began working.

—straightened the skimmer, accelerated,

and hit the siren. "Drake's two hours from here," Jackson stated. "just over three from Permian. We can get there first, take him as he lands." She activated the autopilot, then released her seat to swing around and face them both.

"No," Ti disagreed, also unlatching and turning her seat. "We need to take him before he gets close to Drake. We also need to take him without giving him a chance to remotely set off any explosives he might've left at Permian. Ian'll handle that.

"Who's Lt. Williams, and what's at this hanger we're headed for?"

Jackson recognized Ti's question as a polite way to avoid questions that would not be answered, as well as a diversion from the technology that had only recently become available to everyone.

"Williams commands the Explosive Ordnance Disposal and Tactical Weapons Teams. After the threats started, he had the strike transport out, TWT training almost daily, EOD searching for everything from nitro to nukes. Got to be a joke after awhile, 'specially when nothing happened. Then the threat to Powell arrived. After the place blew, Williams swore EOD had scoured it." Jackson sighed. "The plan today had been to evacuate Midessa a couple hours before the deadline, and have EOD go again. Maybe they'll get lucky at Permian."

Reaching the spaceport's restricted area, Ti and Ian followed Jackson aboard a large transport, and into what could only be the operations room. Several people were gathered around a table with a hologram of a

refinery shimmering in its center. One of the men straightened, walked over, glanced at Ti and Ian, and spoke to Jackson.

“We can leave immediately. I have some preliminary plans to take down Adams and—”

“Lieutenant Williams.” Ti’s words were very quietly spoken. “The President requested OSIA investigate the sabotage. That means I am in command. Let me make one thing very clear. I want Adams alive. If it becomes necessary, shoot to wound only.”

Williams turned to Jackson, then, when his superior did not speak, back to Ti. “Yes, ma’am,” he snapped.

“Order a course and speed that puts us ahead of Adams, but keeps us outside his radar range.”

That had been more than an hour earlier.

Ti had stayed out of everyone’s way, watching the oft-practiced routine turning

into efficient action. Now, she looked one last time out the viewport at the smoke on the horizon, then turned, their bond sending her gaze directly to Ian. He was seated at a computer terminal, blue eyes darting between the holo-board and -screen where his coding appeared. He suddenly raised a hand, swiped it across a line onscreen, his mouth tightening in irritation, then bent his head back to the board. She knew a frown had appeared, his jaw tightened. He was trying to find a way to jam the transmissions of the skimmer they were following. A routine hack job for Ian, except this time he not only had to do it without alerting the pilot of that skimmer, he also had to be able to take over the controls if Adams refused to land.

They needed both before the skimmer got too close to the Drake refinery. They couldn’t risk Adams suiciding into that refinery and, using Ian’s worse-case scenario,



setting off via a remote trigger the explosives they had to assume he'd planted earlier at the Permian refinery.

Ti sent Ian a mental caress, then turned to where Chief Jackson sat on a nearby bench, leaning back against the transport's bulkhead, eyes closed. Jackson's face seemed to have more lines than a few hours earlier, her brown hair a few more gray strands. Ti sympathized, knowing the past year had seen her own red curls deepen to auburn, her green eyes acquire their own lines, and wished there was some other way to get the information she needed. But there wasn't, so .... She strode across the room.

"Why?" Ti asked as she sat next to Jackson.

"Huh?" Jackson jerked, eyes blinking before settling on Ti. "I'm sorry, what ...?"

"Spindletop's not that big, so why are you being targeted?"

"Never did get that briefing that would've answered your questions." Jackson lifted a coffee cup from the holder on the table beside her, sipped, then cradled the cup between her hands. "It's not the oil itself, but how it's produced. Our scientists finally found a faster, cheaper way to process crude oil. Yes, I know, there've been rumors before, but this really works. Problem is, it only works here. Something indigenous to the planet. Same reason terraforming didn't work. I'm no scientist. What I've been told, refining takes several different steps. The new process eliminates some of those steps, saving time and money, and still produces exceptionally pure oil, not only what the Terran Fleets need, but Earth itself."

"Okay. So, you announced the process, and the threats started."

"Huh-un," came with a headshake as Jackson swallowed more coffee. "First came offers to help us convert the refineries, loan us money, materiel, whatever we needed, in exchange for partnerships. And the Terrans!" Jackson's voice held the usual scorn of Outworlders when speaking of Earth. "Practically told us to name our own price. Threats started after we turned them down. Security was increased, but we didn't think anyone would really do anything. Like you said, we're so *small*! Then came the threat not only specifying the Powell refinery's main processing unit, but giving a date and time! Now, I ask you!" She shot a cynical smile to Ti. "Still, couldn't be too careful, so we closed it down the day before, searched it thoroughly, locked it, posted guards, and it still exploded. Right. On. Time." Jackson shook her head, frustration in her voice, and on her face. "Powell had been the only fully converted refinery. Midessa was about half through the change-over. We couldn't convert them all at once, couldn't afford all four off-line at the same time. Contrary to popular belief, we're not a rich planet. What food grows in a desert? Oceans are full of fish, but we need more than that, so we trade oil to Ceres for grain, Kyrille for meat, Kydosa for specially treated cloth. Losing two refineries means losing half our income. If we lose the rest...."

"I understand."

"As it is, we'll have to borrow to rebuild. I understand Earth's already sent an offer to help us get a loan through the Swiss Bank.

I'll tell you this." Jackson's voice became firm. "With or without Earth's help, we will rebuild! So here's your question back. Why?"

Ti shook her head. Something about Jackson's answer rang a vague bell. Something she had read, something—

"*Damn Chambers anyway!*" Jackson spit out, drawing Ti's attention back to her. "If he hadn't been so concerned with *proof*, none of this might've happened."

Ti agreed. But it had, and now they were chasing a probable saboteur who might have a remote control, and might be ready to suicide into a refinery to destroy the last of Spindletop's economy, and even if they stopped him, he might not have any answers, and if he did, they might not be what she needed—She took a deep breath, slowly released it as she relaxed the fists her hands had formed. She needed to relax, and remember; something relating to what Jackson had said—A movement from across the room drew her eyes.

Ian swiveled his chair around, faced Ti and Jackson, and nodded. He waited until they, and Williams, joined him. "Just one problem. As soon as the jamming's activated, he'll know. I've tried, can't find a way around it. Otherwise, I can take control anytime, providing he hasn't fiddled with the controls on his end. I included contingencies based on what I'd do in his place, but ..."

"Understood." Ti's terse verbal acknowledgement was expanded upon mentally, not in words, but with a warm confidence. "Now, we need—" she broke off as Ian's

wristband buzzed. He glanced at a blinking red light, then at Ti.

"The information checks out," was said strictly for the benefit of Jackson and Williams, as only family, and a few close friends, knew they both were telepathic, let alone bonded.

Ti nodded. "Lieutenant, if we go to max speed now, how long to overtake Adams?"

Williams toggled a comm on the desk next to him, and asked the pilot that question. "Eleven minutes," came back.

Ti leaned over, spoke into the comm. "Do it, Captain." She switched the comm off. "Ian, as soon as we're close enough, start the jam, and take control." Ti added mentally, "*I'll give you as much warning as I can.*"

They got within a mile of Adams' skimmer before they heard the echo of his passive radar. It appeared to everyone that Ian activated the jam at the very first nanosecond of the echo reverberating in the transport, and they marveled at his fast reflexes.

It hadn't been just fast reflexes, but Ti, using one of her talents to mentally scan for Adams. She sensed his mind a split-second before Adams' radar warned him of the transport's approach. Ian, through their bond, knew, and activated the jam. Both of them hoped that her warning had been enough to prevent any signal going back to Permian, because, at this distance, Ti couldn't actually take over his mind.

Maybe it had, Ti thought, because Adams increased speed, and began zigzagging as the transport narrowed the distance. At least, no call came in from Dispatch. Yet.



After Jackson called twice for Adams to land and received no reply, Ian spoke.

“Taking control now.”

The skimmer suddenly dropped towards the ground, just as suddenly veered to the left. It then soared up several hundred feet before suddenly stopping, then moved in a series of jerks and twists.

“Fighting me,” Ian tossed out, both hands flying over the holo-board. “Bastard’s good.”

“Williams, send a couple shots near him, close enough to let him know we’re serious,” Ti ordered.

Williams issued the order. Moments later, a laser shot out from the transport, then a second struck the skimmer’s tail as it zagged instead of zigged.

Ian managed to override Adams, and bring the skimmer down in a semi-controlled glide, but the sand wasn’t all that yielding.

Ti was out of the transport before it completely stopped. Ian, Jackson, and Williams were on her heels, an armed squad on theirs.

“Everyone, stay back!” Ti ordered as she scrambled towards the skimmer, cursing the 3” heeled boots designed for meeting VIPs, not running in sand.

The crash into a sand dune had crumpled the cockpit, broken out the wind-screen, and trapped Adams in his seat. Ti did a fast mental scan, found his injuries weren’t fatal. She stood inches from the skimmer, studying Adams as she caught her breath.

“Who’re you working for?” she finally

asked.

Adams remained silent.

“Okay.” Ti straightened. “I’m a telepath, so we can do this so that you remain sane. Or not.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” Adam’s demeanor remained calm, his words confident. “There’d be such a protest—”

“From whom?” Ti interrupted. “Not from you, you’ll have no mind left. From the citizens of this planet, whose economy you’ve crippled, whose husbands, wives, sons, and daughters you’ve killed? Chambers is already talking, and when what he says gets out, and it will if I have to contact every reporter in this sector, no one will give a damn about you. Besides,” she leaned closer, “you see any witnesses here?”

“You don’t have the gu—” Adams jerked, stiffened, mouth still open, eyes staring at nothing.

The information Ti ripped from Adams’ mind ensured that all explosives at Permian were found, and defused.

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Ian watched as Ti, returning to their ship after briefing Spindletop’s president, walked to the bar, poured herself a glass of Scotch, and swallowed half of it. Then he walked over, took the glass from her hand, put it on the bar, and wrapped her in his arms. The top of her head rested snugly under his chin as her arms encircled his waist, hugged him close.

“You did what you had to do,” he murmured.

Ti held onto Ian, let his warmth, love, and understanding soak into her soul. She

finally raised her head, reached up and let a hand caress his face. "So. What've you got?"

Ian's face was somber as he pulled back just enough to look at Ti. "Some of the names you got from Adams are descendants of the original TATT leaders, and not at all shy about hiding their beliefs in Terran superiority. I've sent alerts to the police in the systems Adams knew about, but they're probably long gone. If they're back in the Sol System, never find 'em."

Ti nodded. "So TATT's back in business destroying... Business." She recalled Jackson's statement about Earth's offer of a loan, and frowned. "Why would Earth offer to help rebuild if TATT's behind the destruction?"

"Help rebuild?" Ian's confusion showed in his voice.

"Jackson said that Earth's offered to help Spindletop get a loan to rebuild. When I talked to the President, she said she'd probably have to accept. But why, if TATT—shit! I need to check something!" Ti pulled away from Ian, almost ran to her computer station, and began talking to the AI.

Ian caught a few words about other systems attacked, loans from Earth, payoff dates, and began to understand.

Ti finally leaned back in her chair, surprised to see a sandwich and cup of coffee on her desk. She raised her head, saw Ian seated at his own computer opposite her.

"Figured it out?" she asked before taking a bite of the sandwich.

"Think so." He fleshed-out the abbreviated questions and answers from Ti and the AI. "Spindletop's not the first system

attacked, but all the others just had their trade transports hijacked. We figured increased pirate attacks, but several times the transports were actually destroyed. That's not something pirates normally do, since zero cargo means zero credits. Most of those systems had to take Earth's offers of loans until they could rebuild their trade." Ian shook his head. "Trade is a hellava thing to base your entire economy on, but that's what most of the Outworlds use, have since the Uprising cut off the cash from Earth. When the pirates disrupt one system's economy, the ripples spread to the economies of all the systems doing business with the original system. So, what's Earth going to use to pressure the Outworlds?"

"Payoff dates on all those loans are after the vote on the Treaty renewal. Except, there's a clause. Repayment in full on demand by the lender. Can't pay, default, and lose everything." She bit sharply, almost viciously, into the sandwich.

"Unless you vote with Earth to make the changes to the Treaty they want." Ian's voice hardened. "Earth doesn't have enough support now, but the vote's not for six years. Plenty of time to damage enough Outworlds so they're facing economic ruin, offer loans, then demand repayment, and if they refuse, sic pirates on them."

Ti swallowed as she shook her head. "It's a valid premise, but, thinking about it more, I don't see how it would work. First, why would pirates cooperate with TATT? Even if they do, the Outworlds would just do what they do now, call on the Fleets for protection. Earth couldn't stop the Fleets

from responding. They're supposedly neutral, and, besides, there are so many Outworlders aboard at least two of the carriers that they'd mutiny if anything like that was tried. Have to check, but I'd bet most of the other carriers and the destroyers also have an abundance of Outworld citizens." She eyed Ian, who thought a moment, then slowly nodded agreement. "Second, the Fleet pilots would eliminate a lot of the pirates. Where would TATT get more fight-

technical parts, equipment not usually found on personal ships."

It took Ti a moment before she remembered.

Almost a year ago, they had been on assignment to Detalas, trying to find missing weapons-grade diamonds. It hadn't taken long to discover the missing diamonds were connected to the sabotage of the Cobras the year before. During the investigation, a contact had told them that



ers, let alone more pilots?"

"George Simons."

Ti frowned. "Who's he?"

"One of the names you got from Adams. He's the president of ShipShape. It's a salvage and restoration company, Terran based, but with a good Outworlder rep. Mostly luxury personal vessels. Lately though, rumor has it he's been doing a lot of specialty refits." Ian's voice sharpened. "Small individual craft requiring lots of

obsolete Fleet fighter shells were missing. The information at first seemed unrelated, then Ian, with his Fleet background, made a possible connection. He now restated it, only this time as a certainty.

"ShipShape's reconditioning the missing fighter shells with the new Cobra tech, including the new weapons systems, using the missing diamonds. The weapons might also be put into what the pirates are using now, along with some, if not all, of the new

tech. The Fleets get called in, the pilots see the old Starfires, don't expect the Cobra tech, the new lasers. Who's got the advantage then?"

"Okay, that takes care of the fighters. What about the pilots?"

Ian reached for his coffee cup, drank deeply before continuing. "Again, I got to wondering. The search I did after Detalas, for all personnel who left the Fleet after our investigation at Edwards? I didn't subdivide it. Did this time. Just started, but so far I've found a dozen test pilots that decided to go civilian instead of accepting reassignment. That's not unusual, test flying is more exciting than going back to regular flight duties. Most of the pilots who quit were Terran." He saw Ti breathe deeply, give an understanding nod. "When I saw that, I expanded the search. Reenlistments throughout the Fleets are down, but only among Terrans."

"I'd really appreciate it if you stopped wondering!" Ti retorted as she stood, grabbed her plate and both their cups and walked into the galley. "So, you've got the pilots, and fighters. But the Fleet fighter pilots are still better. They've got Talons, against obsolete Starfires, and when the Cobras are finally released—Oh, hell." Ti very carefully put the dishes on the counter, then turned, her face white. "The Cobras are the most technologically advanced in software, hardware, and weapons systems, in decades. Suppose, just suppose, the main Boeing plant blown up a year ago wasn't."

"Wasn't?" Ian was perplexed. "Wasn't what, the main—" Then he understood. "It happened on Earth, at night, at a place that

was only partially seen on-screen. Terran reporters said it was the main Boeing plant. No one was allowed to get close. There are three support plants, now working around the clock, but together they can produce only a fraction of the main plant's output. If the main plant's still in business and has been for a year—" It took him only a moment. "Simons' specialty refits are decoys."

"Use them against the Outworlds, forcing the leaders to call on the Fleets for assistance, then, bring out the Cobras. They'll destroy the Fleets' Talons, maybe damage the carriers, and destroyers...."

"They might, and not just because of the new tech," Ian said. He turned to his computer, did some quick keyboarding—he preferred to work with his hands rather than use the AI—and stared at the screen a moment. "Something you need to see."

Ti walked over, saw pictures of a Talon, front, side and overhead views. "Okay. So?"

Ian brought up another set of pictures, front, side and overhead views.

"Another Talon. So what—" And then she saw it. "It's a Cobra. Nearly identical, except—"

Ian used the keyboard again, and the pictures appeared side by side, with the differences shaded. There weren't many. "Let the Talons begin fighting pirates, then the Cobras show up. There's just enough similarity for a Fleet pilot to think they're Talons. Moving at combat speeds—"

"We have to find those Cobras. And the decoys. How many techs among those Terrans who left the Fleet and where are

they now?"

"I'll have to check the latest search results." He started to turn back to the keyboard.

"In a minute." Ti came around from behind him, perched on the edge of the desk facing him. "You had something else about Simons." She had caught it in his mind, just a brief feeling of wondering if he should say anything or not.

Ian waited a moment before speaking. "He's acquired quite a few silent partners over the last four, five years, resulting in quite an increase in his operating capital. I've just started tracing them, and so far, all the names have some connection to TATT. Except one. Frank Rotiya."

"Frank—General Rotiya?" Shocked surprise was on Ti's face. "The Commander of Terran Security?"

"A very large contributor."

"I know he doesn't like The Treaty, but he's got more reason than most people to hate TATT."

Ian knew the reason, but not as personally as Ti.

Two people had been largely responsible both for the compromises that had resulted in the Treaty and for the reluctant

acceptance by Earth, her Sol System allies, and the Outworlds: Jonathan Rotiya and Stephen Stuart. The bomb at the signing of the treaty had killed Rotiya's father. Ti's father had had only moderate injuries. TATT had claimed responsibility.

"I'm surprised he let you take this assignment." Ian saw the flush on Ti's face. "You didn't tell him? He is your immediate superior."

"He's my superior on paper only!" Ti snapped. "The Treaty may've put Oseeah under his direct control, but we're two independent agencies, and he knows it! Damn it, Ian! If he's involved, then Terran Security's involved. Everyone in Oseeah will have to be briefed, and we'll never prove it. He'll have covered himself six ways from Sunday."

"So we dig seven ways from Monday. We're just as motivated as TATT. More. Besides, if Rotiya's made this personal, then he's already screwed."

Ti plopped onto Ian's lap, her arms encircling his neck. "Should've left me in that alley."

Ian's arms encircled Ti, pulled her close as he finished their catchphrase. "What, and missed all the fun?" ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**