

Incident at Madstop

By Brantley Thompson Elkins

With advice from Velvet Belle Tree and Tarot Barnes

Galactic Year 1016-2 [1517 Terran count], Selene

“Mata said she’d take us to the beach, Tata,” Ariel told his father eagerly.

“We’ll get to watch the sea snakes,” Valentina chimed in, just as eagerly.

Just like Katya, Gavrel thought. His ex knew he had to go off-planet; it was just the right opportunity for her to get her hooks into the kids. By the time he got back, he’d be out of the picture entirely. But there was nothing for it, nothing to say...

And then it suddenly popped into his head, and out of his mouth.

“I could take you to Madstop, to the big conference.”

“Who wants to go to a conference?” Valentina objected.

“*Boring*,” agreed Ariel.

“But it’s a fabulous world. It’s where the dawn’s eyes come from.”

That seemed to pique Valentina’s interest, if only because Katya was the proud wearer of a dawn’s eye pendant. It had cost Gavrel Ironcastle more than he could afford; no doubt she was showing it off to other men now that the divorce was final.

Ariel still seemed unimpressed; Gavrel wracked his brain trying to come up with something that would appeal to a boy just old enough to have learned to drive a ground car. Then it came to him, and he could have slapped himself for having thought of it before: Veliky Vagon Tvorets, right here in Novy Kyiv, produced the mining aircraft used on Madstop.

“Like I just read about in *Teknika Molodezhi!*” he exclaimed. “Can we ride one? We could go hunting dawn’s eyes.”

Valentina’s eyes lit up at that, and Gavrel knew he had both of them sold on the

idea. But he also knew he'd gone very far out on a limb, so he stopped short of making any promises about a mining trip by evading the issue – and then changing the subject. He was full of himself, and inordinately proud of it.

"It's the chance of a lifetime," he told them. And indeed it was – for him. Gavrel could never have afforded such a trip, even before the divorce, in the ordinary course of events. But as Selene's Foreign Affairs Executive, his expenses would all be taken care of, and nobody was going to object to a few fringe benefits – now that the Radical party administration was on a roll. And he'd be part of it, part of *history*.

Gavrel didn't know any of the people from the distant seeded worlds, but there'd be time to get acquainted aboard ship. Having family along might give him an edge; be a talking point, at least – word was that none of the others had brought their husbands or wives or children. If he could charm Ariel and Valentina, maybe he could charm... so he began with them.

He regaled them about the wonders of Madstop, as exotic as inhabited planets got. If it weren't for the dawn's eyes, of course, nobody would have ever set foot there. Even as it was, few lived there, and they'd learned to deal with the dangers. No Terran dared venture beyond the few habitable outposts, except to hunt for the precious jewels – missions were carried out only when careful monitoring of volcanic sites indicated it would be relatively safe. *Relatively* was the operative word. It was never *absolutely* safe. Miners on Madstop were experienced at this sort of thing; it had been some years since they had suffered any casualties.

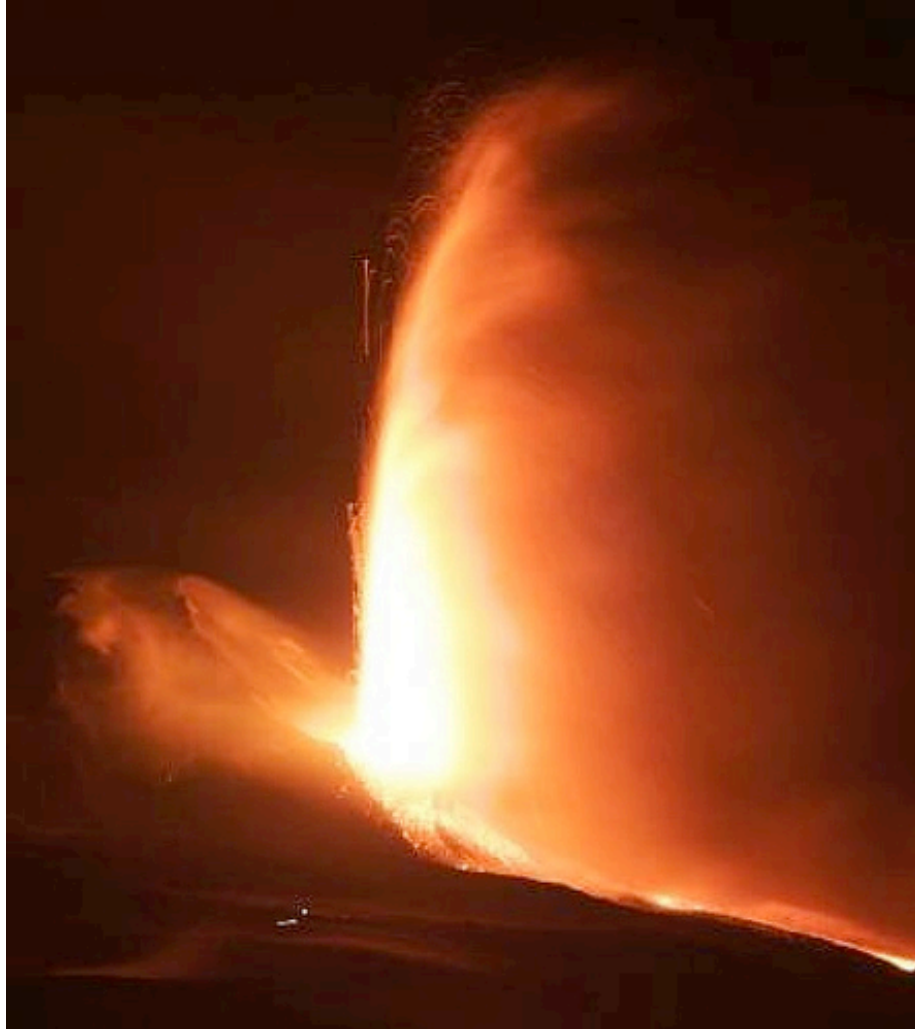
But Gavrel glossed over that sort of detail, speaking instead of the spectacular scenery and the supposedly romantic lives of the miners, who were fabulously wealthy from their export trade even after the Scalantrans took their cut. He could see the glint in the kids' eyes as he appealed to their curiosity and sense of adventure. Things were looking very good. He had them eating out of his hand...

"We can always go to the beach when we come back," Ariel ventured. "The sea snakes will still be there,"

"Or Mata could go with Vlad," Valentina added.

Gavrel knew about Vlad. He didn't know if would last. The man was a partner in a fisheries cooperative and owned the stretch of beach in question. Chances were that he

wasn't terribly interested in becoming a stepfather, whatever Katya wanted. But why let him have an opening? Madstop wasn't a beach, but it was where the action was – and it wouldn't hurt his career to make something of it.



So, not to worry; he was in the driver's seat now, and just in time. The children were in their troublesome teens, old Terran count. Gavrel knew he should have paid more attention to them when they were younger, but he had been preoccupied by his duties as a planetary legislator – a rare position for someone from an immigrant family that had originated on Kellog 2, even with the opposition party.

And then, suddenly, the Radicals were no longer the opposition. It was none of his own doing, or even his party's. Planetary Chief Executive Berkovich was caught in a scandal involving government contracts for the ring train network – kickbacks going to him and anybody who was anybody in the Popular Front hierarchy. Legislators switched parties in sufficient numbers to sweep Berkovich and his cronies into the dustbin of history, and...

Gavrel Ironcastle became Selene's foreign affairs executive.

It wasn't that great an honor. Travel times between star systems being what they were, there wasn't a hell of a lot for a foreign affairs executive to do. Usually. That was why Gavrel had been consigned to the shadow post in the shadow administration of his party. Even with the Madstop Conference long in preparation, Shadow Chief Executive Aram Korolenko hadn't thought to reshuffle his government-in-waiting; it had seemed at the time that it would be a very *long* wait.

No matter how the chance had come to; Gavrel was going to make the most of it. He'd return from Madstop as a hero, even a legend. Perhaps he would become Chief Executive himself one day. Anything could happen. Of course, he had some catching up to do on the agenda of the Conference, but he knew enough off the top of his head to impress his offspring.

"Kalla herself will be there," he told them. "She was the first Companion, 400 T-years ago."

"One of the Velorians? Like our Protector?" Valentina asked.

"No, not like our Protector," Ariel said, apparently pleased with himself at knowing something naughty. "The Companions were *concubines*."

"Only at first," Gavrel corrected him. "They outlived their indentures. Nobody had expected that, but it turned out that Velorians live a lot longer on Terran planets than on their own world. So they had time to learn a lot."

There was more to it than that, Aram had told him. The Velorian Senate was the formal sponsor; it had issued the Call. But the diplomats who carried it didn't have any experience off-world. Diplomats from Seeded worlds, by contrast, were familiar with the rough and tumble of planetary politics – and knew something of worlds besides their own through the Scalantrans. They had soon taken the lead.

It had taken two decades to arrange the Conference, interstellar travel time being what it was. Choosing Madstop as the site had been a matter of security. There weren't many places there where Terrans could survive unprotected; delegates and staff would be restricted to the Conference Dome built for the occasion by the miners' syndicate. Wary of possible Aurean espionage, organizers sought to keep access ultra tight, with all identities checked. Nobody but the diplomats from Velor and the Seeded worlds and their staffs and a few Scalantran observers should have been able to get in.

The one exception was a redhead attached to Selene's delegation. Gavrel had advertised on the World Brain for a tutor and minder, and picked Erika Nevsky for her looks – hoping she'd be impressed enough to take care of him at night when she wasn't taking care of the kids during the day. She was an outstanding specimen of classic Rus womanhood from Kyivan times back on Stara Zemlya. Or so it seemed.

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"Why is she just *walking* to the podium?" Valentina asked when Kalla Zaver'el made her grand entrance to open the Conference.

"Why shouldn't she?" Gavrel said. "This isn't an emergency, and it certainly isn't a circus. This is business. She isn't here to flaunt herself, and she doesn't want to flout the ground rules. The powers-that-be on Velor don't want us Terrans to feel afraid or intimidated."

"Powers-that-be? Ground rules?"

"Their Senate and High Council decided that as a gesture towards any qualms on the part of Terrans, any Velorians from the home planet would have to wear gold. They couldn't order Kalla or the other expatriates to do so, and they aren't. But they don't want it to look as if they're lording it over the homeworlders who planned and set up the Conference. Everybody knows they've lived with Terrans for centuries; nobody's afraid they'll cause any harm."

"You should have told us," Ariel said, the whine in his voice grating on his father's ears. "We've come all this way, and we haven't seen anything we couldn't have seen back home."

"You've seen the Scalantrans," Gavrel said.

"They wouldn't even *talk* with us," Ariel said.

"You've seen the other delegates," Gavrel said.

"They're just ordinary people. Not like the Vels."

"When are we going to see the mines?" Valentina said. "I could get my own dawn's eye."

"Yes, when are we going to see the *mines*?" Ariel said.

It was another sticky moment for Gavrel. He hadn't exactly promised they'd get to go out on a mining expedition, but...

Kalla was speaking now, and that gave him an excuse to shush the kids.

"...not to rule, but to *nurture*. True Enlightenment comes of long experience, and the willingness to learn from experience. Our role is only to protect the freedom of your worlds and the rights of their peoples to shape their own destinies, to share knowledge and experience with other worlds, to enable each to contribute in its own way to the greater enlightenment of the whole..."

She was speaking in Romaic with simultaneous translation into other languages, including his own Paroski. The Scalantrans were good at translation software; they even produced pocket translators for private meetings. Gavrel listened dutifully, but without great enthusiasm. He was more concerned with mundane issues on the agenda that had come up in shipboard meetings – like whether Gatekeeper forces for wormholes should be financed through flat assessments on each world, assessments based on population, or some combination of the two.

As the representative of a populous world, Gavrel had been instructed to push for flat assessments. He'd been buttonholed by, among others, a representative of Gebron, a distant mining colony still recovering from the Aurean attack that had set the stage for the deployment of Protectors and for the Conference itself. Gebron favored progressive assessments. So did Madstop, for that matter, but... hell, they could afford a flat rate.

"We're *hurting* out there," the man had pleaded. "We were lab rats for the GAR. Lost nearly all our people and all our equipment; our clients have balked at investing in reconstruction – had to beg the Scalantrans for credit, and that hasn't come cheap."



Gavrel tried to force his attention back to Kalla's keynote address. It wouldn't look good for people to see him looking distracted. The kids were fidgeting in their seats, he noticed. But Erika actually seemed *enthralled* by the proceedings. Nothing wrong with being *interested*; her teaching specialty was history, after all, and history was going to be made here – for better or for worse, he couldn't predict.

But it didn't look as if *he* was going to make any history with *her*, even though he had caught a glimpse of her charms aboard the *Margin of Profit* when she wore a silken robe on the way to the shower. *Accidentally on purpose*, he had thought at the time, but nothing came of it – she had quietly but firmly rebuffed his overtures.

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As for Ariel, he was depressed after the general session wrapped up. There was nothing to do back in quarters but watch vids related to Conference matters, or the local newsfeed, which mostly had to do with boring stuff like futures trading in dawn's eyes. It hadn't occurred to the organizers that they'd have to accommodate, let alone entertain, anybody like him and Valentina.

Erika stepped in to fill the time, continuing a course she had started aboard ship on galactic history and science. She seemed to know a lot about the wormholes and the Old Galactics. Stuff like that, and she had her own take on it. "Do you ever wonder what became of the Old Galactics?" she asked once. "We don't even know what they looked like. But we see their works everywhere. We wouldn't be here except for them."

She was doing her best, Ariel knew. It was simply that her best couldn't compete with the occasional but vivid newsfeed images of the fiery vistas of Madstop – the *real* Madstop, not the sterile interior of the Conference Dome. And there were the vistas of Erika herself.

Ariel was old enough to know that Tata was hot for their tutor – and that despite her interest in the Conference, she hadn't shown any interest in *him*. Tata had been gruff with him and Valentina on account of that, besides being preoccupied with the Conference. It made for a tense situation, all the more tense because he couldn't talk about it, with her or Tata or, naturally, Valentina. It just hung in the air.

It hung between his own legs, for that matter. He couldn't talk about that, either, and he didn't even want to *think* about longing for the same woman as his father. Only, he couldn't help thinking about it. It was a good thing she had a head on her shoulders as well as her other assets, or he might not have been able to focus on her tutoring sessions. That was good, because she usually tutored him and Valentina together, and it would have shamed him beyond words to betray his feelings before his sister.

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The next day's session was going to be devoted to funding of the Gatekeepers, contingents of Vels other than Protectors who would be stationed in small ships near wormholes to serve as an Early Warning and First Response force against the Aureans – or other enemies, for there *were* other enemies: older Seeded worlds like Igoybe and Riut, trying to create their own mini-empires.

Indeed, word had arrived at Selene shortly before the *Margin of Profit's* departure that Riut had moved in on Bulwyn, a source of xintanite used in Vendorian steel. That had a lot of planets on edge, because Riut used Vendorian steel in the manufacture of mechs for surface operations as well as warships for space combat. The Vendorians themselves had cut off trade with the rogue planet, hoping to curb its expansionism for the sake of good relations with its other trading partners.

"Everybody in the sector is afraid of Riut," Erika told them then. "Their military forces are quite methodical. Destroy all resistance in space, then destroy all resistance on the ground. But destroy only the *people*, except for those they really need. Leave the factories intact. Brainscan any prisoners with essential industrial knowledge and skills, deepteach Riutans to operate the factories, then put them back into production. That's how it was on Bulwyn, and that's why the people from Negenti and Lior are going to be at the Conference."

The way Erika described the shape-shifting battle mechs and their Riutan riders, "half-like machines themselves," it was as if she'd seen them first-hand. But that wasn't possible; she'd told them that she'd been born on Selene and lived there all her life. She looked like she was only in her 20s, so she'd have been only an infant at the time Riut

conquered Bulwyn. Wherever she'd heard the story, it explained why other worlds were so eager to have Gatekeepers as well as Protectors, even in sectors far removed from the Aurean threat.

Rogue worlds like Riut, of course, hadn't been invited to the Conference, and yet some participants – including Negenti and Lior – were calling for punitive assessments against them to help finance the Gatekeepers. Just how these would be collected, they didn't say – but when High Councillor Dar'nyot of Velor issued a memorandum to the effect that Protectors would not be assigned to do so, the air went out of their proposal.

One of the Madstop natives, Jaime Ruiz, stopped by to speak with Tata the night before the session on funding. Ruiz had headed home on family business after the opening session, so Tata had met him at the lock when he returned, and taken Ariel and Valentina along. When Ariel spotted the aircraft, his eyes lit up – it looked just like the ones he'd seen and read about in *Teknika Molodezhi*, but when he tried to ask Ruiz about it, Tata had shushed him again.

"Have to talk serious business," he'd cautioned, before going into a huddle with Ruiz out of sight and sound.

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It was indeed serious business the next day – but not for Ariel and Valentina. They'd been allowed at the opening session – practically dragged to it. But it turned out that was a special dispensation, originally intended for officials of Madstop and their families. From here on, it would be delegates and staff only. It didn't upset the children in the least.

"It was so boring yesterday," Valentina whispered to Ariel at breakfast.

"Boring as cow shit."

Tata gave them both a dirty look, then turned his attention back to his pocket com for any updates on the day's proceedings.

But that left the question of what the children could *do* with themselves.

"Doesn't *anybody* get to go outside besides the miners?" Valentina asked Erika.

"How many times do I have to tell you? It's too *dangerous*. They warned us again

as soon as we landed, remember?”

“They just don’t want to us to have any *fun*,” Valentina said. “Or are they afraid we’d steal some of their jewels?”

“We could only go out with Ruiz or one of the other miners,” Ariel said. “How could we steal any jewels?”

“Well, you’re not going *anywhere* with *any* of the miners.” Erika said.

Gavrel wanted her to put in an appearance at the session as “staff,” although that hadn’t been in her job description. “Krentz from Lior has a secretary,” he said irritably. “And they spent *nine years* making it here. How’s it going to look if I’m all alone?”

“What, and leave Ari and Val all alone?” Erika replied indignantly. “Just get me a live feed, and make a show of consulting me by com. I can make a show of keeping a log of everything you say, and responding appropriately. If you think that will help.”

Ariel was surprised to hear Erika use their diminutives. It looked as if Tata was, too – or maybe it was just her attitude that left him speechless for a moment.

“I can’t...” he finally began. Then, “Never mind. You’ll get your feed. But you’d better make good use of it.”

With that, he left in a huff.

Erika got her feed, and she made good use of it. But except for fielding a couple of queries from Gavrel, it was Ari and Val that she made a show for, with commentary on the session that was at once witty and insightful.

“That’s Krentz talking now, the one with the silly forked beard,” she said early on. “He’s one of the people who thought the Velorians would go after Igoybe and Riut for assessments. But the thing is, Velor doesn’t have enough warships yet, despite a crash program to order them from the Vendorians or produce them at home; Gatekeepers are going to have to rely on whatever ships are available in each system. And Lior’s fleet is a joke; there’s no way it could mount an attack on Riut.”

“I don’t understand about the Gatekeepers,” Val said. “Why do they need ships at all?”

“They’re Velorians, but they’re not Protectors like our Isphana. Protectors are all enhanced Prima-1 women, and the Messengers Prima-1 men. But most other Velorians are Matra and Brava class. They can’t fly through wormholes or live indefinitely in space

off orgone energy. They have to eat and drink just like you and me. But they can fly through raw space when they *have* to, and they're strong enough to knock holes in enemy warships. That can make a big difference for systems that are lightly defended."

"It must get boring, being cooped up on those ships, just waiting for something to happen," Ariel said.

"They'll work in shifts – three on and three off. That's Dar'nyot's idea, anyway. So they'll get plenty of R&R on the planets they're defending."

"So when do we get any R&R?"

"This is it."

Ari shrugged, and glanced back at the live feed.

"Who's that next to Krentz?"

"That's Brecht, the secretary your father was talking about."

"She's ugly."

"I'll bet you think all women besides Erika are ugly," Val broke in.

Ari blushed.

"Let's just put it this way," Erika said, ignoring Ari's embarrassment. "Krentz' wife picked out Brecht."

"An 18-year sentence," Ari said. "And no time off for good behavior."

"He might die before he sees his wife again," Erika said, "Or she might have died by the time he gets home. It's a sobering thought. And yet he means well. He wants to help create something that will outlast him. It's the same with the others here. They may actually bring it off, make the galaxy a better place for it. I find that comforting."

Ari looked at Val, and Val looked back at him. He couldn't think of anything more to say, and apparently his sister couldn't, either. It was a strange feeling.

Later that day, Ruiz took the podium to announce that he and the representative from Nova Iberia had been working on a compromise: a basic minimum assessment, with sliding surcharges based on Gross Planetary Product as well as population. Rather than call for an immediate vote, they sought leave to make the rounds after the session to address any concerns, and let the other delegates offer their input, then sleep on it before making a decision.

Erika shook her head, as if she didn't think this would amount to anything.

“Looks like we’ll be having company again tonight,” Ari said. “They’ll keep you busy, I expect.”

“Most likely. But I don’t think they’ll really settle anything this soon.”

“I wish we were at the beach back on Selene with Mata,” Val said.

“Even with Vlad.”

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“GPP does make a big difference,” Esteban Velazquez told Gavrel in a private face-to-face. “We can’t expect worlds with similar populations but far different levels of technology and wealth to pay the same assessments. We’ve still got some catching up to do with your own planet, or Tazzi, for that matter. But when we do reach that point, we’ll have more to protect, and be willing to pay more for it.”

Gavrel nodded, and looked to Erika. She merely nodded back, and left Gavrel to his reflections.

Selene had been one of the first worlds assigned a Protector; Isphana had come on the same ship that was ferrying First Protector Vespvr to Tazzi. But Vespvr hadn’t come to Madstop; neither had other first wave Protectors like Zolushka of Nova Iberia, nor any from subsequent waves. They remained at their posts, the Senate and the High Council having ruled that it was essential for diplomats invited to the Conference to be confident that their worlds and loved ones were being defended in their absence.

There had been and still was a rush to recruit, train and assign more Protectors from Velor, and to recall Companions from worlds that had more than one such; they could be enhanced and sent back – but this involved considerable travel time... and a willingness on their part. As for Companions who couldn’t return, or refused to do so, they were advised to do the best they could to deal with any Aurean threat. Worlds considered to be most in danger had first call on Protectors from Velor.

Velazquez was taller than Gavrel, black bearded with an olive complexion typical of the Spanish stock with which Nova Iberia had been seeded. For his part, Ruiz wasn’t at all typical of Madstop miners: he was short and black, and walked with a limp – some accident on the job, Gavrel supposed. There was no such thing as a typical inhabitant of

Madstop; there had never been a Seeding.

A crazy explorer named Chiche had found the planet – the stories differed as to just how – and, against all odds, discovered the dawn’s eyes and lived to tell... and sell. Word spread; others came to seek their fortunes – some indenturing themselves as the Companions had once been indentured to pay for the trip, others squandering their wealth in hope of finding greater wealth. Interstellar travel wasn’t cheap. It wasn’t fast, either, so development of Madstop hadn’t come in a rush; but given a few centuries...

“We used to have a Companion, but she was recalled for Enhancement after the Advent and sent to Gebron of all places,” Ruiz was saying. “There’d been a Velorian couple that came through once – fugitives, they were. We offered to let them stay until things blew over, but they kept going to wherever they were headed. Velor didn’t get around to sending us a Protector until they got the idea to hold the Conference here. But we don’t even see her; she’s guarding the wormhole on her own until we get a Gatekeeper force. Getting back to that, Esteban and I agree that we’ve got the right solution to the assessment issue – none of the worlds are going to get screwed. It’s got both the reality and *perception* of fairness, and perception counts for a lot when you’re trying to get a whole bunch of different worlds working together.”

Gavrel nodded again, as if in agreement.

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Ari saw from the live feed the next day that there were still sticking points, having to do with the types of ships available to Gatekeepers in each system, and even with the proper behavior for Velorians on leave.

“The man from Nova Iberia with the funny hat is a Steward of the Church,” Erika explained to him, trying to liven things up. “The Church was never happy about having Companions there. It isn’t too happy about the Protector, either, even though she limits herself to Messengers when it comes to—“

“I know what it comes to,” Ari said, embarrassed at her alluding to sex when he was having sexual feelings about her. He turned his attention back to the screen, where Ruiz was again arguing for the compromise, but with a protocol that Gatekeepers could

be subject to the same rules as Protectors. That didn't go over well with Dar'nyot, who pointed out that Gatekeepers wouldn't have access to Messengers.

"Why can't they have Velorian *men* serve as Gatekeepers too?" Ari asked.

"You've got a good idea there," Erika said. "But not one the Velorian High Council would approve, I think. They're as conservative in their own way as the Church on Nova Iberia."

Nothing was resolved at the Conference that day. From the look on his face, Ruiz was disappointed when the session ended. But Ari was surprised to see him stop by their quarters again afterwards.

"I'm here to make you an offer you can't refuse," he told Tata, who also looked disappointed, but perhaps only because he hadn't appeared on the live feed. "I've got kids your age, and I know how kids are – they wouldn't want to be cooped up here with nothing to do. And we don't generally get to see people from offworld, unless you count the Scalantrans, which, not meaning any disrespect, isn't quite the same."

Let it be, Ari thought, not even wondering what might have brought it on. He glanced at Val. She seemed to have the same thought. But their thoughts were rudely interrupted by Erika.

"This is a bad idea," she said. "I've said it before and I'll say it again."

If Tata had been making it with their tutor, Ari later realized, he'd probably have heeded her advice. But he wasn't. At the time, he was only disappointed with Erika – he thought they'd really been hitting it off with her.

"Jaime's lived here all his life," Tata said now. "He ought to know what's safe and what isn't."

Yes, Ari said to himself. And in that moment, at least, he loved his father as if he had never loved him before.

And so they were off to the actual home of a miner and his family. That meant boarding the aircraft at one of the Conference Dome's parking docks, securing the inner door and then cycling the airlock before opening the outer door and heading through.

It was always gloomy out even during the day, what with all the smoke and dust, and now it was night, with the only illumination coming from volcanic eruptions and lava pools.

“That’s not where we get the dawn’s eyes,” Ruiz told them. “You have to look for those in the vents, and be damn sure they aren’t active at the time. But if they weren’t active some of the time, they wouldn’t spit up the jewels from downdeep. It’s a tradeoff, but one we can live with.”

Ari was fascinated by the plumes and the lava lakes, but also by the controls of the vehicle. *They’re just like what I saw in that magazine*, he thought. *I could fly this thing myself*. Being proud holder of an interim permit for a ground car back home had put ideas in his head – though he hadn’t yet qualified for even a tentative flitter license.



Yet he wasn’t reckless in the common sense of the word; he knew better than to go over the speed limit, or run stoplights. But there weren’t any stoplights on Madstop, there weren’t even any roads. Still, he would surely have avoided temptation if it weren’t for the fact that there wasn’t a standard airlock at the Ruiz home; rather, the flier landed on a platform just outside, and a retractable docking collar with a door at each end extended itself to the door and mated with it for an airtight connection.

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Ruiz' home looked pretty much like the Conference Dome. In fact, it *was* a dome, just not as large. Inside, it was divided into several rooms, and the eating-sitting room to which Ruiz had shepherded the visitors gathered was pretty much like the rooms at the Conference Dome, except that the walls were painted bright red.

"It's the color of the Miners' Syndicate," Ruiz said. "We're not really communalists here, but we do share and share alike when it comes to dawn's eyes. It's a matter of trust: each of us works the vents whenever it's safe, each puts in a full measure. But nobody actually owns the vents, so we pool our earnings. It's the Syndicate that deals with the Scalantrans; we trade for essentials plus whatever luxuries the membership approves, and divvy up the rest of the credits equally among our members, so they can buy the consumables they like and whatever else takes their fancy."

Gavrel wondered how they'd divvied up the Companion, when they owned one – but had enough presence of mind not to ask. He also wondered why Ruiz was talking about this trust business to begin with. That was surely a legitimate question.

"I presume there's a reason you've brought us here," he said.

"We read the news from Selene; it's our closest neighbor, after all. So we know about the doings of your unlamented Berkovich. A matter of trust, you see, which he betrayed. Here on Madstop, we have absolute trust in one another; it's a matter of sheer survival. Now we are being asked to bring forth an interstellar alliance in the same spirit of trust. A difficult undertaking."

"Quite difficult, from what I've seen."

"We need to discuss this further, after dinner. But right now, I want you to meet my family."

As if by some invisible signal, they appeared.

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Ruiz' children Gilberto and Martilena were a few standard years younger than Ari and Val, but that wasn't the problem. The problem, as Ari saw it, was that they were too

serious. If they had any games in their room, they didn't mention it. All they wanted to talk about was stuff like chemistry and geology.

"We've gotten really good at reading the signs," Martilena said. "When we're old enough to go out on our own, it'll be important to gauge when a vent's about to blow – that's when the jewels come up, but we've got to wait till things calm down to go after them. Reading signs is very important."

They did like to listen to music, and do some sort of exercises connected with it, but that seemed as much a practical matter as an indulgence. They also had vids about life on planets other than their own, but the only one they showed was a documentary about the discovery and settling of Madstop itself, and the worlds the first settlers had come from.

The only time conversation turned to what Ari considered Real Life was when Gilberto allowed that it was just as well the planet didn't have a Companion any more, because having her do so much of the dangerous work had made things too easy for the miners. "Besides," he added, "There was trouble among the unmarried men over which of them could get to learn the Acts of Life from her. The Syndicate tried to settle it by lot, but they didn't like that, and neither did she."

Ari wasn't terribly surprised that Gilberto would know about things like that, but he was surprised that a boy that age would *talk* about it – and in front of his kid sister, at that. Their mother Sophia was in the Quiet Room with Ruiz and Tata. Even Erika had joined them; she said she was interested in the kind of things they were talking about, and Ruiz didn't seem to mind.

But Ari minded a lot, and was increasingly restless. "I'm hungry again," he said. "Can we go back for a snack?"

"You should have eaten more at dinner," Gilberto remarked. "But if you really have to..."

Ari beckoned to Val. "Come along," he said.

Val looked at him questioningly, but came along.

When they were out of the children's room and out of sight of Gil and Marti, Ari tuned to Val and whispered conspiratorially.

"They don't even lock the outside door, or the flier. We could go now."

“That’s crazy,” Val whispered back. “You don’t even have a license. We could get in all sorts of trouble.”

“Veliky’s controls are all alike; I could understand everything Ruiz was doing with them. Anyway, what’s Tata going to do, send us back to Selene? We’ll never have a chance like this again.”

* * *

Erika might have overheard their talk, if she hadn’t been in the Quiet Room. But even in the Quiet Room, the alarm sounded when the flier started up.

All conversation about Gatekeeper financing and other issues came to an abrupt stop. Ruiz was startled at first, then alarmed, then angered – all within seconds.

“They’ve stolen the flier!” he shouted. “They’re going to kill themselves!”

“I’ll make the call,” Sophia interrupted, punching in the com code Pryala Nair, who was handling Emergency Response this shift.

Gavrel stood there aghast.

“I don’t—” he stammered.

Ruiz glared at him, his face a mask of rage.

“I’ll deal with you later,” Ruiz said sharply. “You won’t escape responsibility. You can depend on that.”

Gavrel was speechless, and shaking with fear – for the children and for himself. *Even if they find them, bring them back safely, I’m ruined.*

Sophia was on the com, talking to Nair. It took a while.

“Daksha came on too,” she said after signing off. “They didn’t believe me at first. I had to convince them it was real. Anyway, they’re revving up the Rescue flier; they’ll zero in on the transponder.”

“I should have minded them,” Erika said.

“At their age?” Sophia said. “They should be minding themselves. That’s what growing up is all about.”

“I should have known better than to invite Outworlders here,” Jaime muttered. “They all live soft lives. They never grow up.”

“They can’t all be like that, Jaime,” Sophia said. “If you believed what you’re saying, you wouldn’t have wanted to represent us at the Conference in the first place.”

“The Conference! The Outworlders will blame us for whatever happens, and use that as an excuse not to agree on anything.”

Jaime glared again at Gavrel.

“And it will be *your* doing. Why did you have to bring your stupid children here?”

He paused for a moment, shaking his head.

“My doing, too. I’ve been played for a fool.”

Nobody could think of anything to say after that. Nothing that wouldn’t simply add fuel to the fire. But before long, there was a buzz on her com, and Sophia had to speak again with Pryala Nair.

“They’re tipped over,” she reported somberly. “Near a lake. She’ll have to grapple with our flier; they may not be able to mate the access in time.”

Gavrel just stood there, as if he weren’t a human being, but an engine that had seized up.

Erika suddenly left the room.

* * *

Ari knew he was going to die here. They were too close to the seething lava. It was already too hot for comfort in the flier, despite the insulation. He and Val had both cried themselves out, after the shock of the accident, after she had cursed him at the top of her voice. She couldn’t curse him any more than he had cursed himself, but that didn’t matter now.

There was another flier hovering near them, and the pilot was talking to them on the com, but they couldn’t understand a word he was saying. Ruiz’ flier wasn’t equipped for translation. Why should it be? If there were something the Madstop man wanted him to do, he’d never know.

Their flier shifted again. Maybe one of the struts had given way under the heat. But then the craft began slowly to right itself, and a few moments later it was actually lifting. How could this be? The Madstop man was shouting excitedly; they could hear

him over the com, but the other flier didn't seem to be doing anything.

As their flier turned back towards Ruiz' home, with no sign of intervention from the other craft, Ari wondered if it was all a hallucination. That must be it, the heat had gotten to him, and he was only dreaming that he would survive. And yet it didn't feel hot any more. He wasn't sweating. None of it made any sense. He looked at Val; she too seemed to be confused. But then, maybe she too was only a dream now.

But when the flier arrived back at the Ruiz home, and somebody mated the lock, and the door opened, and he saw the look on Ruiz' face – right then he knew it wasn't a dream. It became a nightmare when Tata elbowed his way past Ruiz and began to beat him savagely while shouting incoherently. Ruiz managed to pull him off, but the rage in his father's voice still knew no bounds.

"You... you've ruined everything... live down... how am I ever going to live this down? I should have left you with your slut of a mother!"

"I'm the one who's going to handle this," Ruiz said, his anger more controlled but perhaps even deeper. "You're no better than he is. And as if things weren't bad enough, we have to deal with the matter of Erika. Do you have any *idea* what that means?"

"But how was I to know?" Tata pleaded, clearly on the defensive.

"If this gets out, it'll torpedo the conference – destroy the hopes of every world represented here, and countless others that stand to benefit."

It might have gone on like that, but the com buzzed and Sophia answered. She looked grave as she listened to Pryala.

"They want us to come to the Syndicate HQ," she said. "All of us."

"They?" Jaime asked.

"Daksha's already called the Arbiter," Sophia said. "It's supposed to be a routine accident enquiry. They'll pick us up. No mention of Erika, until we get there, and get into Quiet."

Ari was bleeding, and too stunned to think straight. But he did have one coherent thought: *Erika*? What did all this have to do with Erika?

* * *

It was Pryala who'd been the first to know what Erika had to do with it. She and

her husband Daksha.

Pryala had called Daksha to the front of the Emergency Response flier from the grappling controls as soon as she spotted the naked woman approaching. What they saw didn't make any sense, but they couldn't deny the evidence of their senses. Only a Supremis could survive unprotected in the hell that was the surface of Madstop.

"For a second, I thought it was Kalla," Pryala said. "But when I caught her in the high beams, I knew it *couldn't* be. And why would Kalla be out here? How could she possibly know?"

She and Daksha stared spellbound through the murk, as the woman righted the downed Ruiz flier and then lifted it gently. It was an incredible feat, calling for perfect balance as well as super strength. But that wasn't what jumped out at them. It was her red hair. It was a dead giveaway: artificial coloring would have burned away as quickly as her clothes. She couldn't be a Velorian, and she couldn't be an Aurean – they were all raven-haired. That left...

"Geheimite," Daksha said.

Pryala nodded.

The Geheimites were a legend. Nobody they knew had ever seen one. People on most worlds doubted their very existence, or so they'd been told. But there was no room for doubt now – only for apprehension. The common rumors about Geheimites were contradictory: they were the Procreators of the Galen, they were pacifists who secluded themselves on their own world and never had intercourse with any other... or they were rogues, at times pursuing their own agendas, whatever those might be; at others, working with the Aureans.

All or none of these tales might be true of the Geheimite who had come to this world. The only certain thing was that if word reached the Conference, it could cause a panic. Daksha and Pryala were on the same wavelength there.

"It doesn't really matter why she's here," he said.

"Only *that* she's here," she said.

It had taken them only seconds to observe the facts and realize the implications. On Madstop, you had to be able to think on your feet. Right now, they knew they had to be very careful about how they dealt with this on an open comnet.

“The Ironcastle children are safe,” Pryala told Sophia Ruiz, choosing her words carefully. “On their way back.”

“Thank God,” said Sophia. “We’ll thank you and Daksha in person. But... there’s something else. Something terrible.”

“Terrible?”

“Their tutor, Erika. She’s... she must have thought it was all her fault and... she went out... through the lock. She’s gone. I don’t know how I’m going to tell the children.”

Pryala cut her off. “The tutor’s safe, too.”

“I don’t understand. She—“

“Just keep your eyes out as they approach.”

Pryala kept the Emergency Response flier hovering over the Ruiz home as Erika – not her real name, of a certainty – carefully deposited the family flier on the landing stage. There wasn’t any damage to the craft’s door, fortunately, and it mated to the house airlock without any difficulty. Having accomplished her mission, Erika floated next to the landing stage – then beckoned to the Nairs, and pointed back the way they had come, gesturing that she wanted to parley.

* * *

The Arbiter was a middle-aged woman named Cecilia Tramontano. Ruiz said she was tough but fair. Gavrel didn’t like the sound of that.

They’d gone to an awful lot of trouble. The Nairs had to come back with the ER flier, grapple the family flier and set in on the ground, then proceed to the landing stage to pick up everybody else for the trip to what was as close to a government center as Madstop had. It was all but deserted this late at night, the part-time Syndicate workers having all headed home.

Arbiter Tramontano had greeted them, but then retired to her office, saying that it was necessary to research precedents regarding assignment of responsibility in a case like this. That left to the others to carry on an argument that had started aboard the ER flier.

“Is this how you raise your children on Selene?” Ruiz carped.

Gavrel waved his hands helplessly, “I assure you that we don’t; this is regrettable but...”

“You must raise them to be thieves,” Pryala said.

“They are not thieves; I am certain that they intended to return the flier.”

“As if they had any right to it in the first place,” Sophia said.

“Intentions don’t matter,” Daksha spat. “They have dishonored our hospitality and violated our trust.”

“But they’re just children!” Gavrel pleaded.

“And your responsibility; what kind of world do you come from where children can take something without asking?”

“I assure you—”

“Your assurances are worthless.”

“Not to mention that you’ve compromised the Conference,” Sophia added.

“We’ll never know what Erika was up to,” Pryala said, with resignation plainly in her voice. “She could be on her way to Aria by now.”

“I can’t understand why she went after the children,” Sophia said. “If weren’t for that, we’d have never known.”

“Forget about Erika,” Jaime said. “She’s history. We can’t do anything about her, but we can sure do something about this Ironcastle bunch.”

Daksha glared at Gavrel.

“If it were up to me, I’d cut off exports to your world, or at least slap a 50% export tax *on top* of any other existing charges,” he said, then turned away in disgust.

Gavrel knew it was pointless to argue with him. But Sophia tried to calm things.

“We can’t hold all Selene responsible for the actions of the Ironcastles,” she said. “But whatever we do, we’ve got to settle things here. The fewer people who know about it, the better. Above all, we’ve got to keep it out of the Conference.”

It was at this point that Cecilia Tramontano returned. But she wasn’t alone. Erika, still naked and grimy from her labor outside, was right behind her. It was a conversation stopper, to say the least. Except, of course, for the Arbiter.

“It seems that you all have made my day,” Cecilia said crossly. “I can’t seem to find words for *what* you’ve made it.”

Erika knelt as if in supplication. But Cecilia ignored her.



"This... creature has confessed to being a Geheimite," she complained. "I had to refer to the databank to learn what that meant. I have no particular interest in legends, but it seems that we have encountered one. Why she is still here, she has not deigned to inform me.

"When it comes to a sense of decency in the broader sense, you haven't given a good account of yourselves. Still, that has to be balanced against the understandable stress of the situation. As for Erika, or whatever her name is, she hasn't given an account of herself at all. But she wants to speak with you. That is why she is still here."

Finally, Erika herself spoke up.

"There is nothing I can say about myself that you have not already guessed," she said/ "And yet I do feel a certain sense of... responsibility. Otherwise, I would be on my way home already. There is nothing more for me to learn here."

"Who are you working for?" Daksha asked.

"Not the Aureans, if that is your fear. Beyond that... there is no beyond that."

"Why are you still here?" Ruiz asked.

"Believe it or not, I want you to succeed with this conference. You Terrans are so pathetic, and yet sometimes you can act nobly. You are trying to do so here, and so I... Not that it matters. But I don't want to be the cause of whatever befalls the children, or their father, even if they have shown great foolishness."

Gavrel winced, but stood silent. But Sophia who came to their defense.

"What challenge do they have to be any different?" she asked. "On Madstop, we are challenged every day. We live in a very unforgiving environment."

"I can appreciate that," Erika said. "I've spent enough time on mature worlds like Selene, where one need not be a Supremis to feel safe and secure."

"It's not that..." Gavrel felt awkward. "It's not that we don't have trouble back on Selene..."

"You don't know the meaning of the word. And yet, here you are, imagining that you are playing some great part. I don't see any great hope for you, but perhaps there is still hope for *them*. That's why... that's the only reason."

"What hope do you see for them?" Cecilia asked.

"When they were watching the Conference, I could tell that they were really

interested, in spite of themselves. I remember Ari wondering why there couldn't be men serving as Gatekeepers. Just like that. It would solve a lot of problems. And yet, nobody at the Conference proposed it."

"The Velorians would never accept it," Jaime said.

"Things change. That's what this Conference is all about," Sophia countered. "I wish I'd thought of it. We should talk to Kalla about it."

"The children," Erika said, "I'd like to have a word with them before I go. Will you indulge me?"

Cecilia at Gavrel and Ruiz and the rest, then back at Erika.

"For whatever it's worth," he assented.

When the Ironcastle children were brought in, there seemed to be sadness on Erika's face.

"I don't know what's going to happen now," she said. "It's up to the Arbiter. He'll think of something. I'm not sorry I came to Selene, and came into your lives, even under false pretenses. But I never meant you any harm. I should have played my role better than I did, but I had another role, and I was playing that. I'm sorry for that, and I've tried to make up for it. I've given you back your lives. I hope you make something good of them."

That was all.

She turned and left. Cecilia cycled the airlock for her.

* * *

Arbiter Tramontano did think of something. It wasn't fair, but it was necessary. It began with an official announcement by Daksha Nair on behalf of Emergency Response that Jaime Ruiz and his guests had lost their lives in an unfortunate flier accident. Only those directly involved could have challenged its veracity, and they had all agreed – however grudgingly – not to do so.

Sympathy calls poured in to Sophia, but the other miners all agreed that life, and the Conference, must go on. It was not surprising, then, that a special virtual meeting of the Syndicate anointed her as Madstop's representative. She appeared at the very next

session, playing the part of a grieving widow but also broaching the proposal for mixed Gatekeeper forces – a proposal that would become a key to reaching Final Consensus on the assessment issue.

Kalla herself approached her afterwards to express sympathy and appreciation. “I had been thinking of raising the matter myself,” she said. “But I wanted this to come from a Terran. It is essential to the success of the Enlightenment that it be seen to be and indeed be founded on the initiatives of the Seeded worlds, and not as merely a gift or an imposition of Velor. You have my gratitude, and your memory will be honored by countless Terrans in the years to come.”

“Thank you,” said Sophia. That was all she *could* say under the circumstances. But she had the comfort of knowing that Ari had seen the Conference embrace his idea, even if he could never claim credit for it.

Once the Conference was over, and all the Outworlders had left Madstop, Jaime Ruiz would be able to surface again. But not the Ironcastles. What could be done about them? They couldn’t stay on Madstop, they couldn’t be sent back to Selene, and they couldn’t be packed off to some other Seeded world. They’d promised not to talk about Erika, but promises could be broken. So they agreed to leave it to Arbiter Tramontano to determine their fate.

In the end, Tramontano left it up to the Scalantrans. The Scalantrans were very cooperative, having had a very profitable trading relationship with Madstop. They also had their own stake in the success of the Enlightenment. The next ship to call agreed to take custody of Gavrel and his children, spiriting them off planet. But they couldn’t keep them indefinitely. It was the ship’s historian who made a daring proposal to solve the problem of the Ironcastles.

It took years of preparation, and the Scalantrans had to call in their markers with a group of Seeders who were still active. The Scalantrans could prepare their wards for their new lives, deepteaching them in the language, history, customs and survival skills of the world and land that was their destination. They could give them shots against a broad range of diseases, to ensure them a chance of living long and healthy lives. But only the Seeders could provide the necessary transportation in one of their stealthed raiding ships.

By the time everything was ready, Ari and Val were adults, and impatient to find new lives among people of their own kind, however strange they might seem. Their old lives were over; they had no idea what had become of Mata, or what was happening on Selene (Katya had married Vlad, but divorced him two years later; the Radical party had been defeated, and the Popular Front was back in power,). But at last the day came.

“Maybe we’ll have some fun and adventure,” Ari said.

“And get married and have children of our own,” Val said.

“Adventure, all right,” Gavrel said. “I wouldn’t count on the fun. It’s pretty primitive there, after all.”

But things were finally ready. They transferred to a Seeder ship bound for a raid, only this time the ship would give as well as take, if only in a small way. And so it was that Gavrel and Ari and Val, through a long and devious journey, found a new home on a world where they would never even be tempted to talk about the lives they had lived before, still less about Erika or the Velorians or the Aureans or, for that matter the Seeders themselves. It was a remote world, a world by no means safe and secure, a world called Earth, a country called England, where it would not be Galactic Year 1017-2, but the Year of Our Lord 1532.