

Going to Gimli

Part 2

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Some years earlier, Sarah had been a student travelling on the Mars-registered starliner *MSS Adventure Seeker*, journeying from Atlantis to Mars to continue her planetary geology studies. Onboard she met and hit it off with Zane, an apprentice in the Asgardian Merchant Marine working with the *Adventure Seekers* sublight fusion engines. A standard milk-run, no different than innumerable prior flights. But instead of emerging from hyperspace near the blue-green world Mars, the ship found itself face-to-face with the brown and gray world Earth.

The ship should have jumped away again to get away from Earth, but the hyperdrive did not engage. Nor did the fusion engines. The ship instead drifted like a dead hulk, heading closer to the nightmare world. Things were not improved by the ancient defense network around Earth. A nuclear weapon was propelled from the vast cloud of debris orbiting Earth and struck the starliner in the aft section. Of the fifteen hundred souls aboard the *Adventure Seeker*, only seven hundred made it to lifeboats before the ship tore itself apart; of those, three lifeboats with sixty survivors in total landed on Terrestrial land masses within sight of the natives.

Of the twenty passengers on the lifeboat Zane had managed to hustle Sarah into just as the ship exploded, three were eventually rescued by the Marines. It took months for Zane to be healed of his physical injuries; less for Sarah. The interstellar news media obsessed over the *Adventure Seeker* story for some weeks; Earth being a banned world, it had been generations since anyone had left the surface. But while the media had whispers and rumors of what had happened to those who had crashed on Earth, nothing concrete had been released. And this was the way that the cruise line company, the manufacturer of the ship and the manufacturer of the ships AI wanted it. Zane would be reasonably safe in front of the media... once healed of his injuries, he simply looked deeply unhappy. But Sarah, while far less physically injured than Zane, had been far more shaken by when she'd witnessed and been subjected to. To help assure Sarah's silence, an extremely generous financial settlement was offered to her. To Zane – with an unfortunate limited-liability contract with the cruise line company – a much smaller settlement was made available. It was enough for Sarah to buy an island of her own where she could avoid the company of other humans. Zane purchased the small sector of the island which had an old, but intact, starship hangar and landing field. For a year Sarah was content to simply live in solitude, Zane her only human companion. But as she healed, she began to grow bored. The purchase of Fletcher

Island only consumed a small fraction of her total fortune, so she bought a starship. And thus the Rhoades Interstellar Transport Company was born.

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Zane remembered these assholes. After he and Sarah had settled in on Fletcher Island, they had been contacted by a group of enthusiasts known as “The Adventure Seekers.” They were, as it turned out, an Atlantean private club that had been around for a few generations, a group of the wealthy who travelled to various civilized worlds and did vaguely adventurous things. It seemed they had no relationship to the ship other than the coincidental name. But when they discovered that two survivors of the *MSS Adventure Seekers* last adventure were living right on their doorstep, they became quite persistent in seeking an audience. It took months of increasingly profane denials from Zane before they gave up. Or so it had seemed.

The tour guide completed her transition to a bright crimson color. She knew why her clients wanted this particular crew and had been dreading this moment. Would there be tears? Anger? Shouting? A sudden cancellation of a very lucrative contract?

St. John-Smythe’s smile faded several shades as he processed the reaction he was getting from the *Corpus Georgis* crew. Sarah subconsciously shuffled half a step back; Zane subconsciously took half a step over to put himself partway between Sarah and St. John-Smythe. Sarah grew wide-eyed, stared off in the distance... the thousand yard stare of people who have seen things people should not see. Zane affected a neutral aspect, which for him was a visage of some menace.

“I say,” St. John-Smythe said at last, subdued and somewhat tentatively, “we are very happy to be here.”

“Spectacular,” Zane droned. He sighed quietly and looked past St. John-Smythe and his people, out to the silver aircraft floating in the ocean. The gentle waves barely rocked the craft.

St. John-Smythe was taken aback. His plans had suddenly hit a bump that he simply had not expected. He was used to being treated deferentially by those he hired, not with anger and contempt. There was a silent standoff of several seconds. Finally, Zane turned to Sarah:

“Captain... perhaps... you should head to the flight deck and get preparations for launch underway. We’ll take care of getting the passengers squared away.” She nodded, absently, then turned and walked off towards the ship, still hidden in the darkened hangar.

Through the electronic telepathy permitted by the communications implants (the only implant that Sarah had, due to it being fantastically useful), Zane thought to George: *See to it she gets to the flight deck – or at least her quarters – ok. Use a bot to help her if you need to. And for Odin’s sake, don’t be a dick to her just now.*

And for once George simply acknowledged, without hint of sarcasm or snark.

Openly, Zane said, "George, if you'll send the bots out, we can get these fine people's luggage stowed aboard."

Tour agent Stroad quietly let out the breath she'd been holding. The milestone she had dreaded had passed without cancellation.

A small army of bots emerged from the hangar. Roughly humanoid, they were general purpose units, manufactured for the occasion, painted a bright, clean white. Individually they were non-sentient units capable of carrying out mundane tasks, but for now they were directly controlled by George. There was one bot per passenger. Zane began to realize that this might not have been sufficient, given the vast pile of luggage that the hovercrafts own bots were beginning to disgorge. Oh, well.

"If you'll have the passengers line up," Zane said through clenched teeth to the travel agent, pointedly ignoring St. John-Smythe, "we can get the boarding process underway."

While the bots transferred the luggage to the lower cargo hold, the passengers lined up behind St. John-Smythe. One by one Zane examined each person and their ticket, committing each to memory. None was anybody he had ever heard of, though as he read off each name George silently fed him basic biographical data. The majority were the scions of old money; they had done little to nothing to earn their vast fortunes, but they were generally quite skilled at spending it. In a society of plenty, there was little enough for the wealthiest to spend their money on except for land, parties and impressing each other. Fortunately, funding expeditions to explore, exploit and colonize distant worlds had long been considered an appropriate way for the super rich to both acquire new land and impress each other. And thus mankind kept up its slow outward crawl.

As each ticket was checked and confirmed, a bot would come up and Zane would say "Welcome aboard. Please follow the bot to your suite."

He noted that in almost every case, the passengers looked into the hangar and at the ship with a faint look of disdain and disappointment. Clearly, this was not what they were used to. *Too damned bad.*

Most of the passengers were human, and most were old, though of course they didn't look it. But a few were not standard Homo Sapiens. The Kleins, a Neander couple, as flashily stylish as the rest even with their pronounced brow ridges. A semi-married pair of gengineered felines, Harry and Samantha Nightstalker; wearing clothes and standing bipedally, otherwise they could hardly be distinguished from regular housecats. *Make sure Esmeralda is locked away in the forward crew section,* Zane communicated to George. At least the minor mystery of the "small" suite was solved.

Following after the cats was a woman with a truly astonishing figure, all the right curves in all the right places. Spectacularly perfect, she would have nearly stopped Zanes heart except that she was all white plastic and chrome. *Huh,* Zane thought to himself. *I wonder how George is going to react.* Zane had never seen a sentient android that married a sexy form to a hard armor exterior. *Takes all kinds, I guess,* he thought, then processed her through. She was one Miss Andrea Winters, a chief executive of the

Bertha Arms Corporation. Zane's eyebrows shot up. "I have a few of your guns," he told her. "Well designed." She gave a well-practiced businesslike smile and passed through.

The rest of the passengers were largely forgettable. The crowd mostly looked like thirty-year olds, though they moved with the economy of much older people interested in and practiced at avoiding risk. Only one of the passengers stood out to Zane: a blond, blue-eyed giant, twenty centimeters taller than him, well-muscled, perfect skin properly tanned with just the right amount of five o'clock shadow that Zane understood women found irresistible. The man was a perfect physical specimen, the best physique that breeding, engineering and a diligent workout regime could provide, and he held himself with an apparent sense of self-assurance that demonstrated that he was fully aware that he was perfection personified. Zane hated him instantly. "Welcome aboard," he said through gritted teeth and forced smile, "Mr. MacDougal. Please follow the bot to your suite."

MacDougal said nothing, but gave Zane a faint smirk that showed that he knew perfectly well what was going on in Zane's mind.

When the last passenger was processed, Zane was left standing with the travel agent, his hands in the pockets of his vest. He glared at her for a moment. She had dealt with angry clients and angry contractors before, so she didn't shrink from him. But she was clearly uncomfortable. "So," Zane said as last. He made a popping sound with his lips. "The *Adventure Seekers*, huh? Say, that's cute."

"Yeah..."

"Can I take a wild-assed guess why they mysteriously chose this ship and crew for their little cruise?"

"I think," Strood said thoughtfully, "that most of them are only interested in you just to say that they got you to fly them. They're not looking to bother you beyond that."

"Most," Zane pointed out. "How about that SinJin goofball?"

"He's their club president," Strood pointed out, "and their public face, so far as they have one. He was most interested in having me procure your services... and to keep their identity secret until they arrived. That is not unusual for them. They are all really quite wealthy, after all, and don't like to advertise where they're going in case someone... tries something."

"Hmmpf."

Strood looked down at the concrete surface at her feet for a moment. "I realize that this may be somewhat disconcerting for you and Captain Rhoades. But it is the line of work you both chose, and you're getting paid exceedingly well for it."

"Yes," Zane admitted. "An average person's yearly income per passenger for a two hour flight and some sightseeing."

"Don't think of it that way." Strood brightened considerably, and put on a devious grin. "Think of it as approximately the amount of money each of your passengers earns just in interest on their holdings in

less time than it'll take you to fly to Asgard. When I suggested that rate to St. John-Smythe, he didn't even blink. I should have asked for ten times as much. I think I could have gotten it."

"Hmm," Zane articulated.

"Well," Stroard said at last, "it's time for both of us to be going. Remember, your passengers are used to a certain... level of refinement and attention."

"Rapture," Zane replied with a deepening frown.

Jennifer Stroard chuckled at that and turned to walk back to the waiting hovercraft. Zane turned the other way and found Loff waiting patiently near the hangar door.

"Is there going to be trouble?" Loff asked. Human behavior was alien, but he was pretty sure that trouble was brewing.

Zane looked down at him seriously, laid a hand on his furry shoulder.

"Nope."

Before he entered the hangar, Zane turned back to watch the travel agent as she boarded one of the hovercraft. The three vehicles fired up their ancient engines, roared to life and scooted back towards the flying boat, shooting directly into the opened maw of the aircraft. As the nose of the aircraft closed down, the eight engines banged and coughed themselves to life, belching out clouds of black smoke as the propellers began to spin. Zane thought it an oddly beautiful sight and wondered what it would be like to fly a vehicle like that, using nothing but direct physical inputs to control aerodynamic surfaces. A flock of surprised seagulls that had landed on the vast wing of the plane took flight in alarm, flying off into the bright blue sky. Sighing once more, Zane turned from the sight of the slowly taxiing airplane and headed into the hangar to board his starship.

Somewhat to his surprise, Zane found Sarah on the flight deck, busily going through the preflight checklist with George. She looked tired, but not nearly as gutted as he'd feared. Once again, he was impressed by her ability to bounce back.

"Everyone checked in and tucked away?" she said, looking up at Zane, who nodded and settled himself into the pilots seat. "Then let's get underway."

With George as the ships AI, a Captain and a pilot were superfluous additions to a ship, but long tradition ever since the Singularity had put the bulk of normal ships operations into the hands of the human crew. Still, automation made flying a starship a simple process. With the press of a button, the ship sprang to life. The antigravs dropped ships weight, low-powered lift jets picked it up off the hangar floor; forward thrusting jets slowly pushed it out into the sun. Silvery-gray, with an added iridescence due to the fine hyperdrive circuitry, it gleamed in the bright tropical sunlight and hovered over the broad concrete pad.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Sarah spoke, a little unevenly, into the general PA system, “this is Captain Rhoades speaking. We are about to lift off for our flight to Asgard. If you would like to tap into external monitors, the feed is located on channel one of the vireal system. You can watch on monitors, headsets or heads-up if you wish. Time to hyperdrive initiation is about five minutes; after that it will be a two hour and sixteen minute flight to Asgard. When we emerge from hyperspace, we will open the lounge so that you can see Asgard with your own eyes. Please enjoy the flight.”

George dutifully shut down the PA system. Sarah sighed, sinking back into the co-pilots seat with a glum look.

“You okay?” Zane asked.

“Yeah,” she responded. “Just... you know.”

“Ayup.”

Sarah gave a slight shrug and a *Let's Go* gesture. Zane pushed forward on the throttle; the ship accelerated away from the hangar and looped around the island towards the east, quickly gaining speed and altitude. At 10,000 meters up, with the island well astern, he ignited the main engines. A faint blue torch shot from the bank of gravitic fusion engines and the ship leapt skyward. The blue sky visible through the flat canopy panes quickly turned a dark indigo and then black. The artificial gravity systems compensated perfectly; no sense of acceleration, or even vibration, was felt by passengers or crew.

On ascent, Zane kept up the legally required but entirely unnecessary running commentary with Atlantis Space Traffic Control. Sarah again switched on the PA system: “This is the Captain. We are about to jump to hyperspace... now. We will exit hyperspace near Asgard in two and a quarter hours and then begin a sixteen hour tour to Gimli Lodge.”

The transition to hyperspace was uneventful to the point of going completely un-noticed by all aboard except for the bridge crew. The flight to Asgard was scheduled to be similarly uneventful, at least for the crew: the passengers would be settling in, aided by their robotic servants. But afterwards the crew was to be made available.

“Gah,” Zane muttered, leaning back in the pilots seat. He quietly pulled out a small flask and, turning quickly away from Sarah, took a sip of whisky. Sarah saw out of the corner of her eye, but did nothing more than glower slightly. She, too, was suddenly not looking forward to this...

At the appointed hour, minute and second, the *Corpus Georgi* popped out of hyperspace. Despite Sarah and Zanes unfortunate experience with the *Adventure Seeker*, most ships could and did emerge from hyperspace voyages with navigational errors of vanishingly small percent. In this case, they were within half a kilometer of the spot in space they had targeted. George confirmed successful arrival; Sarah nodded agreement.

“Well, let ‘em know before they tear the joint apart,” Zane suggested. Sarah nodded again then flipped on the PA system, exhaled loudly once in preparation.

“Passengers, this is the Captain. I’m pleased to announce that we have successfully arrived in the vicinity of Asgard. If you’d like to make your way to the lounge, we will shortly be raising it for your viewing pleasure. Thank you.”

“Woo,” Zane said.

A few short minutes later Sarah strode into the lounge, followed by Zane. The passengers had all already flooded in, and had mostly seated themselves before the great window. But as the window currently showed nothing but the inner structure of the ships hull, they were quickly growing impatient.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Sarah announced. With an unpracticed gestural flourish, she gave the signal for George to raise the lounge. First the large ship-back doors above the lounge opened, raising thirty degrees. A slight mechanical whine, muffled through the ships structure, accompanied the raising. Then the lounge itself began to tilt upwards. The view of the hull interior slid down the window; the passengers leaned forward for a better look as the top surface of the hull moved slowly past, finally passing below the bottom edge of the window. Visible beyond were the stars and Asgard’s sun above. But no planet.

As a grumbling murmur began to spread through the passengers, Zane gestured subtly with his hands. The ship responded to his piloting inputs with a slow roll. The stars moved up. From below the window came a blindingly bright curve: the limb of a small rocky pock-marked world. The roll continued until the edge of the world was straight out as seen from the lounge.

Zane sighed, preparing to speak. “We are currently passing over Asgard’s largest moon, Gladshiem, at an altitude of fifty kilometers. In a moment... ah, there it is.”

Not knowing what to look for, the passengers hadn’t seen what Zane saw... a faint diffuse area of light slowing rising over the limb. The passengers ceased murmuring and bent their attention to the scene before them.

The *Corpus Georgi* was swinging over Gladshiem, flying “sideways” with the window of the lounge pointed in the direction of flight. The moon was a fairly standard chunk of crater-covered rock, with the metallic glints and tracery of industry, commerce and occupation. Only a little over five hundred kilometers in diameter, it was a rough, misshapen sphere of brownish gray, dappled here and there with domed forests and lake and cities.

From the vantage point of the lounge, the moon was slowly turning below while at the same time the stars were rising. The faint glow which Zane knew so well grew in brightness until the passengers could clearly see a bright orb climbing from behind the moon, surrounded by a wide, diffuse haze. As the minutes rolled by, the glowing object continued to climb, growing in width and height, revealing itself to not be a sphere but a tall arch. When the arch filled the window from top to bottom, a new body began to emerge from behind Gladshiem’s rim: the curve of a large blue-green-white world.

Asgard was a terraformed world slightly larger than Earth, slightly less dense, with close to the same surface gravity. While it had oxygen in the air and water on the surface, in proportions comfortable to

the lifeforms from abandoned Earth, there would be no mistaking the one world for the other. For Asgard had none of Earth's vast oceans, nor any of its large continents. Instead, it was a mass of glacier-capped mountain ranges separated by vast, deep lakes. More obvious, though, was Asgard's extensive ring system.

Extending from a thousand kilometers above the surface to nearly fifteen thousand, Asgard's rings had formed as a series of small moons were slowly dragged towards the planet and torn apart by tidal stresses. The moons had been separately formed, with different chemical and mineral makeups; the result was that Asgard was girdled by rings of slightly different colors. Seen with the light-dazzled naked eye, as the passengers of the *Corpus Georgi* saw them, the rings appeared white. The careful observer could make out the red of the inner A ring, stained by iron oxide; the slightly greenish tinge of copper oxide in the B ring; the yellow sulfur C ring; and the faint blue of the fuzzy and poorly defined outermost D ring. While the colors were out of order, the appearance of the rings suggested to early colonists a natural comparison to a rainbow. And thus the rings were named Bifrost, after the Rainbow Bridge that connected the world of men to the world of the Norse gods.

Gladshiem orbited some forty-five thousand kilometers out. This put it well outside the Roche Limit, but close enough for a magnificent view of Asgard and Bifrost. Gladshiem was a captured moon, and orbited with a ten degree inclination; it was now about eight degrees above Asgard's equatorial plane, letting the tourists look slightly "down" onto the rings. Asgard continued its climb above the horizon of Gladshiem.

Zane and Sarah, standing side-by-side behind the passengers, gazed at Zane's homeworld. Sarah saw a beautiful world, so unlike her own. Like her world, Asgard had a multitude of small moons, but Bifrost dominated all. Asgard was now fully risen above Gladshiem's horizon, but still only half visible: it was in quarter phase with the "upper" half sunlit, the "lower" half in darkness. The rings cast their shadow across much of the northern hemisphere, adding a bluish cast to the shadowed areas. The rings themselves were mostly sun-lit, with a bite taken out of the backside of them by the shadow of Asgard. The path of the *Corpus Georgi* took it past the moon and towards the planet. The ship slowly pitched down until the ring system was parallel with the deck of the lounge.

"Welcome home," Sarah said to Zane in a low hushed tone.

"Mfff," was all Zane replied.

Zane, in contrast to Sarah, looked upon Asgard and saw the world that had rejected him. A part of him still recognized the beauty of the place, but the feeling of "home" had long since been transferred to Fletcher Island.

The passengers continued their murmuring. But clearly the show met with their approval: the murmuring was appreciative and congratulatory. Zane sighed nearly silently when he saw, out of the corner of his eye, St. John-Smythe coming towards them.

"I say," he said, directing his beaming smile alternately to Sarah and Zane and back, "Bloody good show!"

"Half of the credit belongs to Asgard itself," Sarah told him. "It's hard to go wrong with a view like that." She gestured out the window at the planet and its rings, now dominating the view from side to side.

St. John-Smythe nodded, sagely.

"But the rest of the credit must go to Mr. Waterman, here, and Loff, for designing this lounge, and to George for designing the approach trajectory." She gestured down to the far end of the lounge, where the Thessi was busy trying to look something other than uncomfortable with the attention he was getting from some of the passengers.

"Indeed!" St. John-Smythe nearly shouted. "A first-rate presentation in fine accommodations."

Zane admitted to himself that the joint did look fairly snazzy, especially for something slapped together at a moments notice out of shipping containers.

"So, what's next?" St. John-Smythe asked.

Sarah looked out the window, nodding towards Asgard. "In a few minutes a short thrust will put us on a four-hour transfer orbit to Asgard. There we'll spend fifteen, sixteen hours touring the planet and its rings."

"Wonderful!"

As Captain Rhoades and the leader of the *Adventure Seekers* carried on a polite conversation about what the next day would entail, Zane noticed that a crowd was starting to gather around them. They were maintaining a respectful distance, but they had a look of hopeful expectancy that set his teeth on edge. Especially when he saw MacDougal looming off to the side, still with the self-satisfied grin. Zane glanced at him; as he did so, MacDougal cocked his head in recognition, then slowly and deliberately turned his gaze towards the Captain, looking her up and down appreciatively.

Zane's right eyelid twitched.

St. John-Smythe, taking note of his group, suddenly made a change in his tone, switching from light-hearted to somewhat more serious. "I say," he said unnecessarily, "since you are both here and we seem to have a spot of time..."

Uh-oh, Zane thought. *I know where this is going*. With a thought, he switched on his internal communications link with George.

"...We were wondering if we could impose upon you to regale us with tales..."

Crap, Zane thought. Then, to George: *call the Captain to the flight deck*.

“Captain Rhoades to the bridge, please,” George’s voice called out over the PA. “Captain Rhoades to the bridge.”

“If you will excuse me,” Sarah said quickly to the group as a whole, then turned to leave. As she did so, she gave Zane the briefest of squint-eyed looks.

“Ah,” St. John-Smythe stammered as Sarah turned and left. Zane stayed put, raised an eyebrow and stared at St. John-Smythe.

“You were saying?”

“Well,” St. John-Smythe continued, “As you may have surmised, since we are the Adventure Seekers, we have a natural and understandable interest in the fate of the starliner *Adventure Seeker*.”

“Uh-huh.” Zane’s arms folded across his chest. He noticed, almost subconsciously, that the low background chatter that had filled the lounge had dropped to near silence. Everyone was listening.

St. John-Smythe cleared his throat. “Seeing as how you and the Captain were on the last voyage of the *Adventure Seeker*, and had your own adventure on Earth...”

Both of Zane’s eyebrows shot up. “‘Adventure’,” he said, as if greatly surprised.

“‘Experience,’ if you like. The two of you did go down to an off-limits planet and return, dear fellow. Few others have met the inhabitants of Earth and lived to tell the tale in many decades.”

Zane’s eyebrows shot down. “No. Not many have. Several of my friends died there.”

“Yes,” St. John-Smythe said, slowly. Making a show of carefully choosing his words, he finally came out with it: “We were all wondering if you would be so kind as to tell us the tale. It would mean ever so much to us.”

Zane kept his arms folded across his chest, in part so that he could keep his fists out of clear view. For several seconds he remained silent, coldly regarding the odd little man in front of him. He considered a range of responses, some rational, some emotional. In the end he went with:

“Nope.”

A low muttering of disappointment spread among the gathered crowd. “Ah, well...” their leader stammered. He thought for a second. In a lowered voice he said “We would be willing to pay extra for the privilege.”

“That’s nice. Nope.”

“But why not?” St. John-Smythe pleaded. He was not used to being denied, especially when offering a nice bribe.

“Look, dude,” Zane said, then, remembering the surrounding group, “uh, people... Earth is a bad memory. It’s a horrible goddamn place. What happened there is not something I want to talk about. Hell, it’s not something I really *can* talk about. If you want the story, talk to the Marines who rescued us.”

“Uh, we did. Or tried to, anyway.”

“And did they tell you to go fuck yourselves?”

“In as many words, yes.”

Zane smirked. “Good. Trust me, you’re better off not knowing. Look out there.” He gestured out the window towards Asgard and encircling Bifrost. “This is one of the most beautiful places in human occupied space. You’ll gain far more wisdom and fulfillment if you just look at that sight for a while than if you were to listen to me blab my story. All you need to know about Earth is that it sucks and you don’t want to go there.”

“Yes, but...”

“And what do you care, anyway? Y’all are rich as hell. Just buy a town full of novelists to write you fantasies on an hourly basis.”

St. John-Smythe looked around at his people, then back to Zane. “That’s just it, you see,” he said, seriously. To Zane it sounded as if the ridiculous accent had faded somewhat from his voice. But then it came back: “We are all, as you quite rightly note, quite, quite rich. We can have whatever we want. And we have had everything we wanted. We have had all the finest in real and virtual experiences. But fantasy has grown stale, and reality rather too safe. You, on the other hand, have had experiences we can only dream of.”

Zane stared at St. John-Smythe in frank amazement. “Dream,” he said in disbelief. “Dream? You know the public version of what happened to us, and you think it’s something to dream about? Look, pal, only three of us were rescued from the Earthers. Two of us have spent the years since trying to forget that ‘dream.’ You know what happened to the other lady.”

“Oh, come on,” a deep bass voice said from Zane’s right. Zane turned and found MacDougal looking down at him, a condescending grin on his face, a slight shake to his head. “It wasn’t as bad as all that. You’re just ramping up the drama. Trying to make a more interesting story? Or trying to negotiate a high price to play storyteller?”

As Zane processed that, George whispered in his head, *Remember, if you kill a passenger, there will be trouble with the Better Business Bureau. Just FYI.*

Thanks heaps, Zane silently replied. Rather than slaughtering MacDougal then and there, which he suddenly had the urge to do, Zane simply rubbed his forehead with his hands in an effort to stave off an inevitable headache. After a few seconds, he was slightly relieved to find that the passengers were

mostly looking at MacDougal with some combination of anger and contempt. He may have said what they were thinking, but they had not been gauche enough to actually say it.

“Look,” Zane said, exasperatedly, looking tiredly at MacDougal. “Do you see this eye?” he asked, pointing to his left eye. MacDougal nodded.

“Do you see this leg?” Zane asked, pointing to his left leg.

“Of course,” MacDougal replied.

“They are not the ones I was born with.” He let that sink in for a few seconds. “Do you have any idea how painful it is to regrow limbs and organs?”

“Uhhh...”

“No, I didn’t think so. It’s not fun. It’s not fun to remember, it’s not fun to talk about. It was the worst experience of my life, by far. The Captain’s, too. So, please, if you have questions about what happened on Earth, by all means, keep them to yourself.” This Zane said calmly, politely, almost cheerfully, but managed to work in a faint hint of menace. MacDougal continued to smirk, but Zane noticed that it had faded slightly. *Well, baby steps.*

“But hey,” he added brightly, after a few seconds of silence, “this here’s a pleasure cruise around the prettiest ring system in who knows how many parsecs. I grew up around here and cut my teeth flying through those rings, so if you have any goddamn questions about that... hey, we’re all about the fuckin’ customer service. Feel free to ask away.”

As the crowd murmured in disappointment, Zane leaned over to St. John-Smythe. “Fair warning,” he whispered in the shorter man’s ear. “Do not pester the Captain with this nonsense. She dislikes being reminded of Earth. And if you upset her... that will upset *me*. And I’ll chuck your tubby ass out the nearest airlock.”

Zane gave his best, fakest smile, waited for a few seconds, then nodded politely to St. John-Smythe and deftly stepped to the side, out of the muttering throng. He saw Loff at the other end of the lounge, surrounded by his own, smaller, substantially more female gaggle of admirers. Zane made his way towards his besieged crewmate. On the way he took note of those few passengers who were actually at the window, taking more interest in observing the celestial view than in pestering the ship’s crew... the Nightstalkers were both standing with their front paw-hands on the window. Small as they were, the gravitational anomaly at the window was especially noticeable to them; indeed, they seemed to be enjoying it. Standing precisely halfway down the long window, the theoretical best vantage point, was the android Winters. Bolt upright, perfectly motionless and devoid of expression, she could have been mistaken for a statue, but her eyes were open just a little too far. Zane could tell that beneath the hard metal and plastic exterior functioned an artificial brain every bit as capable of appreciating beauty as any organic mind.

And there was Loff... surrounded by half a dozen women and shuffling back and forth from one foot to the other in nervous irritation. The women were asking him questions about his race, himself, his fur, his ship, his crew... a machinegun blast of queries too fast for him to process. Zane considered leaving him to his fate as a gag, but decided against it.

"Ladies," he said, as cheerfully as he could muster, "I need a word with my technician. If you will pardon us?" Zane waded in, put a hand on the diminutive alien's shoulder and led him away to a chorus of disappointed "Awwws."

"Having fun?" Zane whispered down to Loff as they made their way across the clear part of the lounge.

"I'm not happy," Loff replied. "I prefer when we only haul cargo."

"You and me both, buddy," Zane replied with a chuckle. "Why don't you head down to the cargo bay and check on the bots and whatnot." They both knew that that was a meaningless task, but it would get Loff away from the passengers for a while. They began to walk towards an exit.

"I have an idea," Loff said.

"Tell me," Zane replied with interest. Loff laid out his thoughts; Zane nodded. "Yeah, I like it. Bounce it off Sarah just to be sure, but I don't see why not." At the exit, they went different directions.

To be continued...