

# Going to Gimli

## Part 3

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Zane entered the flight deck. "What was that?" Sarah demanded with a frown as Zane flopped himself down into the pilots seat.

"Hmm?"

"You had George call me up here."

Zane shrugged. "They wanted to talk about Earth."

"Yes, I know. So what? We knew they would."

"I figured you wouldn't want to have a crowd of idiots jumping on you about it."

Sarah shrugged. In truth she had been relieved to be called away just in the nick of time... it had been years since she had spoken to anyone, including Zane, about her time on Earth. She could not look at Zane and think of Earth and not feel a sharp stab of sadness and shame. And she had no desire to speak of it now. But still... "I don't need you to protect me, you know."

Zane raised an eyebrow in doubt.

"Don't give me that look."

Zane stuck his tongue out, rolled his eyes, put his thumbs in his ears and waggled his fingers. "This better?"

Sarah glared at him. "Not especially." For a second, Zane believed she was actually angry, but then he caught the gleam in her eye.

He sighed, tiredly, and rolled his head around his neck. "I suppose I should head back down there. Poor ol' Loff was getting set upon by the womenfolk, so I sent him down to the cargo bay to get some peace and work on a project he thought up. But someone should go hang out with our social betters, I suppose. Just give me a few minutes to cool off a bit." He leaned back and closed his eyes.

Sarah said nothing. Instead, she simply sat and watched Zane. She knew him well enough to read him like a book. And right now, every chapter was entitled "Irritation." So she went back to silently reviewing the transfer orbit plan for the next few hours. Within seconds, Zane was faintly snoring.

Precisely two minutes later, "WAKE UP!" blared from the flight deck speakers. Zane lurched into consciousness, flailing wildly for a second. Sarah gave a slight yelp.

"What the hell, man!" Zane shouted.

"You said to give you a few minutes," George said cheerfully. "Two minutes passed."

Zane blinked blearily a few times. "Oh... you suck. You really do." With a groan, he pulled himself free of the seat, nodded to Sarah, and wandered off to his small cabin. He was tempted by the bed, but instead settled for a quick cleanup. Then he made his way back down to the lounge.

Somewhat to his surprise, the crowd was well behaved. The ship was a little closer to Asgard, a little higher above the ring plane. From this vantage point, the rings were brilliantly displayed, as was the night side of Asgard. Faint aurora were visible above the north pole; Asgard's cities, substantial in number if small in population by historical human standards, stood out as bright yellow-white pinpoints. Several thunderstorms flashed with lightning. The outermost ring was slightly fuzzy; a small moon had been torn apart to form it only recently, geologically speaking, and as a result the particles had not yet settled into a flat disk. Several sizable settlements floated within the ring plane; most in gaps between the rings, but a few floated among the pebbles and boulders and dust of the rings. From this distance, the only ones that were visible were a few that were currently in the shadow cast by Asgard itself, letting themselves be seen by the artificial light they emitted. Several settlements could be faintly seen orbiting beyond the outermost ring.

Zane stood well back of the crowd, most of whom were clustered along the window. Arms folded across his chest, he scanned the crowd, picking out the unwelcome figures of St. John-Smythe and MacDougal. He understood clearly why he disliked St. John-Smythe; anybody that chipper set his teeth on edge just on general principle, but the insistence on bringing up Earth was a special little something extra. But MacDougal... Zane knew he didn't like him, but wasn't clear why. Sure, the giant passenger clearly had the hots for Sarah, but to Zane's knowledge he wasn't really Sarah's type. There was little chance of MacDougal sweeping her off her feet, and none at all of MacDougal getting away with anything untoward and unwanted... George would burn him down to the ground and dump the ashes into the ship's toilet if he tried. But there was still something about MacDougal that irritated Zane.

With a sigh, Zane continued to examine the crowd. Most were flashy, yet eminently forgettable: the paradox of the try-too-hard fashionistas. The Neanders stood out. Little taller than Sarah, they were half again as wide and all muscle. To Zane's eye they were an unlovely couple; too brawny, too hairy, with facial features that were just off enough to be unsettling. But the Neander race, since its creation centuries ago, had proven quick witted and friendly. Zane had never gotten to know one as there were still only a few thousand in all the universe, but he'd never heard anything but good things about them, other than some weird religious beliefs they were said to have.

Also readily recognizable were the uplifted felines. Zane had a fondness for cats, but he was unsure what to make of uplifted cats. Given the ease of genetic manipulation, cats had been uplifted many times, often in very different ways and generally not capable of cross-breeding. Many times the experiments had proven failures, but there were several dozen recognized species of uplifted intelligent housecats. The couple on the ship now looked to be of one of the more fortunate breeds. Zane looked up their specifics on his heads-up; information on the Siggurdsson breed of smart-cat floated before Zane's eyes courtesy the neural implants. The Siggurdsson line was one of the older lines, more than three centuries old, and had been tweaked until it was stable. No tinkering had been needed to the line for more than a century; the cats were as smart as humans, as capable of speech as humans and had paws with extendable fingers every bit as dexterous as human hands. Apart from a more domed head to fit their larger brains, they were hardly distinguishable from regular house cats.

Loff had once asked Zane about the human tendency to uplift species, de-extinct others, and sometimes create new ones out of whole cloth. The Thessi and the Narth had never done any such thing, but humans did it with abandon. Zane trotted out some of the high-falutin' philosophical explanations that had been used for centuries. When mankind went out among the stars they quickly found the Thessi and Narth... and then nobody else. Three and a half centuries of further exploration had found nothing higher up the evolutionary ladder than some ambitious slime molds and oddly colored ferns. So it was looking like the universe might be largely empty, a situation humans just refused to accept. We wanted people to talk to, people with other ways of seeing the world. The Thessi were fine, if generally pretty dull, but no humans had ever spoken face to face with a Narth without the monstrous reptiloids going promptly insane. So if the universe wouldn't provide new faces, we'd make our own.

At the time, Zane couldn't make out Loff's response to this explanation. But Loff seemed to more readily accept Zane's personally preferred explanation for humanity's genetic tinkering: "Because we can." That explanation seemed to satisfy the little fuzzi-ball, if not exactly cheer him.

The data on the Siggurdsson line became less clear on the subject of their behavior. As with all uplifted species, some element of the human gene code had been spliced in to give them human-level intellect; but their brains remained essentially non-human, with their instincts fighting with their new programmed behaviors and educations. Even the oldest and most established of the uplifted species could react in ways humans didn't expect. But right then Mr. and Mrs. Nightstalker were astonishingly human... sitting right at the edge of the window, staring at the night side of Asgard.

A reminder alert binged in Zane's ear. "Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "if you look off to your left you should shortly be able to catch sight of Vingolf, Asgard's second largest moon. It should pass fairly close in front of us."

As the passengers rushed to the window to see the sight, Zane seemed to fall into a trance. His eyes were out of focus as he saw before him graphics and data visible to him alone. George had the ship well in hand, but Zane slightly altered the course and orientation of the ship with subtle, arcane hand gestures.

“Excuse me,” an unwelcome voice broke into Zane’s consciousness. Standing before him, once again, was St. John-Smythe. Zane saw him as if through a brightly lit fog, a fog filled with vectors and gravity field contours. “But are you piloting the ship at this moment?”

Zane scowled slightly, his eyes looking past St. John-Smythe. “I’m trying to,” he muttered. “If you’ll excuse me, closing velocity is several dozen kilometers per second, and I’d prefer to not impact the moon.”

St. John-Smythe started. “Ah,” he said, unable to come up with anything better. He turned to the window.

The crowd began to mutter; Vingolf was not visible, just the night side of Asgard, the rings and the slim crescent of dayside. Up on the flight deck, the canopy presented a different view... not only to the side of the ship towards Asgard, but also the usual ship’s forward direction, which right now featured onrushing Vingolf. Sarah’s eyes grew wide. “Huh,” she muttered, checking the trajectory on the instrument panel. *This should be interesting*, she thought, pulling up camera views of the passenger lounge.

The passengers were growing impatient and confused; no moon was visible, despite the promise. “Erm, I say, Mr. Waterman,” St. John-Smythe stammered uneasily.

“Hold,” Zane said quietly to the annoying little man before him. Zane was looking not out the window, but towards the blank wall at the forward end of the lounge. He could see through it as if it was the thinnest glass. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said at last, loudly, clearly and with an odd, flat stilt. “Behold.”

Vingolf, a lump of rock closer in shape to a potato than a sphere, suddenly filled the window. Some sixty seven kilometers in maximum length, it was passing in front of the windows at a range of less than fifteen kilometers. Many of the more skittish passengers yelped and leaped back from the windows, certain that a collision was imminent. Zane had planned it that way; of course the trajectory would safely skirt the moon and the transparent sixty kilometer bubble that enveloped the worldlet except for the two small ends that extended outside it. But at these speeds, the impression of onrushing disaster was inevitable. *Shazam*, Zane thought to himself, taking no small pleasure in watching some of the passengers stagger back from the windows in a panic.

“Vingolf is a paraterraformed world,” Zane suddenly said, in a professorial tone. The moon continued to pass rapidly in front of the window. “Inside the bubble is a breathable atmosphere; gravity is negligible on the surface of the rock, but a thriving green ecosystem has taken root. Small as the worldlet is, several thousand call it home. The redwood forest that covers the bubbled central part of Vingolf is already half a kilometer tall; nobody is too sure how tall the trees will eventually get.” Through the transparent bubble the forest could be seen, looking like nothing so much as a fungal or mossy growth on a small rock. But this rock also had a haze-filled bubble around most of it.

As quickly as Vingolf had come upon the ship, it passed by. Zane quickly yawed the ship to keep the moon in view as it raced into the dark; as a flourish he added a slow pitch up so that the outer universe seemed to be spinning around the moon, which was quickly shrinking to just a bright speck.

Much to Zane's surprise, applause began to break out among the passengers. Some of the most enthusiastic "hurrahs" came from those who had most theatrically freaked out at the sudden appearance of the moon. After a few additional seconds, Zane re-oriented the ship to point the lounge back at Asgard. But from an artistic inspiration – or from sheer cussedness – he left some of the roll in place. The view of Asgard spun once every few minutes. Job done for the moment, he shrugged off the heads-up vision augmentation and powered down his manual control of the ship, settling back into the here-and-now. And found that he was surrounded by passengers all yammering at him. "I say, old chap," St. John-Smythe blurted jovially, "jolly good show!"

Zane cocked up an eyebrow and looked down at St. John-Smythe and reminded himself to look up the odd phrases. *Ain't nobody talks like that*, he told himself silently.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Zane announced, "that should be the last distinct event for a bit. We will continue our approach to the Asgardian rings over the next two hours. We've synched up ships time to that of Gimli; it is now twenty-two-fourteen." At that, the lights in the lounge began to very slowly dim. "We will pass over the outer edge of the Fuzz Ring at oh-oh-twenty-two, and will begin our approach to Gimli at about ten hundred. The bots will be here to attend to all your needs, but for now I'm going to go catch some sack time. I'll be back in the morning."

"Ah..." St. John-Smythe began, raising a finger to make a point. Zane scowled sharply at him and turned away, stalking towards the exit.

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"Alarm! Alarm!" George suddenly started yelling. Zane promptly fell out of bed, muttering incoherent curses.

The alarm sounded in Sarah's quarters as well. "What?" she yelled in response, leaping up out of her bed.

"There is a fight in the passenger quarters, room five. Your attention is needed."

Sarah was immediately on the move. Grabbing her Captain's Jacket and Hat, she ran from her room down the passageway towards the newly outfitted passenger cabins. *Wait*, she thought to herself. *Cabin five? Isn't that...*

The door opened before she got there. From inside came a pair of horrible screeching sounds. Sarah ran up to the doorway and looked in just in time to see Esmeralda, the ship's cat, fighting in a blur with Mrs. Nightstalker. Over and over they rolled, tearing at each other with claws and fangs, screaming their hatred of each other. "WHAT THE HELL?!" Sarah yelled.

This brought the combatants up short. The fight stopped for a split second.... long enough for Esmeralda to dash out the door. Esmeralda took a flying leap directly at Sarah, catching her square in the chest. Sarah caught her and with an effort held onto her.

Sarah stood in the doorway, looking into the small room in shock and confusion. Mrs. Nightstalker stood on all fours in the middle of the room, her clothes partially shredded, her back arched, her ears back and her tail standing straight up, fur on end. The enraged cat was panting and growling, not seeming to see Sarah in the doorway. Sarah saw Mr. Nightstalker sitting in a corner of the room, looking rather sheepish.

Zane came thumping down the hallway, trying to pull on a jacket to cover the sidearm he wore on his belt. As he came up to Sarah, he began to pull out the small weapon; she looked pointedly at it and shook her head. Zane left it in the holster. "What's going on?" he asked in a whisper.

Sarah shrugged extravagantly, making a face displaying her confusion. Zane poked his head around the door over Sarah's shoulder to look in the small cabin.

"Mrs. Nightstalker," Sarah said calmly. The cat didn't take any notice, but continued to growl. "Mrs. Nightstalker," Sarah said again. This time the cat noticed Sarah; the growling stopped, her ears cocked somewhat forward, the back relaxed ever so slightly.

"What's going on?" Sarah asked in as professional a tone as she could.

Mrs. Nightstalker narrowed her eyes, staring daggers at Esmeralda. "She knows what she did," the cat said acidly, punctuating it with a hiss. Esmeralda hissed back.

"Uhhh..." Sarah looked down at her own cat, who was hanging on for dear life. Were it not for the bulletproof nature of the ostentatious Captain's uniform, Esmeralda's claws would have drawn blood.

Zane looked from Esmeralda to Mr. Nightstalker and back. He caught the furtive look that the male cat gave her, and uttered a quiet "Ah ho ho." Sarah shot him an angry look and he took a step back away from the door, a big grin forming.

"Let's just..." Sarah trailed off, at a loss for words. "Yeah. Ummm. Well... you people have a good evening." She took a step back from the doorway, George sliding it closed for her. Just as the door crossed her field of view she saw Mrs. Nightstalker rounding on Mr. Nightstalker, who was backing into the corner.

Sarah shook her head, frowning. Zane stood a pace back away from her, silent. After a second of looking down at the floor, she turned to look up at Zane. Zane's mouth was wide open, the jaw dropped in as expansive a look of humor as she had seen on him in a long, long time. He locked eyes with her and gave a wheezy, quiet bark, "Ha!"

At that moment, the sound of a ruckus came faintly through the door. More feline screeching could be made out, along with a high pitched "You son of a bitch!"

Sarah couldn't hold it in any longer. As she began to bust out laughing, she quickly pushed past Zane and moved down the hallway back towards the crew quarters. The two, barely containing themselves, rushed forwards. Zane quickly slapped the button to close the door, taking one last look down the hallway. When he and Sarah had first entered it it had been empty, but now passengers MacDougal and Winters were leaning out of their doorways. Apparently alerted by the sound of the catfight, they were now each staring down the hallway towards him. The door closed; Zane gave a slight shudder, his laughter momentarily stilled.

Sarah leaned against the bulkhead and let loose laughing. She still held Esmeralda, who was now quite calm and placid. "Bad kitty," she said without a hint of anger.

"I'm pretty sure a ship's crewman boffing a passenger is against some rule or other," Zane said, leaning against the other side of the hallway, arms folded across his chest. "Especially when the passenger's spouse walks in on it."

"Yeah, probably."

The two were silent a moment, both looking at Esmeralda, now content in Sarah's arms.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'm'a gonna go get tore up and crash again," Zane said. He patted Esmeralda on the head and scratched her under the chin, earning a purr. With a little wave to Sarah, he entered his quarters, the door shushing closed behind him.

Sarah shook her head slightly. "George," she said at last, looking vaguely towards the ceiling, "wasn't Esmeralda locked in the crew area?"

There was a perceptible delay: "Yes."

"And how did she get into the passenger area?"

Another delay. "Someone must have let her out."

"And who might that have been?"

George didn't answer.

The approach to Gimli began at ten-hundred hours the following morning. Sarah, Zane and Loff were up by seven hundred; they ate their breakfast together in good spirits, despite Zane's minor hangover. Dressed in their officer finest they made their way to the lounge by eight hundred. Many of the passengers were already there, ooh-ing and ahh-ing at the sight out the window. Asgard was much closer now; the ship was within the outer radius of the rings, just a few miles above the ring plane. As Sarah entered, Asgard was half lit; the rings were a field of bright white above the ship, a vast celestial ceiling. "Roll us 180 degrees please," Sarah whispered to Zane. "Slowly."

Zane nodded and blinked, activating his neural controls; subtle hand gestures translated into small momentum changes, causing the ship to roll very slowly. Over a span of two minutes the ring plane transformed from a ceiling, to a great wall, and finally to a floor. A smattering of polite applause broke out from several of the passengers.

Sarah gave Loff a nod; he trotted off to the far end of the lounge where a group of bots were wheeling in a featureless metal crate. He led the bots to the middle of the great window; a crowd of curious passengers circled them, mostly maintaining a respectful distance. The walls of the crate fell away, revealing a reflecting telescope half a meter in diameter and three times that in length, standing on a sturdy tripod. The bots lifted the telescope from the bottom of the crate and carried it the short distance to the window. The tripod magnetically stuck itself to the floor so that the end of the scope was mere centimeters from the window. "This is an old fashioned optical telescope," Loff announced. "The photons that you see with your eye at the eyepiece are the actual photons that come to you from across the vacuum of space. No processing, just the real light." With that he backed away; the passengers rushed to get to the scope. Fortunately, before fights could break out the bots brought out two more large scopes and a half dozen smaller ones, distributing them along the length of the window.

Sarah quietly congratulated Loff on the idea of setting up telescopes. "Good thing we had the design specs on hand for the fabbers."

"Actually, no," Loff said. "George didn't have these designs available, so I had to redesign a number of components."

Sarah's eyebrows shot up. "You did that and got the fabbers to finish them all last night? Wow. Glad I hired you!" Loff's ears twitched with embarrassed pride.

Passengers continued to wander into the lounge over the next hour; the bots set up tables, chairs and a buffet. All was going according to plan. Until...

*We're being hailed,* George announced to Sarah and Zane through their comm implants.

*Asgard Space Traffic Control?* Sarah thought back.

*No. An approaching Asgardian Space Navy vessel. The cruiser ASNS Say What Again is approaching. It will be here in ten minutes.*

Zane and Sarah gave each other worried looks. *Do they say what they want?* Sarah asked.

*Nope. Just a message to stand by for rendezvous.*

"Spectacular," Zane added out loud. He fired up his full neural heads up display, letting him see the outer world. The *Corpus Georgi* was on an elliptical orbit heading closer to Asgard; currently three kilometers above the ring plane, maintaining that distance with slight thruster power. The *Say What Again* was on an intercepting trajectory on the other side of the ring plane. To rendezvous it would need to come through the rings. The heads-up showed Zane the projected trajectories. "Uh-oh," he mumbled.



“You might want to head up to the flight deck,” he quietly said to Sarah. She gave him a piercing look, but then nodded briskly and turned to go. Zane started to shuffle towards the window. A few meters from it, he stopped, staring out into space with the glassy-eyed look of someone seeing more than just the view. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said at last, in a loud, commanding voice, “You may want to see this. We are about to have a visitor.”

Under Zane’s commands, the ship slowly tipped down thirty degrees to get a better look at the ring plane. From this distance the uniform white of the rings could, for a careful observer, be seen to be made of an uncountable number of individual particles, each slowly jostling with its neighbors. Even so the ring appeared to be opaque and smooth.

As the passengers crowded the window, the background murmur suddenly rose in pitch and volume. Ahead of the ship the rings were beginning to be disturbed, stirring as if the surface of a pot of water starting to boil. Suddenly a long form could be seen shoving its way through the rings; shaped like a stubby pencil or hexagonal prism, it came through sideways, sloughing off a shower of dust and ice particles that it had dragged along in its passage through the rings. It left behind it a wake of expanding disturbance in the ring; not quite a rippling wave, more of a fluttering as the gasses from the ships thrusters stirred the particles. The ship, covered in pulverized dust and ice and shedding a ragged cometary tail, continued to rise, approaching the *Corpus Georgi*.

As the passengers babbled their confusion over what they were seeing, Captain Sarah was on the flight deck watching the approach on the monitors. *What is this?* She thought to herself.

A stern woman’s voice came over the comm system. “Commercial transport vessel *Corpus Georgi*,” it said, “this is Captain Waterman of the *ASNS Say What Again*. What is your cargo and destination?”

Sarah’s eyebrows shot up. “We’re a chartered passenger cruise out of Atlantis, heading to Gimli Lodge. Is there some problem?”

There was a momentary pause. “Ships the likes of yours do not go to Gimli. Do you have clearance?”

“Yes,” Sarah snapped. “We were cleared some time ago for this flight.”

“Hold.”

Sarah frowned and shrugged. She spent the next several seconds scowling at the warship through the canopy; the ship had braked to a relative halt a few hundred meters from the *Corpus Georgi*, and was motionlessly smoking and steaming as the dust and ice floated away from its surface. It was surrounded by a thin and expanding haze.

The warship was easily twice the *Corpus Georgi*’s length, but much narrower. Sarah estimated that chances were good that her ship outmassed the warship. But even so, the wide tail end of her cargo ship was covered with gravitic fusion thrusters, quite a number more than the *Say What Again* had. She wondered if she might be able to outrace the warship.

Finally Captain Waterman returned to the audio communications channel. "All right, we've checked with Gimli Lodge and they confirm you are expected. Have a good day." The audio clicked off.

"Ahhhh... thank you, Captain Waterman. Ummm, by any chance are you related to Zane Waterman? He's a member of my crew."

A few seconds passed in silence. "Yes," the commanding officer of the warship finally responded, flatly, unemotionally. "He's my cousin."

"Huh." Sarah thought for a moment. "Would you like to speak to him? I can get him on."

"That will not be necessary," Captain Waterman said. "We have tasks. Good day." This time the click of the audio transmission being cut off sounded like a door being slammed.

"Imagine that," George piped up. "Someone else who doesn't like our Zane."

With the need to privately communicate with the warship apparently over, Sarah returned to the lounge. She found Zane standing behind the crowd at the window, watching as the *ASNS Say What Again* ignited its fusion engines. The ship surged ahead, parallel to the ring plane; as it accelerated away it left behind the dust cloud it had brought with it from its passage through the rings. Sarah stood next to Zane and watched, silently.

"How strange," Sarah heard someone say behind them. She turned and saw the android Andrea Winters standing a short distance away, her chrome-and-plastic arms folded over her equally synthetic chest. Synthetic though she may have been, she was as capable of facial expression as any human, and right now she was expressing puzzlement. "Do warships often stop by for a visit?"

"This'd be a first," Sarah admitted. "Unless there's an emergency, we've always been left alone. Can't imagine why we were of interest today." She looked back out the window. The crowd was beginning to pull back from the window and disperse; the *Say What Again* was now just a bright dot well off to the side. Sarah glanced at Zane to see if she could detect any hint of recognition. Did he know his cousin was the commanding officer of that warship? But he gave no hint. She decided not to mention it.

Zane noted that the ring was now well and truly disturbed; the fusion exhaust having swept a gash dozens of meters wide and kilometers long through it. "That'll take forever to clear up," he muttered.

"I imagine it was our trajectory," Winters said. "We are heading towards a rendezvous with Gimli Lodge. Perhaps the local authorities noted that and wondered why."

Sarah shrugged. "Could be. The Asgardian Navy is the biggest military force in the known universe, and they haven't had a decent fight in... what? Fifty years? I imagine they're always on the lookout for any chance to act the hero."

Zane silently nodded in agreement. Miss Winters looked to him again.

"You were in the Asgardian Navy, weren't you?"

“Just the Academy. Never graduated, as I’m sure you know.” Zane caught sight of Loff attempting, and apparently failing, to instruct the Kleins in the operation of one of the larger telescopes. “If you will excuse me,” he muttered, moving off toward the new problem. Demonstrating an ancient optical device to a pair of people from a race thirty thousand years extinct seemed more fun than trying to avoid another debate about his past.

There was an awkward silence between Captain Sarah and Miss Winters for a moment after Zane left. Finally... “So, Captain, do you find this work fulfilling?”

“I’m happy with it. I get to set my own hours and I get to see the universe. There’s not a whole lot more you can ask for.”

“Do you often carry passengers?”

“Every few flights we carry a few. But this is the first flight we’ve carried more than a half dozen. Well, not counting colonies. We carried a boxed colony one time that had, I think it was twenty five hundred. But even then there were only three minders. Surly group.” Sarah shook her head as she thought back on that bunch.

“Do you get many AI passengers?”

“No, not really. But then I don’t think there’s really a whole lot of AIs that like to travel this way, are there?”

Miss Winters shrugged. “Well, once we’re manumitted we generally find the work we like, and then stay there. We’re not a vacationing bunch, I suppose. Though there are more of us who want to get out and see the universe with our own eyes than you might think. There really is something remarkable about actually being out here, even if the entire thing could be simulated easily enough.”

Sarah vigorously nodded in agreement.

The two stood side by side for a moment, silently contemplating the view out the window, human and AI seeing the same sight and having, though they didn’t know it, much the same emotional reaction.

“I understand,” Miss Winters said at last, “that you do have something of a history with AI passengers.”

Sarah looked at her, a confused frown. “Pardon?”

Winters raised an eyebrow. “There are stories in our community,” she said in a conspiratorial tone, “that your ship had an issue with an errant fabber some time back.”

Sarah took a step back as her face turned beet red. “That’s...” she stammered, “Uh, yeah. Not really something I thought was publicly known.”

“If the story is to be believed,” Miss Winters said, “your solution to the issue was... innovative. And surprisingly humane, I must say. Not too many humans would have done what you and your crew did.”

"It... seemed the thing to do at the time," Sarah muttered.

Winters smiled broadly. "Well, it attracted our interest. We've been keeping an eye on the situation since then."

"Hmmm," Sarah hummed. She cast a dubious look at Miss Winters, who was just then noting the passage of an itinerant iceberg.

Several minutes passed in silence. Sarah was deep in thought, wondering just what Miss Winters had meant about "keeping an eye on the situation," and just who the "we" were. Was it like the "Royal We," centuries out of date? It would be just like the super-rich to adopt an ancient turn of phrase like that. But maybe there were some number of AIs in cahoots...

Zane returned from the telescope. Sarah noted with satisfaction that the Kleins were now successfully using the scope. Zane nodded to her and stood next to and slightly behind her, looking out the window stoically. A telltale flashed in his heads-up. "We are on preliminary approach to Gimli," he said quietly. "Got your speech ready?"

Sarah sighed. "Yeah," she muttered. She patted a pocket where she had a folded sheet of paper with hand-scribbled notes.

The lounge had been slowly filling with passengers. Zane checked passenger count on his heads-up; apart from two passengers using the head, they were now all in the lounge. The place was crowded, but the passengers seemed to be giving Sarah and Zane a measure of space. Sarah noted this, wondering if it was because Miss Winters was next to them.

"About five minutes to visual," Zane whispered to Sarah. She nodded.

"Well, here goes, I guess," Sarah murmured, moving off towards the middle of the lounge. She left Zane standing next to Miss Winters.

The two were silent for a moment, each gazing out the window across the vast white plain of the rings towards the green world ahead. Eventually, though, Zane grew slightly uneasy. "So," he said at last. "Your company makes good firearms. I especially like your omnigun. I've gotten some good use out of mine."

She looked up at him and gave him a businesslike smile. "That's good to hear. Any chance the story might be worthy of a testimonial?"

Zane chuckled. "Probably not. I used it during a full retreat a year or so back. Not the most heroic incident."

Winters frowned slightly. "Yes. Well." She shifted her weight from side to side nervously. Her voice softened into a low feminine purr. "I must apologize about Mr. St. John-Smythe. He is a monumental prat, but he does represent the interest many of us have in your story. We really would like to hear whatever you'd care to tell us." She unfolded her arms from across her chest, an action Zane caught out

of the corner of his eye. He noted that her chest was somewhat larger than it had been a moment earlier.

*Really?* he thought to himself. *That's kinda... obvious.*

Miss Winters laid a hand on Zane's arm. Zane could feel that her synthetic skin, while it looked like hard, cold plastic, was actually warm and soft. "I... would be most appreciative if you could tell me of your time on Earth."

Zane blinked a few times in rapid succession; a small, somewhat sad smile formed. "Really?" he said, turning to face her. Her eyes were open wide, a look of innocent expectation. "Really? First that theatrical goofball tries to bribe me with money. Now you're putting the moves on me. What's next? Are the Nightstalkers going to threaten to shit in my shoes? Is MacDougal going to beat the shit out of me if I don't talk?"

Winters suddenly looked startled. She quickly glanced around the lounge, finding MacDougal at the far end facing out the window, looming over the heads of shorter passengers. In that fraction of a second, Winters' superior eyesight saw that while MacDougal was facing outwards, he was looking at her out of the corner of his eye, a subtle smile on his lips. As their eyes met, his smile grew fractionally broader; his eyes turned back towards the view out the window. Winters turned back to Zane, who was giving her a quizzical look.

"Y'all are a bunch of loons," Zane said at conversational volume, loud enough to be overheard by several nearby passengers who did not much care for such talk. "Well, I never!" Zane heard one mutter.

"You've got more gold than Andvari, yet you hire out this boat to haul you to Gimli. And you're seemingly desperate to hear me babble about something that happened years ago. So desperate that you're willing to, well, *stoop*." Winters pulled back from Zane, looking haughty and offended. "You're a CEO of a major corporation, for god's sake. Why the hell do you even *care*?"

Miss Winters glared at him in a thoroughly human fashion. Zane registered that her chest was back to its original size. "You interest us," she said at last, in a businesslike tone, "you and Miss Rhoades. Not only do you have first-hand information on Earth, the mere fact of your survival and escape makes us curious about you. What kind of people you are. How you've changed. Whether you'd ever go back."

Zane snorted. "Go back? Not bloody likely. There's nothing there worth going back for, and all kinds of reasons to stay the hell away."

Winters gave him a piercing stare. "What did you find on Earth?" she asked quietly.

Zane turned and began to walk away from her. Halfway through the first step he stopped, stood for a moment. Finally he looked back over his shoulder. "Monsters," he said grimly. Then he walked away.

