

Going to Gimli

Part 4

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Asgard was looming large. The ship had passed over the daylight side of the planet and was approaching perigee and rendezvous with Gimli Lodge. Sarah was in the lounge, milling with the passengers; Zane was on the flight deck in the pilots seat in preparation for maneuvers. Gimli Lodge orbited in the narrow gap between the A and B rings, 1500 kilometers above the surface. The *Corpus Georgi* was in the gap flying “backwards,” preparing for the braking maneuver. The ship was now coplanar with the rings, visible only as a razor-thin line of brightest white across the sky, bisecting the dark green and blue world.

Zane thumbed on the laser communicator trained on the Lodge. “Gimli Lodge Approach Control, this is commercial starship *Corpus Georgi* out of Atlantis. We’re currently nine-two-seven kilometers antispinward your location, ring coplanar, preparing for decel thrust to bring us to rendezvous velocity, over.”

“*Corpus Georgi*, this is Gimli Lodge Approach control, we see you. You’re right on time and trajectory with your flight plan. We are on schedule to receive you, Gimli Lodge North Polar receiver, one-three-two-fiver seconds, over.”

“Ah, roger, Gimli Approach Control. Looking forward to it. Per the schedule, *Corpus Georgi* Actual, Captain Rhoades, is scheduled to do a presentation for the passengers in... fifty seven seconds. We will be transmitting that.”

“Confirmed, *Corpus Georgi*. Please stand by for arrival of your escorts.”

“Roger, Gimli.” Zane cut the transmitter. “You ready for this, George?”

George snorted. “Just another docking maneuver,” he said.

“Sure,” Zane said with a chuckle.

In the lounge, the PA system suddenly rang a gentle bell to get the passengers attention. The glow panels in the lounge dimmed until the only source of light came from the planet outside. Silence fell over the passengers; a small area of glow panels in the middle of the room re-luminated to cast light on

Sarah. The portion of the floor she was standing on had raised up a meter so that most of the passengers could see her. "Well, we're just about there," she said. She spoke at a conversational level, but her voice was amplified across the lounge. The gravity diodes in the floor and ceiling diverted a tiny fraction of their effort to making small spots of the air here and there jitter, replicating and augmenting Sarah's voice around the wide room. "If you look a bit off to your right, you can just make out Gimli Lodge. From this angle it's just a dark spot, but when we get closer you'll see why it deserves its name."

Sarah launched into a stock history of the Lodge, how the small innermost moon of Asgard was turned from a bare rock into the control center for the initial terraforming of Asgard, and then into a garden and a privately-owned playground. How a lumpy airless rock with a longest dimension barely over twenty kilometers was fitted with a synthetic singularity to raise the surface gravity and a transparent bubble to keep the air in. Of course none of this was new information to the passengers, but the exercise was expected. While she spoke, the passengers were all pressed up against the window or jostling for use of the telescopes.

On the flight deck, Zane was watching a monitor showing a quartet of objects heading out from Gimli on a fast intercept trajectory with the *Corpus Georgi*. They did not present much of a sensor target, but neither were they especially stealthy; instead, they were simply small. He knew them to be the escorts... but damned if he didn't wonder if they might be missiles. *Just my luck to get blown out of the stars because one of my passengers pissed off the wrong asshole*, he thought in passing. But the lead sensor blip sent out a recognition ping.

"Commercial starship *Corpus Georgi*," a powerful female voice spoke. "This is Valkyrie Byrnhildr. We will escort you to Gimli Lodge. Fall into formation with us, do not deviate. Confirm."

"Huh," Zane said. "Sounds like a friendly bunch, don't they?"

"Indeed," George replied, dubiously.

Zane toggled the comms. "Byrnhildr, this is *Corpus Georgi*. We hear you."

"Here they come," George said. Seconds later, the four escorts shot past the ship at a kilometer a second, far too fast for Zane to get a good look at them. All he saw were silvery flashes. On the monitors, they braked at a bone-shattering 120 g's, turned around and flew back to the starship. This time they flew past at only a few meters per second. One of the escorts placed itself less than ten meters in front of the flight deck; the other three positioned themselves before the main lounge window.

"Huh," Zane muttered, finally getting a good look at the escort. "How about that?"

Floating in front of the canopy was not a ship, but, at first glance, a woman. A woman made out of polished silver; dressed in fanciful golden pseudo-Viking armor. On her left forearm was a polished silver circular shield; in her right hand was a long golden sword. She floated in a straight standing pose, clearly unharmed by the vacuum. His heads-up told Zane that she was slightly more than two and a half meters

tall, massed nearly a ton and was putting out several megawatts. "Ya don't see that every day," Zane wondered aloud.

The giant silver and gold woman stared into the canopy without expression. It was not clear to Zane if she was capable of emoting, or if the face was a solid immovable mask. The eyes were solid black orbs, entirely disconcerting.

The appearance of the three escorts just outside the window of the lounge had raised a ruckus among the passengers, who had now lost all interest in Captain Rhoades' speech. It was just as well, for she had stammered to a halt, and was herself staring silently at the three silver Valkyrie just outside her ship. The three figures were motionless and in identical poses... ramrod-straight with the shields raised to cover their torsos, the swords drawn, the sword-arms low, the swords pointed forward toward the passengers.

Sarah contacted Zane, thinking to him: *Just what the hell is this??*

These are our escorts to Gimli, Zane thought back to her. I've heard rumors about the Valkyrie, but not too many people have ever seen them. We follow them. If we don't... dunno. They hack the ship apart?

Not funny, Sarah replied. She felt a tug at the sleeve of her jacket. Turning, she found Loff standing next to her. She stepped down off the platform to speak with him; the passengers might not have noticed, but she could make out the ear twitches and disturbed fur that indicated that Loff was nervous. "Excuse me," he said, quietly. "But what are those?"

"Androids, I'm pretty sure," she replied. She asked Zane to confirm that. Zane pulled up the full functionality of his heads-up, examining the Valkyrie with all passive sensors. All he could see was the apparently metal outer shell and some hot spots. Finally he asked George to try.

George took several seconds to reply. He, too, had been examining the Valkyrie via the passive sensors, with a similar lack of insight. "Excuse me," he broadcast. "Hello, I'm the ships Alvatar. You are AI yourselves, yes?"

"Yes, little ship entity."

George was taken aback by that. "Are you class A?"

"Yes," came the reply. "Class A1.35."

"Holy shit," Zane muttered. George himself was a perfectly standard Class A1.0, like more than 90% of his kind. Zane had never met a Class A AI above 1.2; and there were basically no Class A AI above 1.4 in the physical realm. A fully sentient Class 1.35 AI was a stupendously intelligent being.

"Now," said the Valkyrie, "if you will prepare for the braking burn. We will provide detailed data to your ships AI."

“Roger,” Zane replied. Still watching the Valkyrie on full-spectrum, he detected a rise in thermal output originating from a reactor in her torso. Magnetic fields of immense power began to unfold from her; she slowly pirouetted around to turn her back to the ship. From the armor on her back projected a series of short spiderleg-like structures; the magnetic fields originated from these. High energy electrons were being spun off, making the fields visible to eyes that could see radio waves; specks of dust and molecules of gas were promptly ionized in the fields and accelerated away, making the fields faintly visible in ultraviolet and infra-red. The result was ghostly dragonfly-like “wings” spanning about six meters. The deflection of dust particles provided enough thrust for the slow maneuvers.

On the whole, Zane found the Valkyrie to be somewhat appalling. A Class A1.35 AI should be in some university or research company, busy sussing out the secrets of the universe, not playing traffic cop. The magnetic field wings were just plain bizarre; the amount of power needed to provide even a meager level of reaction-thrust was astonishing large. And all the gold and silver? *Tacky.*

Rich people, he thought with a subtle head-shake. The Valkyrie were clearly designed to be terribly impressive, but Zane simply found them to be another example of Trying Too Hard, expressed in terms of pure gaudiness. He sighed, shrugged. *Well, what else are rich folk gonna blow their money on, I guess?*

“Data coming in,” George muttered. “Braking thrust in three-one-two seconds. Re-orienting.” The ship yawed thirty degree to point the engines in the right direction; Gimli Lodge slid aft, out of view for those on the lounge. The Valkyries did not move, instead letting the ship rotate near them.

“So,” Zane said back. “What do you think of our shiny friend out there?” George didn’t like much of anybody, even other AI, so Zane was taken by surprise when George muttered...

“I think I’m in love.”

Zane sat bolt upright. “scuse me?”

“Just look at her,” George said, dreamily. “She’s perfection. And one-point-three-five! Wow!”

“So *that’s* what does it for ya. Huh.”

“Oh my,” George said distractedly.

“I think she’s kinda out of your league.”

“Yes,” George said. “She’s definitely far better than me.” There was a hint of wistful sadness mixed with wonder in the AI’s voice. “So this is what you must feel like all the time, I guess.”

“Hmmp.”

The Valkyries wings briefly glowed brighter in several wavelengths as their power was increased; the magnetic field reached out to brush against the outer skin of the *Corpus Georgi*. The fine tracings of

circuitry on the outer surface, fine enough to give the ship the iridescence common to hyperdrive ships, was subtly excited. "Oh my my my..." George whispered.

Zane raised an eyebrow and turned the corners of his mouth down in sudden dismay, but decided that silence was golden right about then.

In the lounge, the passengers had also seen the three Valkyrie outside the window turn their backs. Without access to the heads-up display that Zane had, they could not see the magnetic wings, but on the whole they were still entranced. Sarah stepped back up onto the platform to get a better look at the passengers. Most were thrilled, but she noted a few who had clearly different reactions. Winters the android looked at the androids outside as she might look at a new car. MacDougal seemed to be slightly put off by them, standing back away from the windows, arms folded across his chest with the faintest hint of a scowl. St. John-Smythe, like Sarah, seemed to be mostly examining his fellow passengers, but with a smug expression. The expression vanished when he noticed Sarah looking at him.

"Braking burn," George announced. "Three... two... one... now." The fusion drive at the rear of the ship burst to life, rapidly slowing the ship from the elliptical transfer orbit it had been on to the final circular orbit. Barely the faintest hint of a shudder passed through the ship; the onboard gravity adjustment systems hid nearly every trace of the acceleration to those within. The Valkyrie outside kept their positions relative to the ship within millimeters. Miniaturized fusion drives in their calves exhausted through nozzles in their heels, providing all the thrust they needed. The burn lasted only a few seconds, at which point George announced engine shutdown. Zane re-oriented the ship to put Gimli back into full view of the passenger lounge; the Valkyrie slid back into their original positions.

The cargo ship was now in nearly the same orbit as its destination, differing by only a few dozen meters per second. Gimli Lodge was now less than one hundred kilometers distant, and clearly visible to the naked eye. From this angle, the twenty-four-kilometer diameter spherical atmosphere-bubble was a waxing crescent; the sunlit portion shining and gold, the unlit portion barely visible in reflected Asgard light. The moonlet within was faintly visible as a dark region. The passengers impatiently jostled for time on the telescopes, many trying in vain to focus on the Valkyries.

Data packet coming in, Zane transmitted to Sarah. She nodded, listening to Zane rattle off what he was picking up. Her eyebrows raised slightly. When Zane finished, she nodded again, thanked him silently and re-mounted the central platform.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she announced, partially succeeding in garnering the crowds attention. "What you see outside the window are three of Gimli Lodge's Valkyrie. As I'm sure you've guessed, the Valkyrie are androids on the staff at Gimli. Their primary role is defense. Since Gimli Lodge is located in the Asgardian ring system, a fair amount of debris tends to head towards the atmospheric bubble. And while a puncture is unlikely, the owners of Gimli Lodge would prefer to not risk it. So the Valkyrie are tasked with maintaining a defense perimeter; they have powerful built-in sensors capable of picking up a dust grain at forty kilometers, and built-in fusion rockets to get them where they need to go. Their swords and shields are not just decorative, but are actually part of their arsenal. Most potential risks can be simply swatted away if the Valkyrie get to them in time."

Sarah looked down at Loff, standing next to her. He gazed up at her with his best quizzical look.

"The Gimli Lodge people don't do anything by halves," she said to him. "Everything is loaded with style."

"Style," Loff muttered. "If you say so."

"Well, of a sort," Sarah replied with a smirk.

Gimli slowly grew larger in the window. As the ship approached it put the sun at its back, coming at the small moon from its day side. The moon's atmospheric bubble was a perfect sphere made of many layers of advanced self-repairing and incredibly strong polymer. The few bare kilometers of atmosphere were not enough to provide adequate radiation protection for the inhabitants, but the bubble itself aided considerably. Simple dye could have been added to the plastic to help cut down on the glare from the sun, but the owners found it preferable to give the bubble a microscopically thin coating of gold. Thin enough to let light come through, but it blocked excessive infra-red. And not unintentionally, it appealed to the aesthetic sense of the developers.

It also appealed to the passengers watching it appreciatively through the window-wall. The misshapen lump of rock within was not currently visible; all they could see was a vast golden bauble suspended in space, backed up by the day side of Asgard. Stretching across the full field of vision was the razor-thin white line that was the ring plane between Gimli and Asgard.

Zane stayed on the flight deck, overseeing the approach. There was little enough he could actually do, of course; this close to Gimli the fusion drive was ordered shut down so as to not endanger the atmosphere bubble. Even attitude thrusters were discouraged; he maintained orientation via momentum wheels tucked within the guts of the ship. The four Valkyrie escorts had finally changed their positions; they had slowly drifted to the ship's underside and had taken hold of it. Zane and George were told in no uncertain terms that the actual rendezvous and docking would be controlled by their escorts.

This close to the planetoid, the effects of the stuttered gravity produced by the synthetic singularity at its core began to be felt. Periodic lurches would slightly tug at the ship, drawing it in towards its target, putting it in a very sloppy orbit around the worldlet; the sort of orbit that would have given Kepler a stroke. But the ship began to slowly swing around Gimli, rather than just past it. As it did so, what had formerly been behind Gimli started to come into view... another starship, hovering some dozens of kilometers above the atmosphere bubble, secure in one of the gravitic troughs. It looked about as unlike the *Corpus Georgi* as could be imagined... where the cargo vessel was all angles and planes, this one was all curves. A central spindle was surrounded by three much larger toroidal rings... the largest in the middle, two smaller diameter rings fore and aft. Where the *Georgi* was an iridescent silver, this one was bright white.

"Huh," Zane said, eyebrow up. He keyed up comms to Sarah and told her that he'd take this one.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Zane said authoritatively over the PA system. “Just coming into view behind Gimli is the pinnacle of human starship design, the *ASNS The Hard Way*. It’s rare to see it this far in-system. Usually it’s kept out at Sanctuary. I’m not sure why it’s next to Gimli just now...”

Zane stared hard at the starship, using the full capabilities of the *Georgis* sensors to enhance his view. Several small vessels, shuttles and maintenance and cargo handling vehicles, were flitting about the half-kilometer long, half-kilometer diameter craft.

“*The Hard Way* is the latest word in warp drive starship, built by the Asgardian Space Navy about twenty years ago. While I imagine many if not most of you could buy a fleet of ships like the *Corpus Georgi*, I’d wager good odds that all of you together could not hope to put a dent into the construction cost of a ship like *The Hard Way*. Of course, why you’d want to... dunno. On its best day *The Hard Way* could not hope to race the laziest of hyperdrive craft. Warp drive ships are creakingly slow, insanely expensive and incredibly dangerous to crew and bystanders... but they were the ships that first took humanity to the stars. They’re the same technology that took the Thessi and the Narth to the stars, and what the Narth still use. While hyperdrive has completely supplanted it for humans and Thessi, warp drive tech has one undeniable advantage: we know how it works.”

Zane smiled faintly at the distant vessel. Humans who cared about such things retained a great sense of pride in warp drive, even though the technology was wholly uncompetitive with hyperdrive. *We built these all by ourselves.*

“*The Hard Way* is operated by the Science Directorate of the Asgardian Space Navy. It’s a research vessel, used to explore ways to try to make warp drive cheaper, safer and more reliable. I can’t say as I’ve heard of any progress on those, though. Apart from improved secondary systems, *The Hard Way* is pretty much on par with the first interstellar warp ships from four hundred years ago.”

In the lounge area, the appearance of *The Hard Way* added spice to the passengers viewing experience. But there was a minor rumble of resentment when Zane told them that they could not afford a vessel like that themselves. Several of the passengers, the more easily offended types who had the least understanding of just what was involved with warp drive and just how much exotic matter was needed for each flight, promptly swore that they would, indeed, build their own warp ships and show this ignorant tradesman just what was what. As it turned out, in the years to come Zane never had someone knock on his door and stick a warp drive ship under his nose to prove how wrong he had been.

As the appearance of *The Hard Way* was announced, there was a rush to the telescopes. This opened up a space for Sarah to approach the windows. She realized that this was the first time she’d been this close to the windows since the shakedown flight. With nobody pestering her – most of the passengers were clamoring for the scopes, the rest were listening to Zane prattle on about the ship, eventually wandering into a short tale about how he had had a brief tour of the fusion engines during his time at the Academy – she had the chance to go right up to the virtually invisible bowed-out window. Gingerly, she reached out until she could touch it, then leaned forward, eventually resting her forehead on the cool surface. She could almost imagine herself floating outside, taking in the sight of the planet, the ring, the moonlet within the golden bubble and the triple-ringed white starship.

Sadly, her reverie was interrupted.

“Hey-ho, Captain,” a familiar voice said from behind, jovially.

Sarah closed her eyes for a second. “Hello, Mr. St. John-Smythe,” she said, as cheerfully as she could.

“Beautiful ship, eh wot? It was a *devil* of a time getting the Asgardian government to park it next to Gimli.”

Sarah’s brow creased slightly as she pushed off from the window and turned to face the man. “You got them to put *The Hard Way* next to Gimli? How? Why?”

St. John-Smythe smiled conspiratorially and lowered his voice slightly. Not enough to be truly unheard by the people nearby, of course... just enough to make sure that people nearby took notice. “The why should be obvious... I like to provide a show for my friends, and I thought having *The Hard Way* nearby during its preparations for its next flight should prove edifying for all. As to how... well, let’s just say I do have a little bit of pull.”

“Uh-huh,” Sarah replied. She wasn’t shocked that this kind of money might have influence with the Asgardian government.

“It will be in orbit of Gimli for several more days, is my understanding,” St. John-Smythe said, pointing at the ship with his swagger stick. Sarah guessed that St. John-Smythe probably knew exactly how long the ship would be there, but she kept that suspicion to herself. Of course, St. John-Smythe could just as easily be lying about why *The Hard Way* was there...

The *Corpus Georgi* continued its slow, irregular spiral in towards Gimli. The Valkyrie remained at their stations beneath the ship, guiding it with their thrusters and magnetic wings, but Zane stayed on the flight deck and kept a close eye on the progress of the ship. Orbital paths around synthetic singularities were complex at the best of times due to the predictable but uneven nature of the gravity fields they produced, but the Valkyrie were clearly expert at their jobs. As the *Corpus Georgi* swung around Gimli at its closest approach to *The Hard Way*, the Valkyrie gently swung the cargo ship so that the passengers kept a good view of the warp ship through their window. At closest approach they were less than two kilometers from the ship and its retinue of support vessels.

“Magnificent, is she not?” St. John-Smythe gushed. Sarah nodded. It was a beautiful ship, even if it couldn’t hold a candle to her own in any meaningful metric.

“Why bother, though?” a passenger asked on the side of Sarah opposite St. John-Smythe. The woman looked out at the ship with obvious disdain. “They’ll never improve them enough to compete with ships even as clunky as this one.”

Sarah repressed a pained expression, more or less retaining her fake smile. “We don’t know how the hyperdrive really works. We don’t know if they couldn’t all just be shut down one day. Maybe the

Segregators can do that. Who knows. If that happens, warp drive ships will be the only way to travel between the stars.”

That shut them up, if only briefly. The theory that hyperdrive systems could be switched off remotely was an old one, never been back up by anything other than paranoia... but it lasted.

After they passed *The Hard Way*, the Valkyrie spun the ship around so the window faced Gimli. It was close now... about forty kilometers. They were passing around to the night side of the moon, the side currently facing Asgard. They could now see the features of the planet reflected on the golden surface of the night side of the bubble. But as they continued to spiral in, the reflection was overpowered by direct sunlight shining through. The sun was dimmed by the passage; the bubble itself showed up as a gray-orange circle with a dark irregular blotch inside it. Soon they passed into eclipse, the rocky body of Gimli blocking the sun. The reflection of Asgard jumped out at them; the distorted funhouse image of the mountains and forests and lakes and seas of the world were painted onto the golden globe, making it look like a planet in its own right. But the white line cutting across its face, the rings of Asgard as seen edge-on from within, spoiled the effect.

The inward spiral continued. By the time they came out of eclipse they were thirty kilometers from the bubble. By the time they had circled one hundred and eighty degrees around to over local noon, they were only a few kilometers above the golden surface. The sunlight was being reflected straight back at them, a small bright star impossible to look at.

On the flight deck, Zane was informed by the Valkyries that the docking maneuver was about to begin. As instructed, he did nothing but observe as the ship underwent a sudden ninety-degree plane change maneuver, suddenly heading north, climbing up away from the ring plane. They maintained a constant distance above the bubble, about a kilometer. As they approached the north pole of the Gimli bubble, Zane could make out some sort of discontinuity on the surface of the bubble, the first feature he'd seen that marred the otherwise perfect sphere. The ship was slowing as it approached. At last he could see that it was a circular region of the bubble with a different color... darker, not gold coated. It was a circle about 400 meters in diameter, and they were being directed straight towards it. The Valkyrie brought the ship to a relative stop a hundred meters above the circle, and then let go of the ship, letting it drop.

That altitude was in one of the gravity troughs produced by the synthetic singularity embedded in the heart of Gimli. So the *Corpus Georgi* drifted downwards only very slowly; it took several minutes to fall all the way. And when it landed it was as if it had hit soft, sticky foam. The ship lay motionless on its belly on the vast circular plain, the four Valkyrie standing in a square surrounding it. For a moment, all was still. Then Zane noticed something coming at them: a wave on the darker plastic circle, heading inwards towards the ship from all directions. Just before the wave struck the ship, it stopped, a circular ridge some twenty meters high and a hundred meters in diameter. It stayed motionless for a second, then the wave unzipped all the way around on the leading edge. The inwards face of the plastic wave flipped up, creating a wall forty meters high surrounding the ship. The top of the wall then began to ripple and stretch inwards, reaching over the top of the ship. The circle closed over the ship, making a wrinkled dome. As Zane watched, the plastic sealed itself together and smoothed itself out; seamless,

mathematically perfect. The ship was now sitting on the surface of the sphere with a transparent dome over it.

Then it happened again. And again. It occurred nine times; the plastic under the ship pulling back a layer at a time to reform as a layer in the dome over the ship. The structure of the ship groaned and whined each time; with each new layer, atmospheric pressure increased outside the vessel. The tenth time it started to happen, the ship suddenly found that the last layer of plastic beneath it had simply pulled away, leaving the ship to fall downwards. The Valkyrie maintained their positions around the ship as they fell.

Zane was instructed that it was time to fire up the atmospheric flight thrusters and to prepare for landing. Maximum gravity that they would feel would be one third of a standard G, making the ship much too heavy for the Valkyrie to carry on their own.

Zane examined his surroundings. He was inside of a vast plastic bubble; above him was the black of space; a few kilometers below him was a green worldlet of ill-defined shape. Off to one side was the sun; to the other side was the planet Asgard. The ring plane was distinctly below him, outside the bubble. Looking below, where his sight lines went to the side of the worldlet, the "sky" in the bubble began to scatter the sunlight and turn blue. Above and to the side, though, there was too little distance for the air to go blue and the sky stayed resolutely black.

"You are clear and free to navigate," The Valkyrie Byrnhildr informed Zane. "Maintain a maximum airspeed of no greater than 40 kilometers per hour and a separation from other vehicles of at least 500 meters. You are cleared for landing at Sunstone Station."

"Thank you for your guidance," Zane replied.

There was no reply to that. Instead, three of the four Valkyrie swooped away from the starship and headed back up to the atmosphere bubble to continue their patrols out in space. The fourth, Byrnhildr, headed off downwards.

Zane called up and examined the 3D map of Gimli that seemed to float before his eyes. Gimli was distinctly non-spherical, some twenty kilometers long in the longest dimension, eleven in the narrowest. Originally the moon had been tidally locked with Asgard, its long axis perpetually pointed towards the center of the planet. But once its role as terraforming control center had ended and it had been sold off, the new owners decided that they would prefer something different: the former asteroid was rotated so that the long axis was now the north-south axis, perpendicular to its orbital path; it was spun around this axis with a period of some 25 hours. Thus for someone on any point on Gimli the sun would rise and set once every 25 hours... but Asgard would rise and set more than a dozen times in that period.

On the map, settlements and facilities and other places of interest were picked out as bright red spots. Directing his attention to any one would call up information on the place. Some seemed to Zane like they might be of interest to the passengers, others probably not. So he drew a path from his current

position down to Sunstone Station on Gimli's ill-defined equator, wandering past numerous points of interest. The spacecraft, now an aircraft, turned gently to follow the course.

Flight in this environment was easy. Pressure was seventy percent standard, but with standard oxygen partial pressure. Density was more than sufficient for aerodynamic forces to dominate, turning the choppy thruster-based maneuvers in space into smooth curves and swoops. Zane made sure that the lounge always had a decent view of the surroundings.

Down the ship fell. The force of gravity produced by the synthetic singularity fell and rose in waves as altitude decreased, though the trend was always higher. But atmospheric pressure hardly changed. Finally the *Corpus Georgi* descended to the altitude of the north polar peak, a few kilometers off to the sunward side. The peak was rocky and bare in patches; moss covered in others. Behind it, clearly visible through the bubble, was the bulk of Asgard, the terminator into night creeping across its face. As the *Georgi* descended it increasingly put Gimli before it and Asgard behind, eventually entirely blotting out the planet.

Gimli was almost completely forested. Patches of lodgepole pines competed with tracts of Redwoods for space; whole forests of oak and aspen and ash covered hectare upon hectare of carefully re-engineered asteroidal surface. Small lakes and myriad ponds dotted the surface, mostly near the narrow equator where the surface was perpendicular to the artificial gravity field. Most of the asteroid was essentially hillside.

Vast engineering constructs were visible here and there. Most prominent were the towers. Lots and lots of towers, some a kilometer or more high. Some rose out of forests like lone spikes of ivy-covered crystal and gold. Some were portions of vast fairytale castle constructions. Some were glass and steel skyscrapers. But all projected directly away from the synthetic singularity buried in the heart of the asteroid, radiating outwards like rays of the sun. Many of them seemed to tilt at crazy angles due to the shape of the asteroid. All bore a common stylistic motif... the excessive use of gold.

Zane swooped the ship past several towers, tipping the ship so the passengers could get a good look. Many of the structures had parapets and balconies; and many of those had people on them, watching the ship. In some cases there were narrow bridges connecting one tower to another; if the structures were far enough apart, the bridge would visibly curve to match the small curvature of the world.

The *Corpus Georgi* was not alone in the sky of Gimli. Pedal powered nanolights, flying cars, a few hot air balloons, a trio of blimps heading up to the atmosphere envelope to carry out servicing. A few people were buzzing around with nothing more than fanpacks. Given the low gravity, flight was easy. The flocks of geese and pigeons that Zane had to maneuver to avoid had certainly learned to take to the skies with ease.

On the night side of Gimli, lit as it was by the face of Asgard, small, thin clouds could be seen floating over the forests. Vague and diffuse, they looked nothing like the rain clouds of Asgard or Atlantis, but then, the environment was very, very different. At one point the ship flew through a brief spattering of rain, falling down not from clouds but from condensation on the night-side of the atmosphere bubble.

The passengers were unanimous in being delighted. Very few had ever been to Gimli; they were rich, but for the most part not nearly rich enough or well connected enough to finagle an invite. Human space was filled with engineering constructs of amazing intricacy and refinement, and many of truly vast scale... but very few were built almost purely for aesthetics. And while Sarah, standing somewhat back to allow the passengers to crowd the window, thought that many of the structures were tastelessly excessive in their ostentatiousness, on the whole she agreed with the passengers that it was a magical place.

She found Loff standing near her, on the tips of his toes hoping to see over the heads of the taller human passengers. "George, raise us a half-meter platform, please," she muttered. The floor beneath her and Loff slowly extruded upwards, giving them a decent enough view.

"Do you Thessi have anyplace like this?" she asked.

"No," Loff replied. "We've never really made much use of synthetic singularity gravity generators. Ours haven't proven to be very reliable, so a place like this would be impractical."

"Hmm," Sarah uttered. She wondered if there might be a market there. She'd have to start looking into that.

"And I don't think too many of us would be comfortable in an environment like this," Loff said after a moment. "It just seems... off. A bit disturbing."

Damn, Sarah thought. *There goes that idea.*

"The Narth might like a place like this, though. A piece of nature floating out in space with open skies might appeal to them. They hate enclosed colonies." Loff scratched an ear in thought.

Damn, Sarah thought again. Even if there was a viable market among the Narth for good synthetic singularity gravity generators, there was no doing business with them for humans. Everything had to be done through Thessi intermediaries, and that usually blew through the profit margins.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Zane said over the PA system. "We are about to come in for a landing at Sunstone Station. We will circle the landing facility and Gimli Lodge itself a time or two for your viewing... errr... pleasure, but as we land the lounge will be lowered back into the hull. You can pull up external imagery on the vireal system if you'd like."

In a wide flat plain near the equator, Sunstone Station stood as the primary landing field on Gimli. It had the typical structures and facilities as any other moderately well equipped small spaceport... but it was to a conventional spaceport what the spires of Gimli were to an average office building.

"God-dayum," Zane muttered to himself as he steeply banked over the field. "Did these people get a bulk discount on gold foil or something?"

The hangars, maintenance facilities, control tower, storage and fabrication buildings... all were clad in gold. Even the landing field itself was gold tinted concrete.

A few kilometers from the spaceport was Gimli Lodge itself. Fashioned like a modernized and greatly enlarged Norse longhouse, it was nearly 400 meters long by a quarter that wide and a fifth that high; and like its ancient mythical namesake was thatched in, of course, gold. On one side of the Lodge was a dense forest; the other side, a vast grassy field. A sizable lake lay beyond. Sailboats were out on the lake; Zane assumed that they were probably engine powered, as wind in the small atmosphere bubble would probably be a fairly weak or rare phenomenon.

On the far side of the lake stood a spire patterned after a stave church... a stave church grown a kilometer tall. A bridge spanned the lake from near the lodge to the base of the spire, rising thirty meters high in the middle. The bridge was supported only at the ends, a long white arch seemingly floating in the air over the water.

Zane shook his head at that, smiling faintly. A bridge that long, even in the relatively weak one-third G gravity, could only support itself if it had antigrav generators all along its length, antigrav that would have to run nonstop for years on end.

Amidst all the glinting, mirror-smooth gold, Zane noted an anomaly: the sun never reflected directly toward the ship. Any surface that should have sent a beam of sunlight directly at the craft... simply didn't. "Huh," he said out loud, marveling at the optical trickery that prevented pilots from being blinded.

As Zane made one final low altitude pass over the field, he could see an army of bots begin to gather at one edge. Behind them were a small armada of limousines and horse-drawn carriages to carry the passengers to their destinations in the conveyance they preferred. Zane was, by this point, unsurprised at the general color scheme in evidence.

Zane followed the flashing lights to his landing assignment, gently putting the ship down without the slightest bump felt within. As the landing gear compressed, the lounge, now looking skyward, began to retract back into the upper fuselage. The doors closed over it. They were down.

Okay, Zane thought to Sarah. We're here. Let's unload these clowns and book.

Calm yourself, Sarah replied silently. "Ladies and gentlemen," she said aloud, still atop her raised platform. "We have arrived at Gimli. Your baggage will be unloaded shortly; please make sure you pick up all your, uh, stuff from your rooms. Bots will be available to help you with disembarkation. We hope you had a pleasant flight and that you will enjoy your stay."

The crowd favored her with polite, but brief, applause as she stepped down off her perch. The passengers began a chaotic rush out the doors to their cabins to collect their belongings and begin their new adventures on Gimli. Sarah was swept along and out the door.

Loff stayed atop the platform while the passengers left the lounge. As the room began to clear out, he started taking a visual inventory of what would need to be done to clean up... tables and chairs stowed away, uneaten food and other rubbish tossed into the fabbers. But the room did not completely empty.

“Hello, mister... ‘Loff,’ is it?” Matheson St. John-Smythe said with an ingratiating smile. Loff wasn’t sure, but it seemed to him that St. John-Smythe’s accent seemed to have vanished utterly, his speech now indistinguishable to the standard used through all of human space that Loff had visited.

“Yes.” Loff replied. “How many I be of assistance?”

“Oh, nothing much, nothing much,” St. John-Smythe said jovially. “I was just wondering though, if you could answer a few questions I have about Captain Rhoades and Mr. Waterman...”

“Going To Gimli” will be concluded in Part 5.