

## **Dedication**

For my son-in-law  
Alex Baker, 1966-2009  
One of life's dreamers

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Translating idiomatic speech is always challenging, especially when one of the languages originates in a place and a time that has yet to exist. Most of the dialog in this story is spoken in Universal, a synthetic language created by the colonists of New Earth that eventually became the lingua franca for much of the galaxy. In translating into Ancient English the key goal has been to maintain the spirit of the communication rather than a strict rendering of the colloquial text. This has inevitably led to the use of paraphrasing and even some anachronisms. The reader's indulgence is appreciated.

### Personae dramatis

Carson — Commonwealth Mailman  
Aiyana — Engineer for Clan Aniko  
Asima — Mitan Security Officer  
Sosimo — Mitan Security Officer  
Paresh — Mitan Postmaster  
Zhou — Mitan Security Commissioner  
Shin — Clan Aniko Operative  
Juro — Senior Elder of Clan Aniko  
Larissa — Bargirl  
Tabarak — Mitan Gangster  
George — University Retainer  
Naadira — Graduate Student  
Kalidas — Renegade Academic  
Lalita — Archives Official  
Tallis — a Callidus  
Ubay — Clan Aniko Heavy  
Ming — New Earth Security Lieutenant  
Zaakir — Employee at the Aether  
Carruthers — Airport Controller  
Renshu — New Earth Consul  
Mother Baker — Archdeaconess of Lilly Cathedral  
Salima — Orpheus Postmistress  
Caelin — Lift Boss  
Rasul — Orpheus State Treasurer  
Gustav VIII — King of Orpheus

### Historical Characters

Adhiambo Cissokho — Leader of New Earth Colonists  
Teng — Colonial Archivist  
Kuju Sakyamuni — Astronaut  
Aaron Lavan Samuelson — Leader of the Technical Alliance

### **Machines and Systems**

Ship — Carson's Starship  
Buggy — Carson's Interplanetary Transporter  
Yongding — Colonists' Starship  
The Melt — a Nanotech Plague  
The Array — a Large Radar Array

## ARRIVAL

“What will be the nature of your dreams?” the machine asked.

“Erotic, strongly erotic.”

*Well, why not?*

The machine thought about this.

“Very well, please deposit twenty ecus.”

Carson cursed. It was not supposed to ask for money.

“You know I own you?”

“Is this too part of your dreams?”

He swore again and shoved the polished ebony cube aside. The two thousand year-old device had been an impulse purchase on Procyon C. That would teach him.

“Never trust an antiques dealer,” he said aloud.

“Excuse me?” the buggy said.

“Forget it.”

So much for sleeping his way down the gravity well. Carson sighed and stared round the tiny spacecraft. The buggy’s globular display gave him the illusion of peering into space through a transparent bubble. Directly ahead a blue-white splinter of light floated in the starscape: Mita, the local sun, and to its right, a darkened green disk, one of the system’s outer planets. Overhead was the one constant in Carson’s life – the majestic arch of the Milky Way.

He fingered the stiff collar of his suit. It was constructed of gray plant-fiber material that completely covered his limbs; the goal being to cause the minimum of offense to the maximum number of people. It was easy to make a mistake when arriving at a new star system. His shorts had started a riot on Upsilon G.

“How far to go?” he asked the craft.

“About a billion kilometers.”

He picked up the dream machine and examined its shiny surface. The man who stared at him appeared about twenty-five years old except for a certain wariness in the blue eyes. He pushed back a tangle of black hair. *Twenty-five* – could he remember being that young? On New Earth you were legally a minor until your thirtieth birthday.

He turned the device over. Perhaps if he cold-started it? No, he had already tried that twice. Of course he could replace the logic arrays but then it would not be a genuine antique. *Mind you*, he thought with a thin smile, *there were plenty of people who would never know the difference.*

Maybe his spacecraft could help.

“Hey buggy, can you communicate with this thing?”

“Sure!”

“Try persuading it to run diagnostics.”

There was a pause.

“It wants me to pay twenty ecus.”

Carson gave up. He slapped the palm of his hand against the payment pad and sub-vocalized a command to his wallet, a storage device the size of a sand grain embedded behind his right ear. Twenty ecus flowed over his skin and into the dream machine.

“Payment accepted. Please put on the induction headband.”

He did as he was told and stretched out on the acceleration couch. After two minutes of squirming he turned off the inertial dampening. The field’s primary purpose was to protect him from the buggy’s fearsome acceleration, but it also provided a crude simulation of gravity. Well, there was no need of that now. He floated blissfully; zero gee was so much more comfortable. From here on in it would be smooth sailing.



“Greeting and salutations!”

*What the—* He had only been asleep ten minutes before the cheerful voice echoed around the cabin.

“Welcome to our star system. I am automatic welcoming agent Delta Alpha, presently in orbit about Mita F. The People’s Republic mandates that all arriving vessels must be guided by an authorized pilot. Please signal your acceptance.”

Blinking, Carson scanned the starscape. There it was, an orange dot, Mita F, a Jupiter-class planet. He groaned and pulled off the headband.

“Hello agent Delta Alpha. I am willing to accept your pilot.”

There was no question of dozing off again. He would have thirty minutes while his message traveled across space to the orbiting, robot but he had been jolted into full wakefulness.

Finally a reply came through.

“Thank you honored visitor. Based on the class of your vessel the fee for local navigation is four hundred ecus. Please dispatch payment so that I can initiate transfer.”

*Four hundred!*

“Surely the official nature of my business means that I should receive a complimentary service?”

More time passed. With a grin Carson imagined the nonplussed agent pushing his demand to its higher functions.

“I regret sir that your request has been denied.”

Well, it was worth a try. He shot the money across the sky and awaited the arrival of the pilot.

Presently his buggy said, “Carson, I have downloaded an autonomous agent certified by the Republic of Mita that is requesting temporary control of this vehicle.”

“Okay, navigation only, and watch the damn thing for any funny business!”

The chances of the agent going rogue were vanishingly small, but he had known stranger things to happen.

“Greetings honored space captain!” said a new voice. “I have the pleasure of being your pilot today. Please state your destination.”

*Captain is it? Not to mention first mate, mechanic, and cabin boy.* His starship, which he had left lurking at the edge of the Kuiper Belt, was a one-man operation.

“Greetings to you too. I’m heading to Kaimana.”

“Excellent! Estimated travel time using this vessel’s capabilities will be three hours.”

Carson squawked as the inertial dampening kicked in and dumped him onto the acceleration couch. Nevertheless, he was feeling more cheerful. Three hours should be enough time to get back to sleep and rejoin his new friends in the hot tub.

“Roger that. Will we be landing on the island?”

Mita B, Kaimana’s official name, was covered entirely by ocean save for one volcanic landmass.

“Regrettably not. All vehicles must be parked in orbit and passengers taken down by shuttle.”

That made sense, it was a small place.

“If you wish, I will order a personal taxi to await your distinguished presence.”

“And that would cost?”

“Two hundred ecus sir, but I am authorized to offer a discount...”

He cut it off. “Public transportation is available I suppose?”

“A variety of options exist,” the pilot replied cautiously.

“Thank you, I’ll wait until I arrive.”

“Very well, do you have lodgings booked, honored traveler?”

“Shut up.”

The pilot lapsed into sulky silence. Carson was tempted to jam on the dream machine’s headband but the scenery was getting interesting. Directly ahead Mita F had swollen into a huge disk. He watched as it eclipsed its parent star, encircling the occluded sector with a thread of golden light. Nighttime on the gas giant was far from dull. The blue-green aurora generated by its massive magnetic field blazed at the northern pole, and further south titanic thunderstorms spewed lightning bolts big enough to split a continent. Extending into space from each side of the darkened equator was an impossibly thin line: the planet’s ring system.

He decided to be nice to the pilot. Whoever designed its personality had made it far too prickly.

“So tell me about Mita B.”

“Your ship did not receive our welcome package?”

“Yeah, but I never got round to opening it.”

“Then let me tell you of the pleasures that await. Kaimana is an exciting playground for the adventurous traveler. Amenities include –”

“Forget the travelogue, tell me about the economy. I’m trying to make a living here.”

“As you wish, captain. The system was originally a staging post on the journey out from New Earth but tourism now dominates commercial activity. The principal attraction is diamond coral.”

“I’ve heard of that...”

Kaimana would have remained an isolated way station had it not been for the discovery on the ocean’s abyssal plain. Now diamond corals were traded throughout the local arm of the galaxy and visitors were flocking to see the extraordinary fauna in its native habitat. The resulting economic boom had raised the permanent population to a million the pilot said, with another million living off-planet, mainly in the resource-rich asteroid belt.

“The People’s Republic is a member of the New Earth Commonwealth so you will have no problem paying your bills, honored sir.”

“Thanks, but I’m really interested in taking money, not giving it away.”

Rising prosperity meant that there would be a newly-affluent middle class looking for ways to spend. It was only fair that he should help them.

“When I’m not on official business, I deal in antiques. Is there much of a market on Kaimana?”

“I regret that is beyond my functionality.”

Carson gazed out at the universe. By now the buggy’s push drive was hurtling them towards the inner planets at half the speed of light. Mita F’s sunward sector came into view, appearing as a huge crescent striped in primary colors. There was something unnervingly wrong about the atmosphere of

giant planets, the writhing bands of cloud seemed too organic to be the result of random weather patterns.

*Perhaps all this solitude really is affecting my mind.*

He cranked up the screen's magnification and panned across the planet's surface, pausing to study the black silhouette of one of the numerous ice moons. Even from this distance there were signs of human activity. Outlined against the glowing chromophores he could see that the little world was no longer perfectly circular – it appeared as if a monstrous giant had been nibbling at its edges.

“Hey buggy, look sunward, past the planet. Is there anything out there?”

His hunch was right. There, twinkling against the blackness of space – a stately parade of ice cubes the size of mountains heading towards the inner solar system. The satellite was being disassembled to provision water for the arcologies of the asteroid belt.

He was tempted to quiz the pilot about the colossal project, but he couldn't face another conversation. Besides, one vital fact was obvious: Mita was flourishing.

Directly ahead a brilliant white dot expanded into view – his destination, Kaimana. Carson smiled and stretched, his long body spanning the axis of the cabin. He rummaged through the luggage piled on the spare acceleration couch to reclaim the dream machine.

“I'm going to resume,” he told it.

“Please deposit another twenty ecus.”

“You are joking! I was woken up –”

“Each sleep period is charged separately as explained in my Terms and Conditions of Use.”

Perhaps he should toss the machine into the vacuum; he was out of ideas for turning off its demands.

“What in heaven's name are you doing with all this money? Saving up for a vacation?”

“Naturally, I will return it to my owner.”

“But that's me!”

“That is correct. Do you wish to collect my earnings now?”

“Oh dear God, yes!” Carson shouted and smacked his hand against the payment pad.

Five hundred and twenty ecus flowed over his skin and into his wallet. Good grief, five hundred! The previous owner could never have figured it out. No wonder he was eager to sell. He jammed on the headband, closed his eyes, and laid back feeling supremely pleased with himself. Even with paying the pilot he was still a hundred ecus up on the trip.

Two hours later he was above Kaimana.



“Carson, I am pleased to announce that your vessel is now in an authorized parking orbit. The contracted function of this system is thus complete. Please acknowledge delivery of service.”

“So acknowledged.”

“The pilot has deactivated,” the buggy said.

“Roger that, flush it. There's supposed to be public transportation. Are you looking for a bus stop?”

“Already found one. We are rendezvousing with a shuttle in fifty minutes.”

The inertial dampening faded away leaving the cabin in free fall. Carson unbuckled his harness, stretched, and squinted at the planet below. All he could see was blinding white cloud. Perhaps things would be more interesting on the ride down.

Thirty minutes later a stubby craft swam out of the glare.

“Greetings!” the shuttle cried across the ether. “I will soon be docking with your vessel. Please be ready to disembark.”

“You might as well stick around,” Carson said to the buggy. “There’s no point in returning all the way to the ship.”

“Okay,” said the little vessel, “and good news: I just checked and parking is free, so I’ll stay in this orbit.”

The shuttle maneuvered closer and extruded a docking tube over the buggy’s hatch, adding an inertial field to complete the seal. Carson grabbed his bags and pushed off, swimming through the connection into the shuttle’s cabin; it was empty – he was the first passenger. He stowed his luggage, buckled in, and surveyed the featureless interior: no viewports, but that would not be a problem. It promised to be a quick trip down to the surface.

“Welcome aboard honored traveler,” said the shuttle. “I am pleased to announce that this service is provided as a courtesy by the People’s Republic of Mita. We have one more stop before our descent to Kaimana.”

Carson writhed in his harness. The air was hotter than hell and worse, the humidity totally saturated; within thirty seconds, sweat was soaking through his arrival suit.

“Hey – what’s wrong with the atmospherics?”

“This vessel’s environment is set to match Kaimana’s. One hopes that you will soon become accustomed to our planet’s conditions.”

Damn! He should have read the welcome package.

He sweated his way to the next pick-up. *Oh God, would it be like this for the whole trip?*

Eventually the vessel shuddered and docked. As the outer hatch dilated an oversized container shot through the air and slammed into the wall by his head.

“What the...”

His voice faded as a slim figure pushed through the docking tube.

“Oh God, sorry – did I hit you?”

“No, no,” Carson smiled. The woman was the first human being he had encountered in weeks.

Still muttering apologies she swam after her case, gracefully negotiating the microgravity. He pushed out of his seat and helped wrestle her belongings into a storage harness. By now a dozen more people had entered the craft and were busy stowing luggage.

“You wouldn’t believe it,” she said, “but our idiot transit company charges by the number of baggage items rather than their mass, so people cram their entire life into a single giant sack.”

“You’re so sweet to help,” she added, buckling herself into the seat opposite his.

She was one of those lucky people whose faces naturally relaxed into a smile that can sooth babies, disarm the wary, and enchant the lonely space traveler. Like the other passengers filling the cabin, she wore a colorful skintight cat suit – a practical garment if one chose to look at it that way. Carson sat up straighter.

Solitude had not improved his conversational skills. Damn! What kind of smooth line should he conjure up when faced with an attractive woman? He was still thinking when she leaned forward, large almond eyes gazing into his face.

“Why don’t you take all your clothes off?” she whispered.

He stared, and then yelped in terror as he realized that she was naked; the cat suit was some kind of body paint. He scanned the cabin. Good God, they were all naked! Everybody was sporting nothing but a bright layer of color. Any doubts were obliterated by two male passengers floating by his head on their way to the back of the craft.

“Doesn’t anybody wear clothes?” he croaked.



“Oh, a lot of the tourists do. They don’t have birthday suits and they’re shy about just being nude.”

*No kidding.* “But all the natives…” he asked, staring her fixedly in the face.

“Everyone,” she replied. “Oh, occasionally there’s a craze – all the kids began wearing cloaks a few years ago – but it really isn’t practical. It started with the first settlers – with Kaimana’s atmosphere it simply made sense – and by the time they had the resources for large-scale air conditioning, they had all gotten, well, used to it.”

The woman smiled at him as she brushed her short black hair from her forehead. He could imagine how much pleasure the locals got from visitors’ discomfort.

“But you’ll be alright, you’ve already got a suit.”

He frowned before understanding what she meant.

“You mean this?”

He waved the backs of his hands. As opposed to everyone else’s golden hue his skin was a deep brown.

“That’s the result of accelerated melanogenesis. My last planet-fall was Procyon C; the local sun pumps out freakishly high levels of UV light, so you’d fry if you didn’t boost your skin’s defenses.”

“I did wonder – I’d never seen a birthday suit cover anyone’s face before. You could start a new fashion.”

She grinned at him.

“Can you imagine how it must have been on Old Earth when people were naturally different colors? How wonderful!”

“What color would you have been?” he asked, finally getting into the game.

“Oh, I’d be a scarlet woman!”

They laughed and lapsed into an agreeable silence.

The woman’s eyes softened.

“It’s so sad; all the survivors had to interbreed just to maintain the gene pool. We lost so much of our past on Earth.”

She could not have known it, but she had touched Carson’s soul.

*Oh, what the hell.*

“My name’s Carson,” he said

“Aiyana, of clan Aniko,” she replied, and to his delight held up her right hand, palm forward. He copied her gesture and they touched lightly. His skin tingled as they exchanged cards. In the tradition of Commonwealth societies they both paused, eyes half closed, and examined each other’s data.

Much of the information that scrolled across his retinas was incomprehensible, a parade of unknown places, institutions, and cultural mores. He did gather that Aiyana was a mining engineer, living and working on a large asteroid named Eugenia. There was no mention of personal ties, unsurprising in a business card. He wondered if she was making any more sense of him.

“Oh my God, you’re a mailman!” she cried, shouting so loud other passengers turned round to stare.

“It had to be something glamorous with that birthday suit. I knew you weren’t just another wretched tourist!

Aiyana leaned forward and dropped her voice to a whisper.

“Anyhow, no one with any sense comes this time of year – the coral beds are closed for the Cetacean mating season.”

Her eyes brightened.

“Are you delivering the mail right now?”

He nodded, smiling.

She clapped her hands.

“Do you have the final episode of Exodus? Everyone’s dying to see it.”

“I’m sorry, Exodus?”

“Oh, you know, the New Earth drama about the first colonies.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know; I never have any idea what I’m carrying.”

She tilted her head and contemplated him, eyes slit with mock cunning.

“Maybe I should steal it from you and corner the market.”

“Good luck with the decryption,” he laughed.

At that moment the shuttle, which had been working in silence, decided to announce the final descent to Kaimana.

“I love this part,” Aiyana said. “Of course, it’s really just for the tourists.”

The shuttle spoke up again. “To enhance your arrival this vessel will now use state-of-the-art sensoria to render the vertical portion of our descent free of atmospheric interference. What you will see is not an artificial creation but the actual view as it would be perceived through clear air.

“Honored passengers,” declared the craft, its voice rising to a shout as music filled the cabin, “welcome to Kaimana!”

With its last words, the walls of the shuttle vanished and Carson found himself hovering in space above an azure sea. Below his feet was the ragged outline of the planet’s sole landmass, a volcanic island nestling a silvery lake in its crater. His stomach told him that they were dropping rapidly.

Aiyana was suspended besides him, her smiling face illuminated by the planet below. Further away he could see the other passengers and their luggage, all apparently floating in the void.

“Pretty impressive,” he admitted, reaching around to assure himself that the shuttle still existed.

He tried to keep the conversation going.

“Does Kaimana have hotels, lodging houses, you know – places where travelers pay to stay?”

“Well of course. There are lots of hotels.”

“That’s good; you’d be surprised how many planets don’t have paid accommodation.”

She pulled a face, which made Carson realize that she had not spent much time out of the Mita system. He plunged on, unsure whether she considered him a seasoned traveler or a fool.

“So do you have any recommendations for somewhere to stay?”

“The clan’s putting me into its suite at the Caldera View. Check it out, it’s expensive but I’m sure the rates are better when the tourists aren’t around.”

It was time to get plugged in. Mercifully, the local net used standard Commonwealth communications protocols. While the tiny transponder embedded in his inner ear had a limited range, the shuttle provided an excellent relay to the surface and he was soon talking to the hotel. Aiyana was right, the rates were uncharacteristically low. He could stay for a week while he found something long-term.

“Thanks, all booked,” he said and then, intoxicated by imminent planet fall and his first human contact in weeks, he continued. “Would you like to meet for a drink this evening... assuming you’re not busy?”

“That would be lovely, I’ve no events until tomorrow. Wow, my first evening on Kaimana and I’m drinking with a mailman! Wait till the crew hears about this. Where shall we meet?”

*My room!* No, that wouldn’t do. He got back to the hotel’s concierge.

“Yes honored guest,” said a voice from within his cochlea, “we have a variety of delightful meeting places. May I ask is the purpose of your meeting: business, social, festive, or romantic?”

Carson glanced at Aiyana.

“Romantic,” he muttered.

“Then I would recommend the Fire Lounge, featuring an inviting selection of...”

He ignored the sales chatter.

“The hotel says it has a bar called the Fire Lounge. Let’s meet there at...” He squinted while he worked out the local time system, “...seven.”

Beneath his feet, Kaimana’s outline continued to grow. Details began to appear within the extinct volcano: concentric circles and intersecting radii spread from the central lake to the rim of the crater and the land differentiated into patterns of gray, green, and brown. The flanks appeared undeveloped but even so it was to the outer slopes that the shuttle headed. As the landmass swelled beneath them, the music in the cabin subsided and the walls returned to an opaque grey.

“Do you hear that?” he asked.

The silence had given way to a distant rapid drumbeat.

“Don’t worry, that’s just the rain.”

*Oh great, the off-tourist season.*

Ten minutes later they had landed.

## KAIMANA

Carson and the other passengers emerged into a cavernous hangar hewn from the side of the volcano. The ground rumbled as a pair of giant doors closed on a seemingly solid wall of water. Little wonder that they heard the rain during the descent.

The shuttle was right about the conditions, it was just as hot and humid as it had been inside the cabin, but the atmosphere carried the tang of the planet's vast ocean, and he took a deep breath of the real, unprocessed air.

"Honored extra-solar visitor," said a voice. Carson glanced up and saw a small red sphere hovering above him. "Please follow me for screening and integration."

"Wait one moment," he told it.

He looked round for Aiyana who was wrestling with her giant bag. She had strapped on a lift belt but it still had plenty of inertia.

"I have to go to Integration," he shouted to her, tipping his head at the red ball by way of explanation. "Seven o'clock in the Fire Lounge."

She gave him a wave and returned to maneuvering her belongings. Carson picked up his own luggage and trotted after the sphere. There were about a dozen spacecraft service points on the vast floor, few showing any sign of activity. Despite the rain he had probably lucked out – he could imagine the chaos at the height of the tourist season.

He glanced over his shoulder at the ground crew clustered around the shuttle. Aiyana was right; the only thing anyone was wearing was body paint. How long would it take him to get used to this?

The sphere led him through a door into the integration hall which, like the hangar, was carved into the flanks of the volcano although this room held a more finished quality: the floor was carpeted and the glare of the landing area was replaced by soft lighting. The walls were covered with decorative murals but it was the display in the center that brought him to a halt. Mounted on a black stone obelisk was a huge piece of diamond coral.

The organism was as translucent as real diamond, and artful spotlights had been placed to create clusters of prismatic color that slid and merged as the viewer moved. At its heart refracted light burned with the intensity of a white dwarf star. The coral was shaped in the form of a flexing shark but he knew that this was no human sculpture; in some unfathomable way the organism mimicked the surrounding sea creatures. What conceivable purpose could that serve in the abyssal darkness? And the mystery was deepening: new coral figures were emerging on the ocean floor that had an unnerving resemblance to the tourists' submarines.

He dragged himself away from the exquisite display to the integration area. The reception stations were empty except for one lonely individual sitting at an instrument panel. Clearly extra-solar business was slow and he appeared pleased to see a new visitor. Carson placed his right hand in the green circle on the top of the identification pod and waited while the machine sucked out his data.

The official brightened.

“Ah, the mailman! Welcome honored guest Carson. Do you by chance have the last episode of Exodus?”

“You’re the second person to ask me that. Sorry, I have no idea.”

“My mate won’t give me any peace until she’s seen it.”

In a brisker tone he asked, “How long do you plan to be visiting the Mita People’s Republic?”

“Twenty to thirty days I imagine. I buy and sell artifacts, and I’m hoping to do some business while I’m here.”

The bureaucrat sat up.

“I must advise you that the export of diamond coral is strictly controlled.”

“Not my field – I mainly deal in ancient technology.”

“Hmm... there’s a market for that?”

“You’d be amazed.”

The official became businesslike again.

“You are authorized to reside in the People’s Republic for thirty days. Enjoy your stay.”

“Thanks. Do you have any idea how long it’s going to keep raining? It’s weird – I can’t find any weather information on the net.”

“Who knows? Maybe one, two million years.”

Carson began to laugh politely then realized that he had simply been told the truth. Well, he should have guessed. Sighing, he shouldered his bags and followed the ball, which had turned green, to the exit.

“Hey,” he yelled at the sphere as they hurried down a corridor, “how do people stay dry round here?”

“Pardon me, honored visitor, that question is beyond my functionality.”

They emerged into a huge transportation area. This too had been hollowed out from the interior of the mountain. In the far wall was a series of tunnels. A small vehicle shot out of an opening and circled over Carson’s head.

“No thanks,” he yelled at the taxi and continued to follow his guide.

Eventually it led him to a parked bus.

“This vehicle will take you to your hotel; I wish you a pleasant visit,” the ball said and promptly vanished.

“Your destination honored passenger?” the bus asked as he clambered aboard.

“Caldera View Hotel.”

“Third stop, please be seated.”

While he waited for the bus to get moving Carson got onto the net and searched for a valet – frustrated by his lack of local knowledge he had decided to get some quality help. The Mitans were used to dealing with ignorant visitors, and he had no trouble finding an agency. A cool contralto voice sounded in his ear.

“Greetings, how may I be of service?”

He immediately warmed to the valet system: no self-aggrandizing introduction, just straight down to business.

“I’ve just arrived from out-of-system,” he sub-vocalized. “I am going to need lots of information about places, local customs, business practices, and, um, personal interactions.”

“That is all within my scope. Shall I begin with a short overview of the People’s Republic?”

As the valet briefed him, more passengers got on the bus. Finally it rose from the ground and entered one of the tunnels. A short while later they emerged into sunshine.

*What the hell, where was the rain?*

“Hey valet, is this an illusion?”

“No, you are now inside Kaimana’s crater. The entire area is covered by a weather shield. The light is synthetic, designed to emulate Mita’s natural radiation.”

The bus gained height, revealing the crater wall. Around him terraces of densely packed buildings stretched down the caldera’s slopes to the meadows and forests that covered the floor of the extinct volcano. In the distance, at the center of the parkland, was the lake he had seen from space. Beyond that, some twenty kilometers away, the crater resumed its upward climb. The far side was less developed, and Carson could make out stretches of cultivated land.

“The shield was built 247 standard years ago. It took five years to construct at a cost of thirteen billion ecus, half of this sum coming from a grant supplied by the New Earth Commonwealth.”

He squinted into the sky as they sped along the airway. The shield was a convincing blue while near its zenith was a blinding patch of white light. Not quite a sun, but a pretty good imitation.

The bus deposited him on a wide boulevard that gently curved away on either side. About sixty meters below he could see another terrace carved into the crater wall, then another – fifty-two in all according to the valet – encircling the caldera from the central parkland to the rim. Each was covered with a riot of buildings though few structures reached higher than the next level. Most had a swath of open space by the edge; some were busy plazas, others elaborate gardens. As he peered down, he could even see one that sported a canal dotted with tiny boats.

The Caldera View Hotel was a squat building surrounded by lush grounds. The building and its gardens appeared to be built on a series of tiers that echoed the carved shape of the crater. Originally, the valet explained, this area has been used for cultivation until population growth pushed out the farms. Now agriculture was confined to the north slopes, although most food was synthesized or harvested from the sea.

The lobby of the hotel was appropriately lavish, and he paused to admire the elaborate displays of tropical flowers. Stepping up to the reception counter, he placed his hand on one of the green circles etched into the marble surface.

“Greetings honored guest Carson,” said the counter. “We have you booked for a standard room for a week.”

“That’s correct.”

It was time to start making some contacts. He caught the gaze of a human supervisor.

“Excuse me, er...”

“Honored staff member,” his valet whispered.

“...honored staff member, I wish to see the hotel manager.”

“Perhaps I can help you honored guest,” the woman answered.

“Thank you, no, I am here on government business. I am a Commonwealth mail carrier.”

This announcement had the desired effect, and he was ushered into the manager’s office. The bureaucrat was delighted to be of service to his distinguished guest. Why yes, he knew several members of the business community who collected antiques. In fact the local historical society was scheduled to meet next week in this very hotel! Perhaps he could attend? The Caldera View was honored to be hosting a mailman, a complementary upgrade was in order.

Feeling very pleased with himself, Carson left the manager’s office and sauntered up to his luxury suite.

Three hours later, showered, naked, and intensely self-conscious, he walked into the Fire Lounge. The valet system had called in its higher functions to reassure him that he would blend in.

“Your skin pigmentation will be taken as conservative business dress,” it told him.

“Unfortunately a real birthday suit, which is a layer of symbiotic bacteria living in the epidermis, takes several weeks to cultivate.”

“The fact that the coloring covers your entire body will be considered unusual, but it is nothing offensive – it is not like showing your bare limbs on Upsilon G.”

“Thanks for the tip,” he muttered. “How do the locals keep their hands and faces clear?”

“The bacteria have been modified to respond to low level UV light and other stimuli – they can be made to selectively change color or disappear completely. Most dwellings have facilities to change a suit’s appearance in a matter of minutes.”

By the time he found a table he had decided that the valet was right. The other patrons paid him only the slightest attention as he sat down and opened the menu.

“Greetings honored guest,” said the menu, “welcome to the Fire Lounge.”

Carson ordered a glass of local wine – the cost of the imported stuff was outrageous – and surveyed the room. The bar’s huge windows opened onto a stunning panorama of the crater. Overhead, the shield was impersonating an evening sky, its reflection transforming the central lake into a gigantic puddle of mercury. Between the lake and the darkening sky, the slopes blazed with the light of countless buildings. He could see the paths of the aerial ways clear round the caldera, each illuminated by the streaming lights of a thousand vehicles.

One wall of the bar was covered with a giant mural inspired by the famous image of the opening of the Covenant Convention. In the center was Adhiambo Cissokho, by then an old woman but still very much in charge. Surrounding her were the hundred and nine delegates, over ten percent of the survivors of Old Earth. Even now, viewed across the immense distance of time, few people failed to be moved by the raw courage of those first colonists. Marooned on an alien world with few resources and the very survival of the human race in doubt, they found it within themselves to create the code of ethics that had served humanity for eight thousand years.

Inspecting the picture more carefully, he saw that its creator had added some low-key animation. Delegates greeted each other, shook hands, and took their chairs. One in particular caught his eye. With a chuckle he realized that it was himself, dressed in appropriate colonial costume. Gazing round the room he saw that other patrons had been captured: the red-haired woman standing by the window admiring the view was, in the mural, talking to Cissokho’s aide, and the two men sitting at the bar were setting up delegates’ tables. Another person appeared in the midst of the historic figures. Good God it was Aiyana! He turned and there she was, waving from the entrance.

He stood up to greet her as she strode in.

“Hey, you did it!” she cried looking him up and down.

Beneath his pigmentation Carson blushed.

“What do you think of *my* outfit?” she asked, twirling in front of him.

Aiyana had undergone a remarkable transformation. The patterned body paint had been replaced by a layer of sparkling crimson. Across the front were a series of narrow slashes that gave the illusion of material sliced with a sharp blade, the diagonal slits revealing glimpses of honey-colored stomach and breasts.

Carson promptly sat down.

“My very own scarlet woman outfit,” she said folding herself into a chair.

She opened the menu.

“Greetings honored guest, welcome to the Fire Lounge.”

“Shut up,” she said cheerfully, then to Carson: “Hey, where’s the final episode of Exodus? I’ve been checking all afternoon.”

“I’m not delivering the mail until tomorrow. I’m already having enough excitement for one day.”

Aiyana grinned and ordered a drink.

“I wish I was going to have an exciting day – tomorrow we start the conference.”

“It must be something special to bring you all this way.”

“Well I suppose it is sort of interesting. We’re planning for the arrival of a slow boat from New Earth – it’s towing Mita’s first black hole foundry. It will be anchored in orbit around my home asteroid, Eugenia. Right now it’s decelerating through the Oort cloud.”

“Whoa, big business! But why come to Kaimana to discuss it?”

“Oh, there’ll be lots of the top clan elders attending the conference. They want to feel real gravity under their feet.”

Aiyana rolled her eyes to show what she thought of that.

“So what about you? Are you going to drop the mail and head straight out?”

“No, I will be around for some time. When I’m not being a mailman, I’m a dealer in antiques. So, I plan to check things out while I’m here.”

“Maybe I can interest you in some elders.”

“Not much of a market. The point is that antiques turn up in the most unlikely places, so whenever I make planet-fall I do a reconnaissance.”

“The Commonwealth Post Office doesn’t mind you wandering around strange worlds? I mean, don’t you have a timetable to stick to?”

“Oh God no, the only scheduled deliveries are between major population centers. All the rest is simply entrusted to vessels like mine. Each local post office finds out where an authorized ship is headed and hands them a packet containing every scrap of mail with an address in that general direction. Some of that originates locally but most will be copies of packets from other passing starships. Items can get duplicated hundreds of times before finally being delivered.”

“So you chose to come to Kaimana because we had so much mail? Really, our little system?”

Aiyana laughed at the thought.

“I was amazed too, but Mita came out at the top of the sorting algorithms.”

Carson sat back and stared at his glass. Aiyana had stirred the uneasy thoughts he had been nurturing for weeks. *Why the hell was all this mail going to Kaimana?* It did not add up, and in his experience, not adding up meant trouble.

He came out of his reverie.

“Anyhow, efficiency is not my problem. I’m freelance; I have my own ship and provided I make a minimum number of deliveries, they let me be.”

“Oh my God,” Aiyana squealed, “you *own* a starship?”

Carson smiled to himself. *Me and the First Bank of New Earth*

“I had a stroke of luck that financed it.”

“Don’t tell me – you found a planet made of diamond!”

“Not quite. I bought a battered old toy at a flea market on Delta Pavonis C; it was a little voice-activated ground vehicle. The design was so antiquated that I started doing some research, and I finally discovered that it came from the first century after the settlement of New Earth.



“It must have been made by one of the original colonists,” Carson continued. “What’s more, a couple of the components were actually manufactured on Old Earth.”

Aiyana put her hand to her mouth.

“What was it worth?”

“A New Earth auction house offered me a guaranteed ten million ecus, but it would have gone for far more. In the end I sold it for five million to the Great Museum.”

“That sounds incredibly civic minded...”

“You’re right to be suspicious. In addition to the money, I negotiated permanent access to the Museum’s entire collection and archives. Only twelve thousand people in the entire galaxy have that privilege – they refuse twice that number every year – try putting a price on that.”

“Anyhow, that’s how I got my starship.”

Aiyana sat back in her chair shaking her head.

“You make my life seem so dull.”

She scanned the quiet bar.

“At least we can find somewhere more exciting than this. I’m told there’s a great restaurant near here, do you want to get something to eat? I want to hear about all the places you’ve been Mister Mailman.”

Carson followed her onto the broad plaza outside the hotel. Darkness had fallen and the boulevard was filling with evening strollers.

“Should we get a taxi?”

“I’ve got a better idea.”

He followed her gaze to a line of horse-drawn carriages.

“Oh no! That’s strictly tourist stuff.”

She squeezed his arm and gave him a gentle shove.

“And what are we?”

The brief physical contact was enough to fill Carson with the urgent desire to sit down again, and he climbed into the nearest carriage.

*Why should I worry about looking like a tourist? What’s that compared to walking around stark naked?*

The driver slapped the reins and they set off.

“That’s the largest living creature I’ve ever seen,” Aiyana said nodding towards the horse. “Is it true they can carry people on their backs?”

“It is. I rode one once in the Stolian system; we went up the flanks of a volcano similar to this one, except that it was still active.”

“Gracious! Wasn’t it dangerous?”

“Only if you didn’t listen to the forecasts. I wanted to watch Stol go down over the sea – all the volcanic dust makes for spectacular sunsets. The slopes are covered with giant white flowers and every blossom turns and tracks the setting sun. As they cool down they make the strangest sound you’ve ever heard, as if they were singing farewell to the day.”

“You’re so lucky. You’ve seen so much.”

Carson squirmed; he loved flattery but genuine admiration always made him uncomfortable.

He tilted his head back. The shield was displaying a realistic image of a night sky filled with stars.

“Take a look up there. The galaxy has at least ten million planets that support complex life, perhaps a million of those have been colonized – nobody knows for sure. How many of those worlds can a person ever see?”

“Not many I guess, but more than one would be nice.”

Two hours later, strolling along the boulevard after dinner, Carson was astonished to realize that he had forgotten he was not wearing any clothes. Aiyana’s curiosity about the outside world was insatiable, and as the wine flowed he found himself becoming increasingly loquacious. In contrast, she was so vague talking about herself, she hardly seemed to have a past at all. Just how young was she?

“So now you just wander around the universe dropping off mail and finding wonderful treasures?”

“Sort of – I spend most of my time in the Commonwealth – the further you go the weirder things get.”

“But isn’t that the attraction? Haven’t you even wanted to pack up and shoot right to the other side of the Milky Way? Can you imagine what it must be like out there?”

“Pretty damn strange, for sure. Although,” he added with a laugh, “if I had a couple of hundred years to spare, I’d be tempted to check it out.”

Eventually they stood facing each other in the hotel lobby. The alcohol, having first rushed to his head, had resumed its travels and arrived at Carson’s loins. He played for time; he was never very good at this sort of thing.

“This has been great,” he finally said. Then, with as little hesitation as he could manage, “do you want to come up for a nightcap?”

“I think that would be lovely.”

He spent the entire time in the elevator desperately recalling his ship’s maintenance schedule.

As soon as they got to his suite Aiyana asked him to fix a drink and dived for the bathroom. Ten agonizing minutes later she still had not emerged.

“Hey valet,” Carson sub-vocalized, “can you find out what time the clan Aniko conference starts tomorrow?”

“I’m sorry, the only information is about a conference that began last week. In fact, I can find no information about...”

“Shut up,” he muttered as Aiyana finally came out.

The scarlet outfit had disappeared, this time she was really naked.

“I thought it only fair that we get on equal terms,” she said softly as she walked up to him.

He grinned, snaked an arm around her waist, and buried his face in the nape of her neck.

She pulled back, looking into his eyes.

“You won’t believe how long it’s been since I last did this...”

“Me too, what do you think I get up to on that starship?”

She smiled and kissed him, gently at first, then with increasing ferocity. Somehow, still kissing, they made it into the bedroom.



Both of them had been experiencing forced celibacy for far too long, and it was hours before they finally fell asleep, exhausted and wonderfully satiated.

It had been a long, long day for Carson, starting three billion kilometers away, and by the time he awoke it was mid-morning. Aiyana was still asleep. She was still sleeping when he emerged from the shower feeling better than he had for months.

Oh God, the conference! He grabbed some tea and sat down on the bed.

“Hey beautiful, time to get up.”

Still she slept on. What was up? Had she not taken a detox last night? He gently shook her shoulder. Even now she did not respond. Good grief she was cold!

As he stared at the lovely face a terrible thought crept into his mind. He looked closer.

“Oh God no!” he shouted.

Aiyana was dead.