

SKID2 by sam

What is SKID2?

SKID2 is an electronic book, the sequel to the electronic novel SKID. Read it, pass it onto your friends, anybody that might be interested, everyman and his dog. If you like what you read and want to check out what happened in the first novel download it from my home page or email me for a copy. The third novel in the series is also available at no cost. However if you want to send me a small donation to reflect our efforts in bringing these freeware programs to you I won't refuse them.

Published By Keith Fenwick PO Box 90312 Auckland New Zealand
ph [64] 025 748571 mailto: sam@iprolink.co.nz home page:
<http://home.iprolink.co.nz/~sam/>

Copyright (C) Keith Fenwick 1997

This publication may not be reproduced, transmitted, transcribed, stored in a retrieval system, or translated into any other language or computer language, in any form or by any means, whether it be electronic, mechanical, magnetic, optical, manual or otherwise, without prior written consent of Keith Fenwick.

While Keith Fenwick undertakes to supply a viable software package he disclaims all warranties as to this software, whether express or implied.

SKID2

Prelude

Raele wondered what was happening on Skid and more importantly wondered whether it was time he headed home. Inel should have long since re-called him, an order that Raele would have gratefully received. But the communications channel had remained silent, as if he had been completely forgotten, cut off and left adrift in space.

The implications of this worrying state of affairs were beginning to loom large in Raele's increasingly troubled mind.

After leaving the offworlders on their home world, Raele and the crew of the patrol craft had gone on an aimless joyride around the universe. They sampled the delights of Candour. Tarried on the planet Guide where time stood still for them, for who knows how long? A few days, a few years, a century or two? Too long?

Then they did a beat up of Celcious B. Raele wouldn't land there, he didn't want to be swamped by the locals wanting food and other goodies as the Celcions would mistake his patrol craft for one of the heavy bellied freighters that no longer called.

It was fun, roaming around without any particular mission bar that last directive to delay their return home until ordered. Raele had been bemused by this last minute change in his flight plan, not least because he was informed of the change personally by Inel and not by Noslow his secretary. But also because Inel, usually so grim and distant, never betraying any emotion, had clearly been disturbed about something.

Raele had been anticipating the forthcoming mission in the unaccustomed luxury of a long range patrol craft. He didn't recognise Inel's obvious discomfort for what it was until they were well under way on their mission. He had been far too busy contemplating, with a rising sense of anticipation the delights of unlimited food and agbar supplies and other luxuries now in unbelievably short supply on Skid. Not forgetting certain other 'comforts' reserved for long distance space travellers in case they were stranded out of reach of a service crew.

Crashing anywhere was an unlikely event for a Skidian craft, created as

they were by the most sophisticated beings in the known universe. Raele thought it more likely that the presence of females aboard was a transparent ruse to keep them from straying from their appointed tasks.

Recreational sex was unheard of on Skid, Raele didn't even know such delights existed until he first experienced the rites of new patrol pilot. Since then his whole life had revolved around the pleasures of the flesh and counting down to his next space patrol.

Speaking of comforts, Raele turned over and looked at the female lying beside him, compared her smooth white skin with the offworld female they had recently despatched. Quite sometime ago now, Raele thought guiltily.

The communication channel had been open for days, Raele had been hoping that there would be some kind of traffic, some message waiting for him ordering him home. There had been nothing.

Nor was there any traffic on the channels that should have been busy with chatter from short range patrol and freighter traffic.

Raele's stomach was upset, he felt generally irritable which was itself unusual for a Skidian which was probably why the others had been avoiding him. Worry was beginning to gnaw at him like a live thing. Anxiety caused by the realisation that he was going to have to make a decision himself. For some unknown reason those that should be relieving him of this irksome burden seemed to have disappeared.

There were other patrol craft, on missions like his probing further and further into the universe and dealing with potential threats to Skid's security. Or merely watching over primitive planets like the offworlder's that were as yet no threat to Skid's security. Raele wondered what their crews were thinking, whether they were as bemused as he at the lack of communication from Skid, if they were still alive.

Raele rolled off the bed and wandered through to the control room to check the communication's channel once again. He scrolled through the log, still nothing. He entered a message and waited for a reply. Nothing answered except the whisper of the universe through the speaker. He checked the scanners as they were close enough to Skid that they should be picking up local traffic.

Nothing.

Raele's finger hovered over the console. Over the switch that would tell the autopilot to bring them to the space port at Sietnuoc in a few short hours.

Raele knew something was dreadfully wrong. But what could possibly be wrong? He pressed the switch and was relieved to hear the quiet beep that told him that the homing beacon was operating.

Normally Raele was excited by the final approach to Skid, this time he was filled with dread. Raele flipped on the viewing screen, picked out Skid from the cluster of other planets and watched as it steadily filled the screen.

Soon Raele could pick out familiar landmarks, the continents, the clusters of light that marked the cities of Skid and the salty seas. As the patrol craft got closer to Skid he noticed that several things looked different from his previous trips home.

For one the atmosphere seemed murky, as if a haze covered the entire planet.

There was no sign of any other patrol craft or the swarm of freighters that normally orbited the planet waiting to join the landing queues at the spaceport that normally bustled with activity. Usually hundreds of craft would be jostling for landing positions or departing for all parts of the known universe.

Raele tried the communication's channel again but it remained silent, hissing at him as if the channel had been accidentally left open on another craft.

Surely there must be someone down there he thought frantically, wondering what he was going to do if there wasn't.

Passing the darkened side of Skid above where Ndgarr should be the haze was thickest. It seemed to billow towards the patrol craft and glowed, as if untold lights burned below.

Then they were past Ndgarr and headed across the salty water to Sientuoc. What was going on? Raele wondered, truly afraid now. For a moment he seriously considered turning the patrol craft around and heading back into space.

"What is happening down there?" A voice articulated Raele's own thoughts.

Raele turned and found Amatm, one of the sociologists peering into the screen and trying to rub the sleep out of his eyes simultaneously.

"I don't really know," Raele replied, temporarily forgetting that he was supposed to pretend to know everything even if he didn't.

Amatm shrugged and walked across to the food dispenser. He wasn't looking forward to returning to Skid and leaving the luxury aboard the patrol craft. Back too unheard of restrictions on the use of agbar. Strict controls over the dispensing of food and all the other unheard of restrictions that were being placed on everyday Skidian life before they had left on their mission.

Amatm snatched a furtive glance at Raele. He saw Raele still staring at the screen so stuffed his pouch and pockets with agbar before turning to eat from the bowl that had filled under the dispenser.

He casually strolled back to where Raele stood and took another look at the screen. This was the end of his first trip into space so he didn't know what was usual and what wasn't but he saw the haze and remarked casually: "Looks as if the planet

Once they landed Raele carefully peered through the hatch which automatically flopped open. There was nothing remarkable in the few patrol craft lined up neatly beside his own or in the service crew that was hurrying over to them.

There was the hint of a foreign smell in the air though, one that Raele couldn't identify, like the flesh that the offworlder used to prepare for eating. The offworlder was half the universe away so it couldn't be that.

Raele stepped gingerly through the hatch and started across the space port to the controllers office.

'Probably asleep,' Raele decided wondering why nobody hustled out to to meet him. No officious clerks or attendants. No special messenger from Inel. Not even any other pilots greeting fellow travellers and swapping stories of the latest mission with. Nobody, nothing.

The only sign of normality was the service crew unobtrusively going about it's business on his ship.

Raele walked across the space port which was flanked by tall structures the offworlder had called trees. He was headed toward the building that housed the senate when it was in session and where Inel also had his offices. Surely someone would be there?

Raele found the building empty as he had half expected, his footsteps echoed hollowly and he shivered slightly. Where had everyone gone? Raele searched Inel's private apartments and found them empty as well. He sat behind Inel's desk and looked at his console. From here Inel kept tabs on every part of Skidian life. It also meant death for anybody to intrude into this inner sanctum, though Raele was beginning to doubt that anyone would disturb him.

The console came to life surprising Raele and then began to make its preprogrammed status report as if he were Inel.

Raele read as the report scrolled down, noting that everything seemed normal enough. Even the problems with the syn plants had been solved while he had been away. Skid's vast industrial complex was running as it always had, a monument to Skid's technological abilities and sophistication.

So where was everybody?

The report continued scrolling, detailing production of different essential industries, the status of defense systems, inbound and outbound flights. Only his own had been logged Raele noted. Population statistics.

Raele gazed at the figures scrolling off the bottom of the screen and

then scrolled them back up not believing what he was seeing.

Almost the entire population of the planet had disappeared! Raele sat stunned for, he didn't know how long, staring at the figures. That they were true he had no reason to doubt, so where was everyone?

one

Sue looked at her doctor expectantly, wondering why he had such a congratulatory expression on his face. She had visited him a few days previously, complaining of nausea. After filling the toilet bowl with vomit for the third or fourth time she decided she must have picked up some kind of bug.

Who knew what nasties really lurked in the streams where they'd drunk? Or hid in the rough cooking areas where they had prepared their food during the trip into the forest she'd recently returned from?

A slight bout of food poisoning or a tummy bug, Sue wasn't too concerned though she visited the doctor just in case.

The doctor was a small frail looking man, with a tight skin that fitted him like a scrubbed plastic glove. His soft clammy hands had made her shiver uncontrollably when he had run them over her bare abdomen as Sue had described her symptoms.

After a cursory examination, the doctor had asked a few seemingly meaningless questions about her periods that left her a little bewildered. He didn't think she was pregnant did he? The mere thought was laughable, not only was she on the pill but she hadn't slept with anyone in months, almost a year.

The idea of pregnancy didn't cross her mind again. Sue lay stiffly on the examination table made up with crisp white sheets that almost crackled beneath her and rested her head on the small pillow.

The doctor took her pulse, holding Sue's hand limply in his clammy paw, checked her blood pressure and then asked her to untuck her blouse. Sue tried not to shudder as the doctor's clammy hands slid over her abdomen again. Pressing here, tapping there.

"All right Miss Clarke." Did he emphasise the 'Miss? ' Sue wondered as he withdrew his hands and stepped away so that Sue could tuck in her blouse and slip off the table.

She watched the doctor mince around his desk with an action that reminded her more of a dog than any human she'd ever seen.

"Woof!" A dog barked an affirmative reply somewhere close and Sue allowed herself a secret smile.

Sue watched the doctor scribble something on a form as she straightened her clothing and sat in the chair across the other side of the desk.

"There isn't to be anything to be unduly worried about," the doctor had begun with a smile. "It's a good idea to get some tests done just to be sure," he had added handing over the form. "If you see the nurse outside, she'll look after you."

Sue found herself unable to ask the questions she had been meaning to. Instead she stood passively as the doctor opened the door and showed her out of his surgery wondering where the dog was.

That had been two days ago.

This morning the doctor's receptionist had rung asking Sue to return to the surgery as her test results had returned from the lab.

Sue was a little surprised to find that the doctor wanted to see her again. She had thought all she would need was a tonic of some kind, a few pills from the chemist and 'she'd be right!'

She began to worry that she had contracted some fatal disease, cancer,

aids even. Sue didn't have much time to run through the whole gamut of possibilities as the nurse ushered her into the doctor's office.

The doctor had risen as she entered with this congratulatory smile on his face and motioned Sue to sit.

Surely there wasn't anything seriously wrong she thought but the doctor's first words confused her.

"I'm pleased to confirm your pregnancy Miss Clarke."

Sue sat bolt upright in her chair, hands clenched at her side, unable to speak for a moment.

"How?" She gasped, not meaning to speak aloud.

"Surely you realise that contraceptives aren't entirely infallible?"

"No, sorry," Sue replied, her face feeling hot and flushed, "the news just comes as a bit of a shock, that's all."

What she didn't ask was whether he believed in immaculate conception. Before she thought of anything else Sue began to worry about what she would tell her parents. How her mother might react, let alone her father.

"There is nothing to worry about," the doctor droned on, blissfully unaware that this pregnancy could create modern medical history. "You're a fit healthy young woman and it's only early days yet. Make an appointment for a month so we can monitor your progress. Until then carry on as usual."

The doctor stared at Sue, noting that she was clearly distressed at the news. Well he was a doctor his work was done. He wasn't a psychiatrist or social counsellor. If this woman had problems with the father or candidates for father then that was someone else's problem, not his.

It couldn't, just wasn't physically possible. It just couldn't be true!

"Bloody hell." Sue was as surprised as the doctor who looked across the desk at her a pained look on his face. Sue froze at the disjointed image that flashed in her head before she could comprehend it. Like an elusive word on the tip of her tongue she couldn't quite grasp it's significance. It wasn't her voice that had uttered the words, but one that was intimately familiar to her.

But? Sue asked herself.

Shaking her head to clear her confusion Sue looked up and found the doctor looking pointedly at his watch. As if saying: it is after three and if you don't get going I'll miss my golf game.

Sue managed to retain her composure until she was outside and rummaging through her handbag for her car keys. She opened the door, tossed her bag onto the seat and cradled her head in her arms on the roof. Sue just couldn't believe it. Pregnant! It just wasn't possible.

Dabbing at her tears with a handkerchief Sue reached over to put the key into the ignition.

"Oh shit!" Not for the first time in recent days she found herself sitting in the right-hand seat and not the left when she meant to drive away.

"What's happening to me?" She asked herself sliding across the seat until she was behind the steering wheel. 'Am I going nuts or what?'

Sue didn't bother returning to work, what was the point in being the boss if you couldn't take time off when you felt like it?

Instead she stopped off at a liquor store on the way home and bought herself a sixpack.

What am I doing here? She asked herself again as she got back into the car. She rarely drank alcohol, though this last week she'd had an almost desperate need to drink. No not simply to drink, to drink with someone. Pulling a can of beer out of the fridge when she got home was almost a habit now. A pile of empty cans in the rubbish bin confirmed that.

For the first time in the short while she knew she was pregnant Sue smiled. Didn't women crave certain food when they were pregnant? That was the reason.

How pregnant am I? Sue asked herself. The doctor had muttered something about eight weeks she thought. Not that there was any point in counting the weeks up, there had been nobody.

Sue knew it wasn't possible that she could be pregnant, however much she was. The symptoms all fit and the tests were supposed to be infallible.

Unable to concentrate on anything for more than a few moments at a time, Sue gave up trying to work out how it had happened. She didn't really think it was an immaculate conception but there didn't seem to be a better explanation for her state.

Back at her apartment Sue unconsciously pulled a can from the sixpack she'd bought and took a long swallow. The trip home had been harrowing, not least because she continually believed that she was driving on the wrong side of the road. Though it was clear from the traffic flow that she wasn't.

Sue had suddenly found that driving wasn't the instinctive process that usually was, she had to concentrate on what she was doing!

Sue had put the irrational idea of driving on the wrong side of the road down to stress and shock. She wasn't sure about that, driving on the left-hand side seemed so natural somehow. Too many run of the mill everyday things felt weird and out of place to her. Pregnancy was just another example. Even the very familiar, her parents, her house, her work, felt strange and out of place. It was as if she had just returned from a long trip only to find that the only thing that had changed while she had been away was herself.

"Gees Wayne, this tastes like weasel's piss!" Sue regarded the can frankly, then dropped it fearing she was going crazy.

The voice had been loud and clear as if someone had spoken beside her. Unnoticed the beer frothed out over the floor. Sue looked around to make sure she was alone and screamed.

Nothing happened, the voice was gone but she tensed at the sound of footsteps hurrying along the path outside. A head popped up in the window.

"Are you all right dear?" Sue relaxed a little. It was only old Mrs Pratt from next door. "I heard a scream."

Sue nodded dumbly through the window.

"Are you sure?"

Sue nodded again, wishing then old busy body would go away and leave her to her misery.

"I thought I saw a mouse," she said weakly, sounding unconvincing even to herself.

Mrs Pratt stared at Sue with an expression of utter disbelief and unhappily lowered her pistol. She'd been prepared for anything and was quite disappointed that Sue wasn't in some kind of trouble.

Mouse indeed! Grunted the crusader against evil doers and all men, as she strode purposefully back to her own apartment.

Sue reached for a cloth and wiped up the mess at her feet, then drained what was left of the beer before tossing it carelessly at the waste bin.

The usually fastidious Sue ignored the can that had missed its target and rolled across the floor. Instead she grabbed another full one and sprawled in an easy chair.

A bell rang somewhere and Sue was just about to get up and answer the door when she realised it was the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hello dear," her mother answered on the other end of the line.

Just what I needed Sue thought, grimacing.

"How are you dear?"

"Oh pretty well," Sue lied wondering when her pregnancy would begin to show. She couldn't hide that from her mother for long.

"Are you there dear?" her mother obviously hadn't heard.

"I'm fine mom, fine really."

"I just rang to see if you were still coming down on the weekend?"

"Eh?" It seemed months ago that she had planned the visit. Surely she had been already?

"Oh sure mom," Sue recovered quickly, suddenly realising what had happened. Not that this discovery made her feel any better. She had lost time somewhere, somehow time had passed her by without her being aware of it. That

was the only way to explain the pregnancy, the feeling she had been away, she might have had some kind of amnesia attack. There was a blank space in her memory as if something had been scrubbed out. But what?

Sue inserted a yes and no here and there in her mother's inconsequential gossip conversation. Meanwhile her mind reeled at each new possibility that occurred to her. All she wanted to do was to scream and scream and scream as she speculated at what might have happened during that lost time. Got pregnant for one.

Tramping last week. Every thing before and after was clear enough in her own mind but the actual tramping trip itself was a different story. She remembered going, and coming home, but what had happened sometime was a bit of a blur. How would that explain her pregnancy? The trip was only last week after all.

"Ok mom, I'll see you on the weekend." Sue cut her mother off, suddenly impatient with her. She didn't want to know about Mrs Jones's piles or how well her nieces and nephews were doing at bible class, or anywhere else for that matter.

Sue didn't know what else to do so she stayed sprawled in the chair until the can was empty and then went into the kitchen for another. Halfway back to her chair she had second thought and grabbed the remainder of the six pack and set it down beside her chair. Before opening another can she used the remote to flick through the television channels until she found something that appealed to her.

She watched staring blankly, nothing really registering, mechanically finishing off the six pack. At last she tried to stand and found that she was more than a little drunk.

What a mess she must look, Sue thought with a giggle.

"Oaark," she burped loudly and giggled again and with great deliberation stumbled over to the couch and fell on it.

Within minutes, some inane game show blaring on the television, she was sprawled untidily on the couch, sound asleep in the land of dreams.

Sue dreamt of strange looking men, tall pale men wearing light coloured robes that concealed everything but their heads and feet.

Angels, she dreamt. Angels assessing her suitability for entrance to heaven, staring but not speaking as she stood before them, their distaste for her clearly evident in their faces.

Sometime in the night Sue woke, finding herself on the couch for the third time that week. She got up wearily, switched off the television and stumbled to the bathroom. There she tipped two aspirins into a glass and swallowed them on the way to her bedroom.

Sue forgot any more dreams that night but woke in the morning knowing how she had got pregnant. It hadn't been a dream but a vision. The angels weren't assessing her qualifications for heaven, but as a vessel for another of god's children. Immaculate conception was the only explanation that made any sense to her.

two

Cop stretched himself at the end of his chain, shivering a little as another squally shower passed over. Can and Punch barked loudly almost alongside him. They needed to announce themselves to the only world they had once known.

Despite the bleak start to the day Cop was glad to be home in familiar surroundings. Then sensing rather than seeing the boss moving around the house, he joined the expectant chorus of the other two dogs.

Cop was also pleased that the boss appeared to have returned with them. He wasn't bad as bosses went, if a bit niggly at times. But weren't they all? At least he made sure they were fed most of the time and didn't hit them too hard when they got a bit cocky. Not that the other two would ever realise how lucky they were.

Cop had enjoyed their trip away, though the food hadn't been the best most of the time and there hadn't been a lot to tempt the taste buds. Except when they managed to bury a particularly tasty morsel for a few days without some machine coming along and sucking it up.

Watching the boss trudge through the wet grass towards them, Cop wondered whether his new bitch had shown up. Cop didn't think so, leastways she hadn't come back with them.

Cop tugged impatiently at his chain as the boss seemed distracted by something.

"Hurry up," he barked imperiously as befitted his top dog position.

"Get out of it you noisy bastards!" The boss yelled in a voice that made Cop think he'd better shut up and keep still. That trick always worked. Punch couldn't control himself and got a light kick in the ribs for his trouble until he held still long enough for the boss to unclip his chain.

Free of the chain Punch ran around in circles trying to chase his tail. He leapt up and down a few times and then lit out across the paddock closely followed by Can, barking like a mad thing.

Cop was far more circumspect. He stayed close to the boss trying to suss out his mood as the boss strode over to where the noisy horse was kept.

Looks ok, Cop decided.

The horse started up with a loud rattling noise and then carried the boss up the hill paddock. Cop closely followed by the two other dogs trotted off with the boss to see what had changed since they'd been away.

Nothing, everything seemed the same as it had before they left, whenever that was? Quite a few moons ago he thought. Well almost everything, Cop was sure that they had moved all but one mob of cattle before they'd gone. Now they seemed to have to do the job over. The boss didn't seem to notice though, so Cop didn't worry about it and concentrated on having too run up and down hills again.

Cop was quite pleased with his mornings work, especially when the boss threw a decent chunk of mutton at him.

Sheep! Decent tucker at last. Cop loved his sheep tucker, especially stuff that had been dead for a few weeks out on the farm somewhere. The boss didn't seem to share this appreciation, but now that they were home he was making sure they had their favourite tucker.

Cop attacked his meal enthusiastically. Getting fed usually meant that the day's work was over, which suited Cop since his recent idleness left him feeling unusually tired after the mornings' running around.

Bruce made his way through the morning on auto pilot with vague feelings of *deja vu*. As if he had been this way before.

Well of course he had. The difference was he felt that he'd lived this day before. Especially when he had been out on the coast looking out to sea as he went to shift the last mob or two.

Staring out at the white crested waves under the darkening sky Bruce had shivered slightly and waited for something to happen. When it didn't he shrugged his shoulders in disbelief and carried on.

It was still raining heavily and bitterly cold when he finished moving the last mob of cattle. Feeling unusually miserable Bruce decided that the weather was a good enough excuse to spend the rest of the day indoors. He'd have a snooze where it was nice and warm.

Must be old age catching up with me he decided glumly. It wasn't really that cold. However, at this stage of proceedings, old age and grey hairs were the last thing Bruce wanted to deal with on top of all his other real or imagined troubles.

Last night was a bit of a blank, he knew he'd had more than one or two beers too many. More like half a crate more by the way his head was banging away and his stomach churned and gurgled.

Bruce half-expected somebody to turn up or catch him on the phone to remind him of what a idiot he'd made of himself the previous night.

Or to tell him to leave so and sos' wife alone if he knew what was

good for him.

Though he wasn't sure about anything Bruce felt burdened by a deep sense of shame and guilt that weighed heavily upon him all day.

What had he done now, who had he offended this time? Bruce waited for the axe to fall.

He must have done something silly or obnoxious if he couldn't remember and he certainly didn't do it at the house as there were no signs of a binge there. No empty, half empty bottles or ashtrays overflowing with old fag ends and that stale beery smell in there.

"What the hell did I do yesterday for that matter?" Bruce found himself struggling to remember what he'd done the past few days. Had he lost a day or two somewhere? Shit! Must have been a real bender he thought, which didn't make him feel any better.

But nobody rang or called by, or gave him the fingers as they drove past while he was working on the road fence. Call; the neighbour had even waved and shouted a friendly greeting when Bruce had gone down to check the mail as he drove past on his way to town.

Bruce started to believe that he might not have had a big night on the piss after all, or made a complete dick of himself in the process. However he couldn't shake a growing suspicion that something was definitely not right either within him or with the world.

The form of this sneaking suspicion or incipient fantasy remained frustratingly elusive. In the same way his brain refused to forward the word he was trying to dredge up to explain this phenomenon, Bruce couldn't yet articulate what was little more than a funny feeling.

During the evening television news weather forecast Bruce suddenly realised that the daily temperatures were considerably lower than what he thought. He was freezing, so how had he managed to get such a good tan in the middle of winter?

Bruce didn't really feel like sleeping either, his sleep was disturbed by pseudo nightmares involving tall pale men and women, and oddly out of context, a single black woman. All of whom seemed to be demanding something of him. Exactly what that entailed also remained disconcertingly elusive.

Bruce didn't find the nightmares particularly disturbing, in fact he was quite intrigued by them in some ways. It was the regularity of the dreams and the fact that Bruce felt he'd met, knew some characters, that was starting to worry him.

If he didn't have enough problems of his own the bloody dogs had gone to pot as well. After half an hour's running around they were completely knackered and all three of them had collapsed beside a gate and refused to move for half an hour that morning.

If that wasn't bad enough, Bruce was further disgusted to discover that almost overnight he'd put on weight. Somehow or rather his belly was now starting to bulge over the waist of his pants.

Maybe I need a holiday Bruce thought. Maybe I should just bugger off for a month or so before taking over the farm from the old man. Though after the uncertainty of the last few years when it seemed his old man would never give up the farm, Bruce wondered whether it was a good idea to delay his return home any longer than he had to and give the old bugger another excuse to stick around.

As the weeks ticked by, Bruce became increasingly restless, continually feeling that even though all he had worked for over the years was coming to pass, he had missed out on something else.

Bruce kept this inner turmoil to himself, not that he could share the growing belief that he was losing his mind with anyone. The boys at the rugby club wouldn't understand and the neighbours would just assume that he had flipped his lid.

Gradually Bruce began to withdraw himself almost entirely from what had been his usual routine. The hour's drive to the pub on a Friday night became the exception rather than the norm. He was usually the first and not one of

the last to leave rugby training if he bothered turning up at all. Not going to training meant that he missed games. He stopped visiting his sister or friends when he went to town to do his shopping. Increasingly, interaction with others became a major trial and he soon ceased to even try and be sociable.

Bruce, who had never been the most gregarious of creatures at the best of times was rapidly becoming something of a hermit.

Although Bruce was aware of this change in character, he felt powerless to prevent it. He knew that he should be forcing himself to get out, make training or drop in on people but he simply lacked the energy and the will to do so.

Bruce was disconcerted to discover his self confidence, his confidence in his ability and competence was being eroded and for the life of him he couldn't work out why. Even more disconcerting was; for no apparent reason finding himself on the verge of bursting into tears.

"What am I going to do? " He asked himself repeatedly until he couldn't force the words from his mind.

Soon sleep became a prized commodity that he only seemed possible if he was drunk. Even then the weird and disturbing dreams still intruded and he became convinced they contained some kind of message for him. Not that Bruce really believed in all that kind of shit.

Bruce tried desperately to shrug off the nagging suspicion that he knew the characters that inhabited his dreams. Especially the black woman who now seemed to assume greater prominence than the others. How could he have met her? It just wasn't possible.

Then the dreams seemed to change subtly, with the woman beckoning him while the others were consigned to a grisly but ill defined death among mighty fires which devastated the place they lived.

That part of the dreams made sense to Bruce, in the past he'd had problems with matches and cigarette butts carelessly discarded with disastrous results. He was paranoid about glowing butts flicked out of the ute's window flying back in the cab to smoulder unnoticed behind the seat or the dying embers of a fire in the grate flicking out on the carpet and setting the house alight while he slept.

It was all nonsense Bruce tersely told himself time after time, but he couldn't shake the sensation that something really weird was going on.

Despite the mediocre standard of programming on television, Bruce found himself spending more of his time veging out in front of it, drinking innumerable cups of coffee. This habit and his increasingly sedentary lifestyle did nothing to ease his growing and frustrating insomnia. While he had been a heavy smoker for years his consumption increased from little more than one packet of tobacco to two or three a week. His standard of housekeeping never a strong point totally lapsed which culminated at one stage in him finding a desiccated mouse carcass underneath his toaster as he relocated it one morning.

From the odorous nature of the kitchen there were obviously other things deceased about the place as well.

His disgust was complete when several fat maggots wriggled on out of the mouse carcass and he almost brought up his breakfast on the bench that he wasn't really interested in tidying.

"Fuck!" He screamed and forced himself to give the kitchen and the rest of the messy cottage a desultory clean up.

three

Dizzy and faint, Sue fumbled with her keys and flopped into the driver's seat of her car and rested her head on the steering wheel.

The last few months hadn't been easy. The daily bout of morning nausea she experienced soon made her consider employing a manager to operate the

agency during her increasing absences.

Sue wondered if feeling nauseous most of the time was normal, she couldn't talk with her mother about it, because she couldn't face the trauma of revealing to her that she was about to have an illegitimate child. But she'd have to do something soon, the growing bulge of her tummy was hard to hide.

The doctor had said not to worry, both she and the baby were perfectly healthy in every respect, but Sue couldn't stop herself from fretting.

After a few moments Sue slipped the key into the ignition, put her foot on the clutch and turned the key. Then she waved her hand around the steering column to grasp the column change gear shift.

"What am I doing?" She almost cried. Why was she continually looking for things that weren't there as if she were used by force of habit to finding various objects in certain positions? Her car was an automatic with a floor change.

"Because I'm pregnant," she whispered hopefully, looking behind her to make sure nothing was behind the car and taking note of the pile of beer cans on the floor. Cans that she was too shy to put out in the rubbish, in case of what the neighbours might think of her drinking. Despite the doctors assurances that the morning sickness was only a passing phase, it didn't pass and Sue was growing tetchy and irritable as the days passed.

Poked into her letter box, along with the usual pile of junk mail and a bill for some flowers she had sent her mother Sue found a copy of the some religious tract exhorting her to come to the lord.

"Just what I need," she thought. As if being 'saved' by parishioners of a particular sect could be of any real comfort to her.

Sue slipped her favourite CD in the stereo and lay down on the couch, wondering what she should do about an evening meal.

"You must try harder to eat well Miss Clark," the doctor had admonished her when she had gone for her check up earlier in the afternoon.

While she was thinking about what to eat, halfway between consciousness and sleep, Sue suddenly discovered she was paralysed.

Unable to move a muscle, her chest constricted as if metal bands had been wound tightly around her, she screamed for help.

Infuriatingly the man across the room sitting comfortably with a can of beer in his hand seemed not to notice her plight. Sue panicked, she couldn't move, couldn't see properly, couldn't do a thing to save herself, she knew she was a goner.

Sue was struck by the man's familiarity, which all but overwhelmed her but Sue knew she didn't know him.

"Arggh," she tried screaming again, "help me," she pleaded silently.

Then as quickly as she had found herself paralysed, Sue sat up and the man disappeared even as she reached for him. Despite the intensity of the experience it was just another dream.

The CD was finished, the red standby light on the stereo glared at her like a single accusatory eye and Sue realised she couldn't remember hearing any of the recording.

She got up and checked the fridge, found it contained a sixpack of beer, a piece of mouldy cheese, a punnet of yogurt that could have been sitting there for a month or so and a withered forlorn looking cucumber. Her nose wrinkled distastefully and she slammed the door shut.

"Bugger that!", The expletive coming to her lips easily, no longer startling her. Sue had given up asking herself why she had started swearing, just as she had given up wondering who the father of her baby was.

Staring at the fridge Sue brightened a little and decided to eat out. She hadn't even been close to the little steakhouse down the road that she'd been meaning to try for weeks.

To her distress Sue found that the steakhouse had become an ethnic restaurant seemingly overnight. Still it looked interesting and she was hungry so she took a seat at the bar and waited for somebody to serve her.

"Can I have a table?" she asked.

"Yeah sure miss, do you want to join another single diner?" The waiter asked, not trying to matchmake but to save having to clear another table.

"No, not really thank-you."

"Rightio, this way please," the waiter said leading Sue off to a table and pulling a chair out for her.

"Here's a menu, now a drink? beer, juice, wine, whatever?"

The waiter's accent intrigued Sue and she tried to place it. Looking around she saw this was definitely not your average ethnic restaurant. The walls were filled with large action shots of sports stars. Sue didn't recognise any of them or the games they seemed to be playing. There were also large photographs of cattle and herds of sheep and men on horses moving along dusty roads that twisted around green hills.

"Umm, a beer please," Sue replied automatically, even though she knew she shouldn't.

"What's yer poison, local stuff, Fosters, Steinlager. . .?"

"Fosters?"

"Yeah well this is an ethnic restaurant you know, gotta have the dinkum product for authenticity's sake you know."

"Dinkum?" The man was obviously speaking English, but not any kind of English she'd ever heard.

"I'll er, . . . try the Fosters, unless," Sue hesitated, "unless you have any....."

"Yes?" asked the waiter attentively.

"Fosters will be fine thanks." Sue had been about to name another brand that had suddenly slipped into her mind.

"No worries."

Sue stared at the menu, trying to make some sense of the suddenly jumbled words and numbers until the waiter reappeared with a frosty chilled glass half filled with beer and a distinctive blue can on a tray.

"Decided what you want to eat?"

"Um, what about an ivo . . . p, sorry." What's an ivop Sue asked herself? "Um I'm not sure yet," she blustered after a moment to the waiter who gave her an odd stare.

"Ok" He said deciding they had a right one here, "I'll come back in a few minutes.

Sue watched the waiter make his way across the restaurant to a group of noisy, boisterous customers were clustered around a large television screen.

"What's it this week Trev?" One of them asked as the waiter pushed a cassette into a video recorder.

"Auckland versus Waikato, last Saturdays game.

"Who won?"

"Watch and find out, I'm not going to spoil it for you mate," the waiter said with a chuckle and turned back to Sue's table.

"Ready now miss?"

Sue studied the menu desperately unable to make her mind up.

"The chef's surprise please," she said catching the entry at the bottom of the menu.

"OK, it's a surprise so I won't tell you what it is, entr,e?" He asked making a note on his pad.

"No thanks."

"Rightio." The waiter walked off towards the bar and returned with a plate of crisp buns and a small punnet of butter.

"Compliments of the house."

"Thanks," Sue muttered, but the waiter was gone.

Sue turned and looked at the large television screen set up on one wall that the men across the room were watching intently.

"Hey Trev, turn the sound up will ya?" one of them yelled over his shoulder.

An excited voice suddenly appeared and called out two comparative lists

of names. In the background two sets of men wearing multi coloured jerseys ran out onto a large stadium, tossing a football around between them.

"There has been a late change to the Auckland team with Michael Jones being replaced after failing a fitness test."

Sue watched a player place the ball on a small pile of sand in the middle of the field, step back and ruck up his little white shorts and then trot forward.

"Watts kicks off," the commentator continued as the ball sailed skyward and fell towards the point where two groups of men were converging on the side of the field.

"The ball is taken in by Wilson, but it's not going to come out of there in a hurry," he said as the two groups of men fell into an untidy heap on the ground. Quickly most of the men formed themselves into some kind of scrum and folded together with an audible bone crunching thump.

"Shit I'd hate to be in the middle of that lot," one of the watching men muttered to the general mirth of his fellows. The crowd roared and seemed to be chanting 'weight, weight' and then there was a combined roar of excitement by the crowd as the ball seemed to roll out of the scrum and was passed backwards to a player who began to run and jink through tackles . . .

Sue felt the hairs on the back of her head rise and she broke into a cold sweat. Before she could clamp down on it, she brought up the beer she had drunk and what little food she had consumed that day all over the table.

"Oh shit!" the waiter grumbled. "You haven't even eaten anything yet!"

"I'm sorry, very sorry," Sue mumbled apologetically through the paper tissue she dabbed at her mouth.

"She's right lady, here," the waiter said, gently pulling Sue to her feet, "go and get yourself cleaned up in the ladies. Over there," he pointed beyond the men watching the video who hadn't even noticed the drama being played out beside them.

"Go and dribble some nice cold water on your face while I clean this up."

The waiter grimaced distastefully at the mess but decided after a more thorough investigation that it wasn't all that bad, really. Most of the vomit and bile had been deposited neatly on the table cloth. Before Sue had got inside the ladies toilet the waiter had dropped the table cloth into a bucket, wiped the table down and was preparing to re set it.

"Ok now dear?" He asked solicitously when Sue reappeared.

"Thank-you, I'm sorry, I just don't know what came over me."

"No worries, you still want to eat?"

"I think so." That was the least she could do, Sue didn't really want anything now but felt obligated to at least order something after making such a mess.

She didn't want the new can of beer that the waiter arrived with either. But when he said: "on the house," she couldn't refuse.

"I must apologise for the mess," Sue began.

"Oh don't worry about it," the waiter said, "happens all the time."

Sue didn't think it looked that sort of place. The men watching the television were putting it away to judge by the stack of cans and bottles on their table but they didn't look as if they were the type to drink until they dropped.

Sue ate the chef's special as she tried to work out what was happening on the screen. The commentator and the men watching, the crowd's reaction, coming through on the soundtrack seemed more than a little excited but Sue was little the wiser.

"What was the chef's special this evening?" Sue asked as the waiter cleared away her empty plates.

"Mountain oysters," he replied without elaborating in case the woman brought up her dinner.

"They were very nice too."

"Can I get you some desert, coffee?"

"Decaf, I only drink decaf."

"Sure, milk, sugar?"

"No just black please." Sue had acquired another new habit along the way. "By the way, what is that game on the screen. The men were watching intently, howling in outrage one moment, sculling their drinks the next and slapping each other on the back. Sue kept on catching phrases like: "He's been doing it all day ref," and snippets of the excited commentator but couldn't make head or tail of the game. It looked a little like organised unarmed warfare.

"It's a rugby game, my brother in law tapes all the big ones for me and sends them over."

Again the hairs on the back of Sue's neck rose and her scalp crawled as she began to feel quite faint.

Sue's growing distress went unnoticed by the waiter who appeared keen to explain, especially as the woman seemed interested.

If he were lucky he might get his leg over later, she wasn't a bad looker in a sort of dark sultry way he decided rambling on.

To her total astonishment Sue found herself almost anticipating the waiters' every word, as if she had heard an almost exact word for word explanation of the game before. But she'd never seen anything like it before, or had she?

Abruptly Sue stood up, delved inside her handbag and flung two twenties at the astonished waiter and then ran for the door and her car wishing that the voice in her head would stop. A voice explaining the game continued in her head even as she got to her car and drove away, until suddenly it stopped as if somebody had turned off a radio.

four

Bruce sat slumped in his favourite chair half listening to the radio, staring blankly out the window. Beside him on the floor lay the morning's paper in an untidy pile. On a low table alongside the chair sat a dirty glass half full of cold coffee and a saucer that he used as an ashtray, overflowing with butts.

Outside the day was uncharacteristically bright and warm for that time of the year and Bruce knew that he should be outside enjoying it. It was the weekend after all but he couldn't bring himself to do anything. A wave of intense loneliness and despair, swept over him. For some reason he felt cut off from the world about him.

It was if he had just returned from a long stint away from home and needed to re establish himself again with his friends and family. Building new relationships, finding a new job.

He seemed to have lost his confidence, a self confidence that he'd never questioned before, it was if he were recovering from some traumatic experience, an accident of some kind. As if he were a prisoner re entering the world after years away inside only to find that he was entering a foreign land.

But none of these things was true, so why then could he not face the world? Why, last night when he had gone to town to do his shopping had he not even called into the pub on his way home even though he'd recognised the cars of a neighbour and several team mates in the carpark?

Even stopping for a feed of fish and chips proved to be an ordeal that he couldn't face.

Bruce was afraid that he was in danger of becoming a bitter and twisted old hermit, subconsciously anyway, he was already halfway there.

"Pull yourself together," he repeatedly told himself. But still he sat around listlessly wondering what to do with himself, until even reading the paper, let alone attempting the crossword was too much for his atrophied brain.

Bruce got up and made himself another cup of coffee from the hot tap and lit up yet another cigarette, despite the fact that he was waterlogged and had

a headache.

I should write a letter he thought. But who to was the next question, so that bright idea died on the vine. No worries he thought a little later, I can fill in the name some other time.

But Bruce ran out of inspiration after a line or two and tossed the pad across the room in disgust.

Bruce thoughtfully regarded his little finger for a moment, deciding whether it was clean enough to pick his nose with when the phone rang. He let it ring for a while even though it was within easy reach, making a pretence of being busy.

He half-hoped it wouldn't be somebody coming out for a visit, or somebody asking him if he wanted to go anywhere, despite the fact he was intensely lonely.

After six or seven rings Bruce reached out for the receiver.

"Hello?"

But the ringing tone continued in his ear

"Shit." Bruce tried to crook a finger around the cut off button but the ringing continued unabated. He whacked the phone a couple of times which freed the button but the ringing stopped.

"Bugger it," he almost cried. Apart from the girl in the supermarket checkout and the bloke at the service station the day before, Bruce hadn't spoken to anyone in days.

After a while Bruce got up and scrabbled through the pile of paperbacks in the corner of the room, found one he hadn't read in at least six months and guiltily curled up under a blanket on the couch with it.

That didn't work either so he tossed it on the floor and tried to have a snooze, before long he picked the book up again and continued to read.

Even though Bruce had read this particular Le Carre spy thriller several times before, he read it as if for the first time, completing the lengthy novel in one long sitting, pausing only for more cups of coffee and to get a new packet of smokes from the kitchen. By the time he'd finished the day was used up and the dogs were barking at their kennels because he'd forgotten to feed them and let them off for a run.

Feeling guilty about the way the day had disappeared Bruce embarked on another fit of cleaning up, improving on but only slightly the purge of a few days previously.

The inside of the microwave got more than a cursory wipe to clean off layers of accumulated fat while the shower and toilet both got a decent scrub out and Bruce also made inroads into the pile of dirty clothing that had accumulated around the washing machine.

Yet despite his efforts Bruce felt no sense of achievement and quickly lost interest in his domestic chores.

After the best part of an hour Bruce slumped down in his chair again and castigated himself roundly for not going to the game that afternoon. Even if he hadn't of played, right now he could be sitting in the club rooms warming himself up with a beer, just being with people.

He glanced at his watch, the game would just be finishing. If he hurried....But the mere effort of even thinking about going out was too much for Bruce, he couldn't be stuffed making the effort.

Perhaps the call earlier had been from the coach who wanted him to play because the team was short again.

Could've been anyone.

Tomorrow was Sunday he reflected." Stupid bastard, of course it was," he rambled on to himself trying to develop a plan of action that would get him up and out of the house. Make a plan he thought, thinking also that he might not necessarily follow it anyhow. Bruce was flexible like that.

As the boss came up the path towards them Cop thought he looked a bit niggly. Actually Cop didn't think the boss looked niggly, he knew the boss was niggly. Neither he, nor Can nor Punch could do anything right these days.

Cop knew what the problem was, but not how to fix it. Yet. It was that female boss, the one who hadn't come back here on the big bird. She would have made all the difference Cop reckoned. Cop's only real problem was that he didn't know how to tell the boss where the female boss was. But he would soon, he was sure of it and when he did the boss would be the first to know. Cop thought he owed him that much at least for taking him on the trip on the big bird that had changed his life for ever.

Cop wasn't sure what had changed, though he was convinced he wasn't the same dog he'd been before they had left. Can and Punch weren't either but the changes were less noticeable than in himself. All they did was grumble about returning home after their adventures, while Cop found himself having thoughts and ideas that had never occurred to him before.

Now all he had to do was work out how to tell the boss where his mate was and he could be rid of him while he worked out what he could and couldn't do.

Bruce had another lurid dream about a black woman that he seemed to know so well. Or was it the first time? Bruce couldn't remember, but he had the uncanny feeling that the dream was more a memory than dream. But that couldn't be right.

Then there were more important things to worry about.

Bruce watched the rural delivery agent stop at his letterbox from the hill above the house and decided that it was time for morning smoko. Along with the morning's paper, a two-litre plastic container of milk that he wouldn't drink in a week and a loaf of fresh bread was a letter.

Bruce took in the post mark and stamp, his heart missing a nervous beat for a reason that he couldn't fathom. He turned over the letter and looked at the return address.

"Wonder what he wants?" Bruce muttered sticking the envelope between his teeth and carrying the other bits and pieces up to the house.

The contents of the letter put Bruce right off his morning smoko, just when he thought he was rising above self inflicted misery. The letter informed him that the owner of the farm he was minding was planning on returning earlier than expected.

"What a bugger," this is all I need he thought. Bruce had been counting on staying put for several more months yet and now he had nowhere to go except back home a couple of months before he was ready. Or perhaps more correctly, months before the appointed time when his father was going to hand over the reins of the family farm.

Later that night, beset by a caffeine induced insomnia, in the safe warm cocoon of his bed, Bruce tried to make effective plans for his immediate future which dissipated like wind blown leaves in the grey light of the next morning.

Bruce couldn't find anything positive or heartening to boost his sagging morale and could never concentrate for long enough on the problem to decide anything, let alone formulate an effective course of action.

Eventually he decided to rely on the tried and tested method of forward planning that had served him so well in the past and let fate take a hand in his future. For despite his low spirits and general lack of confidence he was sure that something would turn up, as something usually did.

five

Sitting in the bath, Sue wondered how best to let her mother in on the good news, or the bad news maybe depending on your point of view. Sue was starting to like the idea of having a baby and wasn't troubled by the thought of bringing it up by herself.

Once her mother was in on the secret, then it would be time to work out how to deal with her father who would most likely immediately bring out his shotgun on hearing the news and demand to know where the perpetrator of this

evil deed was. That was the worst part of the whole situation if she knew the father then there would be no problems, well less anyway, especially with the possibility of marriage in the wind.

Sue's deeply religious parents and had carried their conservative christian faith with them when they had migrated from the South to the promised land of California. They'd maintained their allegiance to the fundamentalist sect that they'd belonged to all their adult lives and had found ample opportunity in the west to continue their need for enlightenment and support.

Dad was a sturdy if unimaginative pillar of the church and had passed on not unnaturally to his two eldest children his deep sense of conviction in his god. Somewhere along the way Sue had largely missed out on this legacy and she knew that her father would take her present condition as a personal affront to his dignity. Even if he didn't voice his displeasure she knew that both her parents would be gravely disappointed with her, though Sue felt her mother might be secretly pleased at having another baby to fuss over.

Unconsciously Sue played with the little plastic duck that had accompanied her in the bath ever since she was a child. She pushed it gently through the cloud like masses of foam, between her breasts, the ducks' rough underside gently scraping her belly already swelling with the developing child.

Sue had considered an abortion, then rejected the idea when she considered that she could look after the child and give it a decent life.

Couldn't she?

The phone started to ring on the bench beside the bath, disrupting her train of thought.

"Hello?"

"Hello dear, mother. I just thought I'd call just to make sure you were ok...are you there dear?"

Sue gripped the handset and realised that her mother had picked that something was wrong when she had last seen her.

"Yes mom, mom I'm glad you rang I've got some news for you. You're never going to guess what happened."

Sue looked at the duck bobbing in the swell created as she wriggled about in the bath, it reminded her a little of an old sailing ship lost at sea.

A vessel?

"Yes dear?" Sue's mother waited expectantly on the other end of the line knowing her daughter was still there because she could hear her breathing into the mouthpiece.

A vessel? Am I a vessel? Sue pondered the question. Immaculate conception, if it were true would please her father. Making him believe that such a thing was possible let alone herself was another story. Although not a rational explanation exactly, immaculate conception was still the most logical cause of her pregnancy that Sue could think of.

Thinking about it suddenly brought her closer to god and her parents than ever before. Everything made sense now!

"Are you all right dear?" Sue recognised the hint of concern in her mother's voice now.

"Yes, sorry mom. I just had an idea that's all."

The figures in white, they must be angels. Was the other man she kept on dreaming about an angel too or god perhaps, Jesus maybe? Not that he really equated with the contemporary vision of god, sitting in front of the television, with a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. And what about the three funny looking bobtailed dogs that followed him around in most of her dreams?

"Mom I'm pregnant," Sue blurted before she was aware of what she was saying.

"Oh." Her mother's startled voice came down the phone line after a moment's pause. Perhaps more hurt than shocked, as if she had been expecting something like this even if just to prove her wayward daughter's fall from

grace.

"Are you sure dear?"

"Yes mom the doctor confirmed it a week or two back."

"What does the father think?"

"I don't know really, I don't. Uh, I haven't told him yet." Sue didn't think this was quite the right time to tell her mother that she didn't know who the father was, if there was ever going to be a right time.

"Don't you think telling the father would be a good idea?"

"Yes I suppose so," Sue replied diffidently, still wondering how she was going to explain the lack of a father for her child and how she would deal with the resulting fallout.

"I hope he's going to do the right thing by you dear," Sue's mother continued, meaning marriage, white dresses, and all the trappings of a church wedding.

"I'm sure he will," when I find him Sue didn't add, feeling rather guilty about misleading her mother this way.

"Shall I come up and stay with you for a few days? No don't worry I'll come up tomorrow and then I can meet your nice young man.

"Mom," Sue was about to try and dissuade her mother, but once she had got the bit between her teeth there was no stopping her.

"Sure. See you tomorrow." Sue caved in, bereft of the energy needed to dissuade her.

"I'll see if your father wants to come," Sue's mother continued blithely unaware of the turmoil she was causing.

"Oh god!" Sue thought, that will make things even worse, she could just imagine the way her father would spend the time brooding over her misbehaviour. Never actually saying as much but making his feelings pretty well clear.

"We'll leave after church then."

There wasn't much else to say, Sue hung the phone up on her mother while she was in midstream and slid down in the bath until her head was submerged wishing she could simply wash her troubles away.

six

Bruce could hear the phone ringing shrilly in his dream, a phone unlike any he'd ever seen. The only contemporary thing about it was the irritating demanding noise it made.

Instead of a small plastic phone, Bruce found himself looking into a screen of some kind at some woman. The black woman had come back to haunt him again.

Who was that sheila?

Bruce suddenly woke just as he felt the woman was about to say something vital about the relationship between them. But vital to what?

The phone was ringing. Bruce shrugged off the blankets and climbed out of bed, stumbling out of his bedroom and across the lounge to the phone.

"Yeah?" the phone seemed to have cured itself of it's problems of a few days previously.

"Bruce?"

"Yeah, who is it?" Bruce demanded drowsily not recognising the voice on the other end of the phone.

"Barry Blank," boomed the voice from the other end of the line so loudly that Bruce held the receiver a few centimetres from his ear.

"Oh hi, how's things? Are you back already?" Barry Blank was the owner of the farm Bruce was managing.

"No not yet. You got my letter? Um, look we've decided to stay on for a few more weeks, I hope that doesn't upset any plans you might have made?"

"No, she's right." It was a relief to Bruce to be able to put off moving on for a few more weeks.

"Good, I thought I'd better ring. I'll get in touch by letter in a few weeks and let you know our return date. Hope I didn't get you out of bed." With that the phone went dead in Bruce's ear. Barry was a man of a few loud words.

Bruce shrugged his shoulders, looked at his watch and decided it wasn't worth going back to bed.

"Smart bugger!" Swanning around Europe on holiday, getting his kicks by waking people up on the other side of the world.

Bruce pulled on some clothes, it was a bit chilly standing there with the phone in his hand, naked as the day he was born with a frost on the ground outside. He made himself a cup of coffee, he didn't think he could stomach breakfast just yet and tried to recall the vivid dream he'd just had without success.

Outside in his warm dirty kennel, half wrapped up in an old eiderdown, Cop scratched his nose and cursed all bosses. Why hadn't the boss stayed asleep a little longer? Cop thought he'd just about cracked it and now he'd have to wait until the next dark time and try again to get his message through.

Cop had a pretty good idea where the female bosses' kennel was. It had taken him days to sift through all the boss talk and then work out how to send the boss talk that he remembered back to the boss as he rested in the dark.

"Oh well, there would be another dark time soon," Cop knew unless the big bright thing in the sky decided not to grow again and fell on them.

Was he heading for some kind of mental breakdown? Bruce wondered for the umpteenth time as he nursed his coffee on the back porch watching the hills slowly brighten as the sun rose. Yesterday he'd felt so helpless that he almost started crying again while he was out mustering. People just didn't do that sort of thing unless they were losing their marbles Bruce reckoned.

Bruce tried to concentrate on the working out what he was going to do once Barry got back. In about a year's time his father was going to move off the farm and he was going to take over. His father had ideas of buying a bookshop or something but in reality Bruce couldn't see him leaving the farm that had been his whole life. Bruce couldn't really see the two of them working together either because they'd never gotten along. Especially since his older and more favoured brother came home late and drunk one night, collecting a milk tanker on the way.

Bruce knew his father had never really recovered from his first born sons' death. Certainly he had become more distant and less forgiving of his younger son's mistakes from that time. No matter how hard he had tried Bruce had never matched up to his father's expectations, nor the expectations he'd had for his other son. Communication between the two of them had mostly been on a monosyllabic level for as long as he could remember.

Perhaps unkindly, it seemed to Bruce that the only reason his father had acceded in turning over the farm to him was to ensure that a Harwood continued to farm land that had been in the family since 1861. Probably with a little help from his mother who desperately wanted to move to town for some unknown reason, because surely there they would soon wither away and die.

Neither of them had made things easy for him, Bruce reflected ruefully, he was going to have to pay through the nose to finance their retirement.

Not to worry, he decided.

So he couldn't go home, not yet anyway. What about a holiday? Now that sounded like a good idea. Six months or so overseas, mucking about before being tied down.

So where should he go? Oz? Nah., too many cockers there he thought. Europe, America, Asia? Bruce couldn't decide, nor could he think of anywhere that he might like to revisit from the year he had spent travelling through those very places.

"I'll make a decision," he muttered, "when I know what's going on." Which neatly set that problem aside for another time.

Suddenly as if a great weight had for no apparent reason been lifted from his shoulders, Bruce felt more alive, far more happy than he had been in months.

With great determination and vigour he strode outside to make a start on the days work, not realising until almost lunchtime that he was in the process of wasting a perfectly good Sunday.

seven

Sue talked herself into believing that god would certainly speak to her if she went to church. On the other hand she knew it was a completely irrational fantasy because if god really wanted to speak to her, he'd speak to her anywhere. She decided to make the effort anyway.

While she selected an outfit to wear, a dress not slacks, nothing too flashy or too sombre, she still hoped that god would speak to her like he did to others and let her know what was going on.

Eventually she chose a severe suit, the sort of thing she wore when she wanted to impress somebody and headed for a church. One of those churches where the congregation was whipped into a frenzy of religious fervour by the pastor. On the way Sue firmly rejected the possibility that god might decide to speak to someone else in their moment of ecstasy; she was the chosen one.

Afterwards with no great insights revealed, she hadn't started rolling down the isle frothing at the mouth or speaking in a tongue nobody could understand, Sue decided it had been a rather unfortunate service.

The pastor had thundered on about immorality and promiscuity in particular, which had Sue squirming in her seat uncomfortably. Her neck felt hot as if it was glowing and she imagined that all eyes were upon her accusing her of the very behaviour that the pastor railed so energetically at. A silly thought, Sue knew, but she didn't realise the how true these feelings were until she looked at her feet on leaving the church and noting the real disapproving stares that were directed at her.

On leaving her apartment earlier, instead of wearing the neat black pumps that she was sure she had slipped her feet into, she wore instead a pair of 'thongs' that she kept by the door for quick trips out to the garage or garden.

Instead of waiting around to congratulate the pastor on his edifying sermon, Sue made a dash for her car and headed home. Her mother and father would be arriving at anytime and she needed to stop and get something decent to eat for lunch. But slowing for an intersection, a 'thong' jammed itself against the accelerator, which sent her careering across the road in front of a truck. With a piercing squeal of it's brakes and a loud blast on the horn the truck missed the car by inches. Sue saw the angry fist of the driver wave at her out his window and made off home as quickly as possible in case the irate truck driver decided to follow her.

Sue was starting to calm down and think about venturing out to a bakery to get something for her parent's lunch when their car rolled up the driveway. Steeling herself, Sue walked to the door to greet them.

"Hi mom, hi dad, have a good drive up?" Sue asked brightly and turned her head slightly. Ominously the usual fatherly peck on the cheek wasn't forthcoming.

Sue looked at her parents and noted their expressionless faces. They looked as if their whole world had caved in on them. Like those pictures of famine victims on the television Sue thought.

"Come on in," Sue said, her hurt evident in her voice. If her parents wanted to subdue her, their tactics had worked. She held the front door open for her obviously hesitant parents.

Sue put a hand to her mouth as she noticed the over flowing rubbish bin that she had meant to empty, three or four beer cans lying on the floor beside it.

Her father, strictly teetotal as per the precepts of his church shook his head disdainfully as he spied them. She saw the: Backslider, look on his face, the visit wasn't going to be easy.

Sue's mother shot her a sad questioning look but said nothing for the moment.

Trying to put on a brave face Sue put the jug on and began to prepare a pot of coffee.

"How have you been?" she asked trying to get her parents to at least speak to her.

"Quite well," her mother replied for the two of them, "considering," she added with an uncharacteristic coldness.

Sue caught her father looking around almost furtively, as if to see if somebody else was in the apartment. He caught her eye and quickly looked guiltily away. Sue dropped a couple of teaspoonfuls of tea into the pot and then remembered that her parents didn't drink tea, probably didn't even know what tea was. But then Sue had only started drinking tea recently herself.

What the hell she thought. They can like it or lump it and dad can look all he likes but he won't find the baby's father. What business is it of his anyway? She decided with a toughness that surprised her.

Sue heard her father clearing his throat the way he did when he had something important to say.

"Yes dad?"

"Umm, your mother says that you are going to have a baby?" He began as if it were such a big deal. Not exactly the opening that Sue had expected.

"I expected that we would meet the father here this morning so we could talk about the wedding, is he coming?"

"Not today." Sue replied shortly, "he won't be coming today," or any day she didn't add. "He's, um overseas at the moment," Sue improvised in a none too convincing manner.

"Oh." Her father's disappointment was evident. "We were looking forward to meeting him so much." He said digging, wanting his daughter to tell all so he could forgive her wanton behaviour.

For that he needed all the details.

Eyeing the jug and willing it to boil, Sue decided to carry on the fiction about the father of her child being overseas, that she didn't know where he was or that he wasn't going to be back for a while. She couldn't tell her parents that she didn't know who the father was could she? And her fantasy about bearing a child of the gods would only inflame her father's evident anger.

"Are you going to keep it then?"

"Of course," Sue had definitely decided against an abortion but hadn't really considered what she was going to do once the baby was born. Though she had decided to call the child Bruce if it was a boy.

She didn't know why the name Bruce seemed so important to her and hadn't even considered a girls name. The name Bruce just seemed to spring into her mind. She didn't know why, nor could she understand why the name's Cop, Can and Punch almost seemed to mean as much to her as the name Bruce did. But that was the least of her immediate worries.

News of the existence of an evidently responsible father seemed to ease the atmosphere, as if the spectre of an impending illegitimate birth had been avoided. Now they could concentrate on how best they could help their wayward daughter.

Sue loved them for it even more for it and softened her feelings towards them.

"Oh dear," Sue's mother began to sob and her husband reached over to hold her wrist to comfort her.

Although Sue was used to her mother's demonstrativeness, the sight of tears coming to her father's eyes as well came as such a surprise that she felt her own cheeks suddenly moist in sympathy.

Beside her the jug was boiling, spilling hot water over the bench top.

She filled the teapot and after a few moments poured three cups of tea.

"I've got no milk," Sue apologised as she sat and the three of them eyed each other tearfully for a few moments before all three started laughing.

"This should be a time for happiness my dear," Sue's father said and rose from his chair so that he could hug his daughter.

Oddly Sue was uncomfortable with this sort of behaviour, especially so when her mother reached over and gave her a kiss, although it had been the norm all of her life. As if she had suddenly grown up or away Sue was profoundly embarrassed by these overt shows of affection.

As if nothing untoward had happened Sue's father went out to the car and brought in the presents they had brought along, as if Sue had first to prove that she was worthy of them.

While they prepared lunch, Sue's father parked himself in front of a ball game on the television.

"You must make sure you eat well now dear," Sue's mother reproached her gently after making a survey of the cupboards and the refrigerator, sturdily refraining from mentioning the beer cans.

Later, after her father blessed the food with a grace asking for gods' protection and forgiveness, they talked of inconsequentiality's as they ate.

Until that is the talk turned to the arrival of the baby and Sue's mothers insistence that she return in a few weeks to stay until the baby was born.

"I don't think so." Sue knew the decision would upset her parents, her mother a little but she wasn't willing to give up her independence just yet.

"Maybe a little closer to the birth," she suggested wanting to keep the two of them at arms length in case there were developments. Exactly what 'developments' Sue wasn't able to define. But she felt in her bones that something unique was about to occur. Whether that special event was simply going to be the birth of her child Sue didn't know. Mind you, that would be special enough she decided.

The rest of the afternoon passed true to form. Sue's father soon dozed off in front of the television, snoring softly and Sue and her mother gossiped and began to make a list of what the baby would need when it arrived.

Sue's father woke suddenly a few hours later and decided it was time to begin the two hour drive home if they were to get there in time to comfortably settle down in time for the evening's televised ball game.

Then it was a quick peck on the cheek from each of her parents and they were gone. Once her father decided to move nothing slowed him down.

Sue was relieved by their departure, it had been nice to see them and after the difficult start, their visit had gone off rather better than she had expected. But she wanted to relish her freedom while it lasted. Once the baby came along she wouldn't be able to enjoy her own company for a long time.

That night she dreamed again about the man she now thought of as god. Sue realised if she were dreaming about god then she was having a vision and revelled in the religious ecstasy of it.

It was a disturbing vision, god looked down on her as she lay upon a bed with a swollen belly and shook his head sadly. He seemed to reach for her outstretched hand but she never felt his hand clasp her own and then he was more interested in one of the dogs that kept following him around. In fact Sue was disturbed by the idea that the dog looked more interested in her than god. Sue didn't know what to make of that.

Then as if he had read her mind, as he surely could, god finally rested his hand on her belly, as if feeling for a baby's kick and Sue smiled at the beaming face looking down at her. As suddenly as it came the vision was gone, replaced by another where she found herself lying on a bed in which she woke screaming when she found god in her bed. Or maybe found herself in his bed? She wasn't clear about that.

At last she woke and found herself reaching out for the body that she was sure lay beside her, to see his face and to know him and when there wasn't simply slid back into sleep.

Finding it increasingly difficult to muster the energy and motivation to put in a daily appearance at her office, Sue decided to look for a manager. There must be untold people who would jump at the chance of running a burgeoning travel agency. She wasn't wrong. An advertisement in the situations vacant section of the local paper elicited such an avalanche of replies from the qualified, the dreamers and the over qualified, that Sue didn't have any idea of how to cope with them.

Eventually after much vacillation Sue turned the matter over to an employment agency who before she was really ready presented her with their best choice, whom she accepted without any reservation.

Well informed about the situation, the new manager, an enormous hunk of a man who had financed his education via a football scholarship at a leading university, soon had the situation under control. His grades were not as it may have seemed connected to his prowess on the football field.

After several weeks one problem emerged that Sue had not foreseen, Hal the hulk seemed to think that she herself came with the job. Perhaps Hal thought he could marry into the business. Whatever his intent no amount of persuasion appeared to dampen his ardour. Her obviously delicate condition, increasingly delicate condition, proved no barrier to Hal's attentions.

Hal took to calling Sue over minor details that Sue knew he was more than capable of dealing with himself, he asked her out to dinner, to the movies, for walks in the park, there seemed to be no stopping him.

One afternoon Hal turned up on her doorstep after she hadn't called or dropped by the office for a few days. Sue tried not to allow him in the house but Hal carefully though forcefully insinuated himself inside even as Sue tried to close the door in his face.

"What do you think you're doing?" Sue asked.

"I thought you might need a man about the place," Hal replied quite sure of himself.

"If you don't get out of here I'll sack you and make sure the employment agency knows all about your behaviour," Sue threatened him half heartedly.

Just her luck Sue thought, first I get pregnant and then I get accosted in my own home by a hulk with fetish for pregnant woman. Unconsciously an epithet came to her lips, one so virulent and delivered with such passion that Hal blanched beneath his designer tan and tucking his tail between his legs hurriedly departed the scene he'd thought to dominate with Sue's cruel laughter ringing in his ears.

"If you don't fuck off I'll kick you in the balls so hard they fly out yer arse!" Which was a bit much really as Sue stood about five foot eight and Hal was something like six foot six in his socks.

Sue slammed the door shut and lay back against it, unsure whether to laugh or cry.

Instead she froze as a vivid recollection flashed in her mind.

God had spoken like that once, if not directly to her, in her hearing.

The two of them were standing, the image was a bit hazy, but it was the two of them standing on a small rise looking out over a vast empty plain as if waiting for his flock to come into view through the cloud of dust that filled the horizon.

Sue was puzzled, god shouldn't talk like that, not according to conventional wisdom anyway. Did this mean that the man in her dreams wasn't god then? That the white robed figures weren't angels? Or was the conventional wisdom concerning the nature and character of god a bit astray?

More perplexing was that if god wasn't god, then who was he? If he were the father of her child then how did he do it?

Sue screamed, sure she was going crazy. Sobbing, bewildered and fearing for her sanity she searched frantically for the phone number of the psychiatrist she's visited to help her get over Tom.

She hadn't thought about Tom in a long time and the memory was a painful one.

Scattering loose pieces of paper and the contents of two address books

over the floor in her panic she eventually found the number and with trembling fingers dialled his office.

"Doctor Dykes office," a bored receptionist answered, surely too dispassionately for one dealing with traumatised psyches.

"Can I help you?"

"I wish to make an appointment to see the doctor as soon as possible."

Sue heard the receptionist flicking through an appointments book.

"I can fit you in at nine fifteen-tomorrow morning."

"That's no good," Sue screamed frantically into the phone, "I need to see her today, it's urgent." Sue pleaded, on her knees in front of the phone as if the receptionist could see and would heed her prayer.

Sue listened to the sound of more pages flipping over, the tap of computer keys and finally the detached sigh of the receptionist as if she were well used to such calls.

"Hold the line please."

Sue waited, almost pulling great hunks of hair from her skull in her desperation. Tears poured down her cheeks blurring her vision and making small puddles on the telephone table and she almost missed the return of the receptionist through her loud sobs.

"Are you there?"

"Yes," Sue replied just before the receptionist cut the line.

"If you can make it to the office in half an hour the Doctor will fit you in." She didn't sound too happy about having to stick around the office for an extra hour.

"Thank-you," Sue sobbed hanging up, in her distress forgetting even to leave her name.

The psychiatrist's rooms were a ten minute walk away, she would get there easily on foot, besides she was too distraught to drive. Anyhow the walk might help to settle her down, as long as if she didn't see men in white robes or little green men even on every street corner.

Without another thought Sue grabbed her handbag, made sure she had a house key, slipped on her thongs and let herself out. She didn't stop to dry her tears or make sure her hair was tidy and her somewhat dishevelled appearance as she strode purposefully head down along the pavement attracted many mildly alarmed stares as she passed through the opulent suburb.

Sue made the psychiatrist rooms in the local medical centre with ten minutes to spare.

The receptionist didn't need to identify the patient, Sue was easily identifiable by her distress.

"Go right in Miss, Mrs?" She needed Sue's name for the bill.

"Clarke.S."

"Thank-you," the receptionist pressed a button on her desk and like a jack in the box released as a child's surprise the psychiatrist appeared at the door and ushered Sue into her office.

"And how are you today?" she asked.

Stupidly Sue thought. How the hell did the silly bitch think she felt? Sue bit her lip and didn't respond which wasn't quite the reaction that Doctor Dyke had been expecting.

A tricky one then Doctor Dyke decided. Something to get her teeth into. Most of the people she saw had no real problems apart from loneliness and laziness. What most of her patients needed was simply a sympathetic ear to listen and she saw nothing immoral with taking their money for the service she provided.

"Sit where ever you feel comfortable," Dr Dyke told Sue and motioned to the chair and the traditional couch.

These days Sue felt most comfortable lying on her back. If she had sat at the desk Dr Dyke would have sat behind the desk, now she sat in the chair that Sue might have. If Sue, if any patient had sat in the chair behind her desk, she didn't know how she would react.

Sue waited expectantly for the psychiatrist to begin sorting out her

problem, she had forgotten that she was supposed to start the discussion off. Doctor Dyke wondered where to begin once the silence between them settled upon the room, she couldn't get a handle on what the problem was if the patient didn't speak. Then she recalled Sue and the upset she had experienced when her partner had left, at about the same time she noticed that Sue was pregnant.

Finally she began, sensing that Sue, she remembered her name now, while obviously very upset was not exactly unstable. But that was more a subjective intuitive conclusion an objective clinical one.

Her training really meant nothing most of the time Doctor Dyke reflected, she mainly relied on her wits and a kind ear to fulfil most of her client's needs.

"You are obviously pretty distressed over something, do you want to tell me about it?"

Sue almost laughed but choked instead, the opening gambit sounded so corny and cliched to her ears. She might just as well unburden her self to Mrs Pratt. She stumbled because she was suddenly afraid to voice her fears. What am I doing here? She asked herself critically. What's the doctor going to think if I tell her that I think I'm carrying god's baby?

"I don't know where to start really," said Sue feeling as if she were about to be hustled down a white sanitary corridor in a strait jacket full of feel good drugs if she articulated what was really on her mind.

Her mind a blur, Sue forced herself to think, why indeed?

"I think I'm going nuts," she declared quietly admitting the fear even though it seemed a bit silly now. She might be a bit upset, but she was coping, functioning wasn't she?

"Why do you think you're going nuts?" Doctor Dyke asked, a little disappointed, she'd been expecting something rather more juicy. This one wouldn't be any different to the others.

"Well you won't believe me, but." Sue decided on a variation of the truth.

"As you can see I'm pregnant."

"A perfectly natural condition, is it troubling you?"

"I know it's a perfectly natural condition," Sue retorted hotly, "what I don't know is how I came to be pregnant, I don't know who the father is!" There Sue thought, I've finally said it. But it didn't make her feel any better.

Doctor Dyke leaned forward with interest.

"There are that many candidates then? Doctor Dyke asked with a trace of envy in her voice.

"No, I haven't explained myself properly, I have no recollection of a sexual act that might have led to my pregnancy. I think god might have done it," she added very quietly.

Definitely crackers Doctor Dyke thought with an inward smile, quickly reassessing her first impression of her patient. She's obviously had a sympathetic pregnancy as a result of the emotional trauma of the breakup of a previous relationship.

Doctor Dyke leaned forward further, far more interested in her patient now.

"Yes?"

"Well it's like this. I've been celibate for almost a year now and unless I've totally blanked out at some stage, this baby couldn't possibly have been conceived naturally."

"Oh really," Doctor Dyke had to work hard to suppress a chuckle. Despite her years in practice Doctor Dyke never failed to marvel at the fantasies people developed to try and forget or gloss over their stupidity or behaviour they knew to be simply wrong, criminal or otherwise.

"You're sure about this then?"

"Well not really," Sue admitted, "you see I've been having these really weird dreams. Most of them seem to revolve around this man." Sue went on to describe what she could recall of her dreams, her visions and the recurring

elements of them.

"So you have a suspicion that your baby was immaculately conceived," Dr Dyke concluded. "Surely you know that's not possible? "You might just as well believe that some space traveller impregnated you one night while you were asleep"

Sue hadn't entirely discounted that possibility either but she thought she had said enough along those lines now.

"Shit woman!" Sue took a deep breath and got herself under control. "See there I go again, someone or something keeps on putting words into my mouth, do you see?"

Doctor Dyke didn't.

"Don't you think you could be reacting verbally, just as you have because that's the way you have learnt to respond?" She suggested.

"Well no, of course not. I have never spoken like that. If my mother or father had ever, even now caught me talking like that they'd wash my mouth out with soap and water.

'This woman needs a lot of help,' Doctor Dyke decided wondering whether she should prescribe some kind of tranquilliser.

"Explain these dreams to me again," she suggested trying to discover a consistent pattern in them.

Sue began to describe the angels and the man she thought might be god, though he was a god that didn't seem to fit any characterisation of god that she'd ever heard of. Then she remembered the dogs that were part of almost every dream but whom she hadn't mentioned to Doctor Dyke yet.

"The dogs?"

'At last, ' a voice in her mind seemed to say.

"What have dogs got to do with the dreams?"

'Heaps.'

Sue shook her head and realised by the incredulous frown on Doctor Dykes face that she wouldn't be any help.

"Fuck this, I'm going to p.o.r.,!" She said getting up off the couch. Where do these phrases come from, I've never heard them before.

'Yes you have,' insisted the voice that seemed to have formed a connection into her mind. Sue didn't find this connection any more disturbing than any of the others, especially as there seemed to be no malice in it. But she knew that if she explained this new event to the psychiatrist that she would think she had really tripped over the edge of sanity.

Sue slipped her feet into her thongs, grabbed her handbag and fled the rooms as if she were being chased by a thousand demons. Past the open mouthed receptionist, out onto the street and then hurrying up the road as fast as her legs would carry her.

Sue cursed herself as she ran, it had been a mistake to go there in the first place. Then she began to feel a little paranoid.

Would the psychiatrist chase after her or worse still send somebody else after her with a straitjacket, some tranquillises and a free ticket to the local funny farm?

She quickened her pace and looked nervously over her shoulder in case she could pick out somebody following her. But what exactly she would do if a van full of big men in white coats drew up beside her she didn't know.

Finally after what seemed hours Sue made it home unscathed and then hid under the bed for a while in case somebody did turn up to take her away. After ten minutes or so Sue crawled out, made a mental note that it was about time she cleaned under there and fell on the bed feeling more than a bit silly.

She lay back, burying her head in a pillow and tried to get a grip on her racing mind as it cycled from one horror to another.

"Please, please," she sobbed, "leave me alone." But Cop didn't hear her plea, it was night time on the other side of the world. Besides not much of what was going on in Sue's head was his doing.

The voice that had spoken to her had ceased, but still the unconnected images flashed through her mind like a kaleidoscope, and then Sue hit upon the

idea of forcing her mind to be blank. She imagined a white wall and for a while this seemed to work and she slept.

Initially the wall remained fixed in her mind, then slowly as a dog thousands of miles away snuffled in his sleep and decided he needed to have a piss a line slowly grew in the centre of the wall.

Despite herself Sue watched the line grow upwards and downwards until it met the upper and lower edges of the wall. Then in a detached way she watched the line develop into a gap as the two halves of the wall began to draw apart.

Subconsciously Sue became quite interested in the dream, was the dream. Not that she could comprehend that part of it.

The wall drew apart to reveal, nothing. The nothing had no colour or texture, no form. No light, no darkness, this can't be true a part of her said, there is no such thing as nothing.

Shouldn't there be something there? Of course. Of course there was something. A light grew from a central point, at first it was just a fuzzy little smudge. The light grew steadily in intensity reminding Sue of a fetuses development from conception to birth shown using time lapse photography.

A part of her recognised this similarity as being of some importance and filed the information away. How apt she thought.

Then there, replacing the nothing was a film screen. Sue felt as though the brief interval, in reality only micro seconds long, between the end of the adverts and promo's and the beginning of the film had been stretched to an eternity.

Sue woke with a start and watched the film begin, finding herself in a cinema surrounded by people staring raptly at the screen, mechanically stuffing themselves with popcorn and ice creams. She looked around for a familiar face but couldn't recognise anyone in the darkness.

She sensed the body beside her moving and saw him smile. His teeth, how was she so sure it was a he? Were brilliantly white in the darkness. Relaxed and at peace, somehow reassured, Sue settled back comfortably as the screen credits rolled by. She'd missed the title by this time and didn't see any names she recognised, but she forgot all about that as with an audible sigh from the people around her the movie began.

It didn't come as a shock for Sue to see herself crouching in the undergrowth of a forest with a crazed expression on her face.

Someone's idea of a joke she thought, one of the others on the tramp she'd been on a few months ago, it seemed like years ago now, must have had a video camera.

But what was she doing?

Sue stiffened in her seat and felt the life draining out of her body, like the way water drained away out of a bath once the plug was pulled. I was lost, I was lost a voice echoed inside her head.

She screamed but nobody seemed to hear, not even the man sitting beside her, maybe everyone was seeing their own private nightmare and screamed along with her. Sue didn't know.

'That's right, I was lost, ' Sue remembered calmly, as on screen she got to her feet and stared around her, moving one way then the next obviously panicked and not knowing which way to turn By her feet rested a large bright pack, she looked down and was about to pick it up, but ran into the trees instead. Then the picture fade, replaced by a harsh grimy light, like a blank classroom over head projector image flashed up onto a dirty screen.

Sue wasn't aware of how long the screen remained like that. Time now seemed to have no meaning for her.

"Are you looking forward to the movie?"

"Eh?" The person beside her was a 'he' Sue discovered. Hey the lights were on she discovered. The man shrugged his shoulders, rebuffed by Sue's attitude.

Sue started to get to her feet, the movie was over, she must have fallen asleep and missed it. She tried to stand upright but an unseen hand pushed her back into her seat. The lights dimmed, the film rolled again.

Now Sue saw herself looking a little furtive, not scared, her trousers pushed down below her knees as she did her business among the bushes.

"Hey that's not fair!" she yelled. "How dare you take a picture of me pissing in the forest!" she yelled at the unseen photographer."

The picture faded again, not before Sue watched herself shoulder her pack, wriggle a little to get it comfortable on her shoulders and then step out onto a track just in time to see a similarly burdened figure disappearing around a large tree.

'Toot toot.' Sue heard the neighbour's car reverse down the drive past her bedroom window, illuminating her bedroom wall for a moment as the car swung onto the road.

Sue pinched herself to make sure she was really awake this time and with a calmness that felt strange after the recent constant turmoil, went over the dream which she could still clearly recall.

Her subconscious was trying desperately to tell her something, something vital she realised, as half a world away Cop cocked his leg on the long grass beside the shed while he waited for the boss to get his small noisy horse to move.

Cop wondered if the female boss had got the message yet, Cop thought she was probably about as thick as Punch. He'd better have another go at getting through to her when it got dark again, after he made sure the bitch next door knew where she was supposed to be tonight.

Then Sue remembered, if remembering what had happened made her feel any better. She recalled getting lost and panicking after stepping off the track to go to the toilet on the tramping trip a few months ago as part of a Forest Tramping Tour Promotion.

She saw the panic at being suddenly, realising that she was lost. She remembered crashing through the undergrowth, calling out in the hope that someone would hear her or realise that she was missing. Then finally she slumped to the ground minus her pack, which had slipped off somewhere, exhausted, the forest darkening as night began to fall.

Sue got the impression that she must have had some kind of black out because the only thing she could really recall with any clarity was walking, no running up the track to catch someone up after completing her ablutions behind a tree.

What was going on? Sue forced herself to think, to draw those suppressed memories into her consciousness. Unafraid now, certain that she had undergone some weird supernatural experience.

Focusing hard she found that some fuzzy images appeared in her mind as if the memories had been imperfectly retrieved.

Frustrated by her inability to get a clear image she balled her fists impotently trying to separate fact from fiction.

Fact one, let's do this methodically Sue decided.

Fact one I was lost.

Fact two I'm pregnant.

Fact three I wasn't lost, I can't remember being lost.

Fact four, I'm hungry, thirsty and going crazy.

The last observation wasn't a worry to Sue now. I'm not, she willed herself to be at peace with herself and found that she was.

The last dream had stilled her fears for some unknown reason, Sue felt as if she had changed worlds, leaving one on the point of death arriving on another before she'd left the first. However irrational or unlikely it sounded Sue began to think that this explanation wasn't far from the truth. Somewhere in the middle she'd inhabited another world, perhaps with the characters of her dream world who must be real. She patted her tummy and thought: there's the proof.

What really happened Sue knew she might never know, but it didn't seem to matter anymore.

She was here, wherever that was, she was alive and she had two futures to look forward to.

"No worries," she said out loud, her favourite saying and then remembered where she'd heard the expression before. A television commercial How silly I've been she thought, but then a dose of the warm fuzzies didn't explain the baby. She shuddered distastefully at the sudden feel of warm firm hands upon her body and then realised that the hands were gentle, fondling and caressing, welcome and all she felt was the wanting and the need to have those hands upon her once more.

Strobe like uncoordinated flashing half images of a body pressed against her own flooded Sue's mind and she ashamedly realised what had happened.

She'd gone out and got drunk, or perhaps someone had slipped something into a drink and she'd allowed herself to be picked up. That she couldn't remember anything disturbed her a little but how unattractive the truth was, 'that's what must have happened,' she decided matter of factly Immaculate conception indeed she snorted derisively. Lack of contraception more like she told herself wondering if the father knew or cared about their baby.

eight

Raele walked slowly out of the space port and out into the city proper. Far behind him he could hear somebody calling his name. Amاتم or one of the others from the patrol craft was looking for him, probably wanting him to hold their hands and tell them everything was ok.

The city was eerily quiet, empty except for the odd service unit going about it's business. Raele moved cautiously, constantly looking about him for some sign of life. He had never known the city to be so empty and quiet and it made him nervous.

He had never known a time when he had been so completely alone either. Always there had been that security of knowing that somebody was close by. In the next room, standing shoulder to shoulder in a crowd at a stim game.

Uneasily he began to move through the familiar empty streets, towards a vast building that dominated the city. Surely there would be somebody there Raele thought, hoping there would be.

Raele continually expected some unspecified lurking danger to leap out and do him some kind of injury. Exactly what, Raele didn't have the imagination or experience to even hazard as a guess. It was just that Skidian's weren't used to being alone or in places empty of people. He wondered how the offworlders who seemed to thrive on being alone in the far greater emptiness of the organic plant had coped with the unknown.

If they could, he could for he was a far superior being. He wasn't some primitive from a backwater planet that didn't even know that space craft from civilisations thousands of light years away regularly cruised their airspace without detection on joy rides and inspection tours.

With that thought in mind Raele put his fears into a compartment in his head and shut the door on them. He began to take note of the city around him and tried to work out what felt so different. It wasn't just the lack of people. It took a long while for Raele to realise that the buildings, the walkways, everything was new. Or if not new had been completely renovated recently.

The open areas that had always seemed slightly shabby, the paths, the plazas the small areas of organic material were all neat and tidy, the buildings shone brightly where once they merely glowed dully under a layer of grime.

Raele pushed open the door of one of the vast entertainment centres that he was passing. It was empty of course but the hum of machinery told him that everything was operating as usual, like everywhere else he had been. He walked outside again and watched a service crew pulling down a large scaffold that they had obviously been using to work on the upper levels of the building.

Raele watched them for a while and then realised that they weren't a service crew at all, but one of the heavy duty crews used for major

construction projects. He had seen the like of them before when he had been stationed at one of the industrial complexes in his early years in security.

Raele looked up at the vast building that he was heading towards and thought that he could see a similar crew working there.

It occurred to him that if he could get up there he would be able to see a large part of the city.

Even better if I had a patrol craft. Raele wondered why he hadn't called one from the space port before instead of moving around the city on foot. He walked over to a console, placed his hand in the identification slot and bashed his request onto the keyboard.

Within minutes he was staring down over the vast empty arena where stim events were held on a daily basis. He watched the construction crew for a while and saw the arena wasn't complete either.

Raele flew further out over the city and began to realise that something had gone desperately wrong. The further he went he saw more construction and service crews and more buildings in various states of repair.

On some of them work had barely begun but there was activity everywhere. Crews building, service crews and untold vehicles moving along the ground laden with construction materials all fanning out from the centre of the city as if they had started work there and were steadily pushing their way outwards towards the outskirts of the city.

All this activity puzzled Raele, what did it mean? He asked himself, how does this explain the absence of people? Soon he was over one of the vast outer dormitory areas of the city and what he saw he was both at odds to explain and horrified by.

Here there was little activity, bar that of thousands of the flying creatures that lived on the great salty waters and occasionally could be seen flying over the city if one bothered looking up. Raele couldn't see what they were doing but they seemed to be walking through the black twisted remains of what had once been buildings. Sometimes they would flutter upwards and he could see some of them struggling with each other over objects they picked up from the ground.

Raele looked closer and in places could see fog still rising from the ground and wondered what that meant. He hovered just above the ground and tried to identify the smell that was coming through the patrol craft's ventilation system.

It was the smell of rotting bodies and smoke, of burnt wood and plastic and ash mixed in with dirt, it was the smell of dampness and death. Raele had never encountered anything like that before, death to him was something sanitary and clean that nobody really understood, even if they happened to zap someone with a dazierwogga which reduced a body to a small pile of ash.

Staring down at the scene of desolation Raele wondered how such a thing could happen on Skid. The sight didn't explain to him where all the people might be, where were they?

Deciding that he wanted a closer look, Raele let the patrol craft sink slowly to the ground. The birds rose to meet him flapping and squawking angrily as the patrol craft intruded on their meal.

As he stepped out of the patrol onto the soggy ground craft Raele pinched his nose to block out the terrible smell that seemed to assault him and permeate his hair clothing and flesh in an instant. No wonder no Skidian remained here! As he trudged over to a set of blackened ruins little clouds of ash fluffed up and clung to his legs and made dirty, damp stains on his white robe. Metres from the patrol craft his foot pressed into something that was both firm and yielding to the downward pressure. As he peered down to see what he had stepped into he heard a long drawn out groan, like the sound of tortured metal when a patrol craft landed too heavily and skidded on its belly along the ground.

As something hot and acidic forced it's way up his throat and past his hand Raele knew what had become of all those that were missing and ran back to the patrol craft.

nine

Bruce cursed, but not too much, as water leaked on to his bare foot through the hole in the roof. The windscreen wiper sort of kept the windscreen clear of water, though infuriatingly so, the wiper must have slipped on its pinion so its path started halfway up the screen and finished well outside the window frame.

Not to worry Bruce thought as he saw an empty parking spot right outside the travel agents'. Without indicating to the cars following behind him, he stopped and manouvered the ute with a series of backwards and forwards movements into the empty space.

The ute was still well out on the road when Bruce gave up trying to park the heap of shit properly. Who gives a shit he decided studiously ignoring the angry toots and gestures that were directed his way as he flung the door open and stepped out, slipping his jandals on and then grabbing his cheque book off the dash.

Bruce didn't bother locking the ute, there was nothing inside worth pinching and nobody in their right minds would want to pinch the ute itself. It was little more than a mobile rust bucket and Bruce decided that he would drive it into a creek once he got home and make a crossing out of it.

"Hey Bruce, ya useless bugger!"

Bruce swung around and saw Dick Todd standing across the road, "aw shit," he groaned inwardly.

"How are ya mate?" Dick called dodging the traffic as he ran across the road to where Bruce stood.

"Not bad, how's yourself?"

"Can't complain, nobody listens anyway," Dick chuckled, "what are yer up to, haven't been down to the club lately?" Dick spent most of his spare time propping up the club bar with his ample frame and didn't seem to understand that some people had better things to do than spend their free hours getting pissed. He was a fairly likeable chap for all that.

"Not a lot, I'm just about finished up at Bogside," Bruce replied, edging towards the Travel Agent's door.

"What are ya up to now, wanna beer?"

"Maybe later eh?" No way, Bruce thought, well maybe he decided after a second's further deliberation, "I've just come into town to tidy up some loose ends and book myself a holiday." Bruce motioned towards the Travel Agent's sign.

Oh yeah mate, I've heard that one before too mate, Dick thought, who do you think you're kidding? But he said:

"Where're ya going, Oz?"

"Haven't really decided yet," Bruce answered diffidently, which was true. He planned to buy a ticket for the first destination that popped into his head when he sat down inside.

"Well I'll be down the club later on. Pop in for a beer."

"Ok," Bruce reluctantly agreed, not intending to at all, anything to get rid of Dick.

'Do I really want to do this? Bruce asked himself as he looked inside the office. He'd seen the girl inside appraising him, trying to decide on his potential as a customer and then her dismissive look. Bugger to her too, he thought and pushed through the door.

She was a pretty wee thing and Bruce had to fight down the urge to plant a kiss on her sweet looking lips and give her tits a squeeze for good measure. He breathed in her fragrant perfume and hoped that his lust didn't show through too much. At the same time he felt a bit intimidated by her apparent sophistication. Maybe she thought she was better than this two cow town and liked making people feel awkward and provincial.

"How can I help you sir?"

"Ah, um. I want to book a holiday somewhere," Bruce grunted inarticulately." He could've kicked himself for sounding like such a clod.

"Anywhere in particular sir? Have you anywhere in mind, we have some good deals to resorts around the Pacific at the moment."

"Umm, Oregon," he said before he knew what he was saying as he desperately scanned the large world map on the wall above the girl's head.

"Portland, Oregon," he added firmly as if that had been his destination all along.

"Ok, let me see what I can do." The girl flipped her flight book open. "Who would you like to fly with and when would you like to go? And oh, have you a current passport?"

"Nobody in particular and yes I have a passport and a multi entry visa in to the US," he said putting the dog eared booklet on the table. "I'm looking at leaving in three or four weeks, sooner if you can get me on an earlier flight.

You realise you will need to get a visa before you can go," the girl continued as if she hadn't heard Bruce while she swivelled around and began to punch away at her computer keyboard.

"I can't write you a ticket until have proof," she added without looking up.

"Yeah no worries," said Bruce flipping open the passport, "I've got a multi entry visa that's valid for another sixteen months or so."

"How did you get one of those?" The girl asked suspiciously looking at the document, and the number of entries in the passport.

She looked at Bruce with new interest, he didn't look like an experienced world traveller.

"I can do you a flight pretty well as soon as you like to San Francisco, you'll have to catch an internal flight from there, the sixteenth suit you?"

Bruce nodded.

"What about an internal flight, hotel accommodation?"

"Not at this stage."

"Ok, that comes to \$1400. 10 percent now and the balance when you pick up the tickets, or you can pay the lot now if you want."

Bruce dragged out his cheque book and painfully wrote out a cheque for the full amount.

Though he had planned to jump straight back into the ute and disappear back to the farm when he had finished his business. Bruce forgot about the list of jobs he had made and tucked away in his pocket and found himself pulling into the club carpark beside Dick's battered old landrover.

Feeling strangely elated he strolled through the bar, already high on the smell of stale beer and cigarette smoke before he downed the pint that Dick shouted him just for coming along.

It occurred to Bruce, standing at the bar that Dick didn't have anywhere else to go and he felt sorry for him. Not that Dick seemed to mind too much. He had the run of the place, helping out the well-painted bar lady, helping himself to jugs of beer and holding a pretty open court in 'Dick's' corner. Today he was engaging in an animated conversation with a little old man proudly displaying a tarnished RSA badge on the lapel of his dowdy jacket.

Something about dog bones. The old man already looked half chooked, though it was barely two in the afternoon.

Bruce leaned happily against the bar. After a few gulps of beer he took out his going to town smokes and flicked a cigarette into his mouth.

"Anyway Phil," Dick said turning to Bruce. "This is my mate Bruce. Bruce meet Phil.

Bruce shook the proffered limp dank hand and said: "Giddae Phil."

"Did you organise your trip mate? Bruce is going overseas Phil."

"Yeah? I was overseas once, in the desert," Phil said, his eyes glazing slightly at the memory of sights and sounds better left forgotten. "Didn't like it much."

"What the fighting?"

"Nah, not that." He said without elaborating and then sort of drifted away to the other end of the bar and some of his old cronies.

"Funny sort of old beggar," Dick said shaking his head sadly as he watched Phil meander away. "Used to be a top shearer in his day, has a beaut farm over Tuakau way and lives there in an old shack, while his son has a big flash house. Doesn't want to move apparently."

"So where're you going?" Dick asked changing tack.

"Yeah."

"Is it a secret then mate?"

"Oh, sorry. Nah not really. I'm starting off in San Francisco and want to head up to Oregon. I've got about six months to fill in."

"Sounds ok to me, there's nothing like travel to broaden the mind," Dick pontificated. Not that he'd ever travelled anywhere. Even a trip to the big smoke, less than a couple of hours away was a major mission for Dick.

Phil had wandered back and nodded sentimentally, his eyes glistening slightly as he recalled the good bits of his own O.E. He'd gone off on a troopship with all his mates in thirty-nine and come home by himself six years later. But these youngsters wouldn't want to hear all about that he decided drifting away from the bar again.

"Well you're in luck boyo," Dick said slapping Bruce on the back. "Did you ever meet my younger brother Trev?"

"Yes I think so," Bruce lied.

"Well he's just started a restaurant in a place called Portland I think. I'll give you his address and you can go and see him if you like?"

"Sounds good to me." Bruce said, thinking what a coincidence.

Now I have a reason to go up there he thought. "I'll certainly do that," he added thinking how strange he felt because he meant it.

Bruce quickly polished off his jug and bought another couple and then one for Phil who had shown up again but was looking rather the worse for wear.

Please god don't let me end up like that Bruce thought, pitying the old man.

Then Phil drifted away again and Dick said with a leery wink that he had another engagement and it was time to go.

"Well Bruce," Barry extended his hand, "thanks very much for the way you looked after the place. You've done a great job."

Bruce shook Barry's hand, a little embarrassed by the compliment.

Barry and his wife had returned from their trip and while his wife was dallying in town, Barry had come down to the farm immediately on his return.

There shouldn't be any complaints either Bruce reckoned. He was good at his work. He looked around the farm a little wistfully, sad to be leaving in some ways for he had mostly enjoyed his stay.

Oh well, he mused. Nothing lasts forever.

"If you've got any queries Barry, you have my olds' phone number. I'll be there for a week or so before flying out."

And that was it. Bruce made sure the dogs were chained up on the back securely and climbed into the ute.

The dogs were whimpering expectantly, knowing that something special was up because riding on the ute meant something out of the ordinary was afoot.

"I'll be off then," he said to Barry as he started the engine and drove slowly down the driveway and onto the gravel road.

Bruce left what sentiment he had at the gateway. There was no lingering on the road that passed through the farm. He had another hour on the gravel before he hit a state highway and then the motorway north, an hour or so on the motorway and then another thirty minutes of gravel before he made it home. Bruce didn't want the trip to take any longer than necessary.

The trip north was mostly uneventful, a female service station attendant remarked how cute his dogs were when he stopped in the middle of Auckland to fill up with fuel and didn't bat an eyelid when Bruce bought the dogs a pie each to munch on.

His paranoia that the ute would finally shit itself in the middle of the motorway rush hour proved unfounded. Before he knew it the trip was almost over and he was stopped on the hill overlooking the farm, his nose full of the sweet smell of fennel that grew alongside the road, hot oil, and dust. Overlaid over those evocative odours was the greasy woolly smell of sheep on a hot day. This was home and Bruce loved it.

Bruce watched the temperature needle on the dash rise as the ute idled away and got stiffly out of the driver's seat. One by one he unchained the dogs.

"Get out of it," he snarled half heartedly as each of them strained on the end of their chains and they leapt of the ute one by one to investigate their new pad. Bruce let them trot down the hill behind the ute and he began to wonder about the reception he might receive at home.

For once his father seemed pleased to see him and said so and his mother didn't try and overwhelm him as if he hadn't been sighted for several years.

"Have a good trip up? His father asked emerging from the garage as Bruce pulled up.

"Yeah." Bruce found it difficult to cope with his parents straight away, there needed to be a settling in time before he felt even a little comfortable.

The dogs came puffing up the drive which immediately caused an outbreak of barking and growls as Bruce's team and his father's dogs acquainted themselves. The uproar was complete when his mother's ancient corgi joined the cacophony.

"Shut up you bastards!" Bruce meant to tie his dogs up to the fence while he sorted out where they were going to be housed while he was away but his father forestalled him.

"I built those for you," he said pointing to some new kennels that Bruce hadn't noticed.

"Thank's, Bruce grunted, unaccustomed to his father's thoughtfulness.

The uproar mostly subsided as Bruce shut his dogs up, then he followed his father indoors.

Neither of his parents complained when Bruce lit a cigarette while his mother made a cup of tea. She even provided an ashtray for him. As usual they sat around the table uncomfortably with the television on to provide a distraction and as an excuse not to talk to each other.

This afternoon though, none of them were interested in yet another re-run of 'Mash,' now well past it's sell by date.

"Well," Bruce's father broke the uncomfortable silence punctuated by canned laughter from the television.

It get's worse as I get older Bruce thought, as he made a valiant attempt not to pick his nose. Communication between himself and his parents was mostly a non event.

"Um."

"Yes?" Bruce knew his father well enough to realise that he was working himself up to saying something. He watched his parents look at each other, as his mother opened her mouth his father forestalled her with a wave that said. Ok I'll do it.

Bruce's stomach knotted in anticipation. What now?

Not what he expected.

"Your mother and I are sorry Bruce."

"Eh, sorry, what for?" Bruce asked not hiding his consternation.

"Umm, we're sorry for the way we've treated you over the years, the way we neglected you after your brother died."

"Oh," was the only comment Bruce muster at his father's stunning revelation.

"I've been thinking about it for a while, we made things pretty difficult for you at times, most of the time. I, we just want to say that were both proud of you."

Bruce watched his father's cheeks glisten and turned away totally

embarrassed. Did the old bugger want a hug now?

"I dunno what to say," he said looking at his teacup.

"Especially recently," his father continued, "over the farm that is and we think we'd like to negotiate a more favourable deal for you."

Bruce nodded, wondering why this sudden change in attitude. His old man wanted a Harwood to continue on the farm all right, but he'd also wanted Bruce to pay over the odds for the privilege.

"Recently we've been supporting the local farmer's support group. You know Bunty Watson lost his place? You'll know how tough things have been recently? Anyway it was only after listening to some of these people that we realised how your brother's death had affected us."

'That was fifteen fucken' years ago! Bruce thought. He was about to say so, then he looked at his parents and saw what the effort of talking had taken out of them.

"We know we can't change what's happened in then past but we hope things will change in the future."

Bruce did the only thing he felt in the circumstances and said: "She's right." He thought at the same time that it was easier to forgive than to forget. But at least he wouldn't feel like a stranger in his own home any longer. This was home now

"Bugger this," his father said. He got up and returned moments later with two cold bottles of beer. For the first time that Bruce could ever remember he and his father got drunk together with his beaming mother looking on as she genteelly sipped her gins as the two men in her life finally got to know each other.

There was reservation on both sides until the alcohol began to break down their inhibitions and then all three of them communicated more or less properly for the first time.

Food appeared and was demolished with gusto, bottle were emptied and taken away and finally the level in the whisky bottle fell by a considerable amount.

"What are you planning to do until you go?" Bruce's mother asked as she stood over a frying pan of bacon. That his mother was actually cooking him breakfast was a measure of how much things had changed.

"Dunno really, muck about here I s'pose. I hadn't given it much thought really. What are the fish running like?"

"Oh a few filets of snapper would be nice for tea." His mother piped up.

"They are catching a few down the harbour, not many around here. The boat's more or less all ready to go if you want."

"When's the tide in?"

"About two this afternoon eh dear?"

Bruce noted that his parents seemed to be much closer than they ever had and wondered what was behind it all.

"So what are your plans for the future?" Bruce's father asked, serious again. "You still want to come back here?"

"Yeah." Bruce still wasn't totally comfortable in his new role as favourite child.

"What I mean to say son is that don't feel you have to hurry back on our account, we can hang on here for a while yet."

"Ok dad."

"Good, that's settled then," his father grunted and then tucked into his bacon and eggs.

Bruce's week at home sped past quickly, too quickly for Bruce as he began to feel guilty about leaving so soon. But his parents seemed to understand, there would be plenty of time when he came home again.

They went fishing and Bruce did a bit of work around the farm and even though he wanted to, wondered whether he was ready to come home and take over the reins of a farm that was so established that it didn't seem to hold any challenges for him. He turned out for the big local rugby game of the season,

the married men against the single. He visited the family solicitor with his father and then before he knew it, found himself at the airport where the parting was as stiff and formal as always.

As the jumbo thundered down the runway then spiralled up into the sky Bruce finally relaxed, smiled at the young woman sitting alongside. Bruce thought he'd like to get into her pants but before he could fantasize about that he was asleep.

ten

Raele watched Amاتم and the others clustered in a tight group staring up at him as he hovered overhead. They would be waiting for him to tell them what to do, what was happening. They would be waiting for anybody that they recognised as their superior on Skid to tell them what to do for that matter. They might be waiting a long time Raele decided.

Raele decided that he didn't want to face them just now, at any moment another patrol craft pilot might return from a mission with a pilot that would see to them. In any event they wouldn't stray far, Raele was sure he'd find them still there however long he left them. He couldn't be bothered with them for the moment and pushed forward trying to think of somewhere any survivors might have gathered, survivors who might be able to tell him what had happened and brought the mighty civilisation of Skid to an ignominious end.

Of it's own volition the patrol craft swept over Sietnuoc, the rest of the city looked the same to Raele. Either it was in various stages of reconstruction or totally devastated, empty of life. He dialled in the on board computer and then wondered why he hadn't before, in an attempt to locate a few Skidians. They seemed to be scattered across the face of the planet, some in the centre of the other cities, a few scattered around the fringes, some in the industrial complexes and a few more scattered through the wilderness. What they would be doing out there Raele didn't know. But there they were scattered in ones and twos, small groups totalling several thousand in number. A tiny fraction of Skids population pre; whatever disaster had befallen it.

The patrol craft left the city behind and headed into the wilderness. Raele felt a twinge of anxiety, he'd never flown over the wilderness alone before. This was a bit of a worry to him and though he was safe inside a sophisticated piece of Skidian machinery he kept on looking around to make sure that someone or something didn't sneak on board and get him. What exactly might get him, Raele didn't have the imagination to conceive. When something didn't leap out and do him a mischief Raele gave up worrying. He could have thought, 'I have more important things on my mind.'

But he didn't, he simply didn't know what to do next.

Raele dialled in a course that would take him to the vast industrial complex closest to Sietnuoc then settled back in his seat. The largest group of Skidians he had detected on his monitor was clustered there, surely they would have some idea of what had happened?

Looking down at the wilderness Raele saw that he was over flying the organic plant that had been built by the offworlder male. There were Skidians there, though Raele didn't think of landing. He did wonder how Skidians came to be there when he had immolated the place just before Inel instructed him to return the offworlder's to their own planet.

The organic plant must have been rebuilt after he had left Skid, for as far as Raele could see it still seemed to be operational. Then he was past the organic plant and overflying one of the vast groups of primitive nameless beasts that inhabited the wilderness.

Suddenly the communication's channel that had been silent for so long crackled into life. "Patrol craft xt2135-2 please identify yourself and the nature of your mission."

The voice startled Raele, what's more as a high ranking officer in the security forces, his right of passage across Skid had never been questioned.

Times have certainly changed he told himself.

"I am RO Raele Inel," Raele said giving his full name and rank.

"I have lately returned from a mission to planet 1000831 in the Lani Galaxy."

"State the nature your mission."

The attitude of whoever was calling him was starting to irritate Raele. He wasn't used to being interrogated as he flew about his own planet. He replied carefully though, conscious of the weapons systems that could blow him and his lightly armed patrol craft out of the sky in a flash of blinding light.

Raele watched the freight docks loom larger and larger in the distance. These ports were the only evidence of the vast subterranean complex.

"We have a positive identification, you are cleared to land," the pompous voice told him over the comms channel.

'Of course I am,' Raele grunted.

"You may dock at port number one."

Raele thought that was odd, surely there would be fat bodied freighters docked there? Should be freighters docked there loading, supplies for the rest of Skid or other planets that Skid serviced. If the situation was bad here what must it be like on other planets' that depended on Skid for almost all their needs.

What he had seen of Celcious hadn't struck him as abnormal though, there seemed to be plenty of Celcions still. Now that was a worry, what if some Celcions managed to take over a patrol craft or freighter and get to Skid? Raele shuddered to think what might happen, Skid had long kept the Celcions at bay by not allowing them technology of any sort after the last Celcion invasion attempt centuries ago. The Celcions would show no mercy to those few Skidians still left alive, Raele was sure of that.

Raele's heart leapt as he saw some Skidians waiting for him on the dock as the patrol craft settled into it's cradle.

He stepped out a little hesitantly and surveyed the group, noting nervously that they all wore dazierwoggas strapped to their waists as if they expected some kind of trouble. Raele made sure that he wore his own, encased in it's special sheath in case of trouble.

Not that Raele didn't believe for one moment that he couldn't deal with a few technicians and minor officials still enamoured by the aura of their petty positions which was what these Skidians obviously were.

"That's far enough," one of them said, placing a hand ostentatiously on his dazierwogga. But Raele saw that the fool hadn't armed the weapon, nor had any of the others. The weapons were just for show, they obviously didn't know how to use them properly.

Raele stopped and waited for their next move.

"Use the checkpoint to formally identify yourself please." The Skidian who seemed to be the leader of the group demanded, the Skidian who looked ready to use his useless dazierwogga.

Raele put his hand into the console and watched his details flash up. His rank was given, his status since returning to Skid and details of his last mission. Not all the details' Raele noted curiously, as far as Skid was concerned he had simply been on a routine patrol.

The reception party visibly relaxed when Raele seemed to be what he was.

"We can't be too careful sir," the self appointed leader muttered respectfully.

"Are you expecting some kind of disturbance?"

"We don't know what to expect after what has happened in recent times."

"What did happen?"

"Nobody really knows sir." Which wasn't quite right, these people certainly knew what happened, what they didn't know was why.

Raele led the group of men into the pilots' lounge and slowly the story came out.

Soon after Raele had left Skid, production from the synplants had all but

ceased, strategic stockpiles were exhausted and Skidians began to go hungry. The inhabitants of the industrial complex had watched it all on their screens with mounting horror as Skidians roamed the streets and the fringes of the wilderness, looking for food, eating anything they thought might sustain them.

Stuffing organic material into their mouths, even resorting to eating each other and then dying of un heard of diseases, wasting away to nothing.

Then there were the infernos that swept through the cities, reducing them to piles of smoking rubble and trapping most of those that were left in their paths until only a few scattered groups of stunned survivors remained, eking out a basic existence as best they could.

Raele knew there were other groups at the other industrial complexes who had access to synfood and other products that would sustain them indefinitely. He wondered if these Skidians had worked that out yet.

"Then the service crews began to work, rebuilding the cities, they kept the synplants operating as if nothing had happened," the sorry tale continued.

It didn't matter to the machines whether there were any Skidians about Raele realised, they would carry on with their tasks Skidians or no Skidians.

"Are the plants operating to their usual capacity?" Raele asked.

"Yes, the problems we had before the disaster have rectified themselves now and everything is back to normal."

Raele decided from the man's tone that while he would like to take credit for solving Skid's problems he couldn't because he couldn't explain why the synplants had returned to normal.

He sat quietly and thought for a while, then he noticed that the technicians were waiting for him to do something. Whatever aspirations they might have had of their own they recognised that he was for all intensive purposes their legal ruler. Traditionally he would follow his father in assuming the position of chief mati, late father? Though it was just as likely that he would be assassinated or exiled to Celcius through the plotting of some other high born mati that also coveted the role.

"Inel?" He asked.

"Inel died before things got bad," one of the technicians replied. "He was operating from the organic plant set up in the wilderness." Added another.

So the place had been the death of him Raele thought sadly. There hadn't ever been much communication between the two of them as was the Skidian way but Raele did feel a pang of sorrow at learning of his passing.

Raele knew that for the moment that these Skidians looked to him for leadership, even if he didn't know what should be done. If he didn't show some kind of leadership the few remaining threads of Skidian society that still bound these Skidians to him would unravel forever taking with it the best chance to rebuild Skid to its former glory.

"How many of you are there?" Raele asked, sure there must be more Skidians throughout the vast complex.

There appeared to be several hundred, the normal complement of the complex either attending to their normal duties or following the meeting in their recreation quarters.

Raele didn't want anything to do with them really, the burden of command was already heavy on his shoulders. For the moment he was expected to lead, even if this was only a temporary measure until Skid came right again. But Skid wouldn't ever come right again, not the way it had once been. Or before somebody else decided they were better equipped to run what was left of the greatest civilisation that had ever been.

"Very well I must continue my inspection tour," he said adding to the apparent spokesman that had met him when he landed: "Mischief I will leave you in charge until I return." Raele watched Mischief's chest swell on being given authority and hoped it wouldn't give him ideas beyond his station.

"I want a daily report on your activities. Your readiness and production reports must be kept up to date and I want an investigation into what happened to the synplants." Raele hoped that would keep Mischief out of mischief for a while. "I also want you to make contingency plans for locating and bringing

every Skidian still surviving to a central point where we can start a new community. You must also provide me with options on where the best place might be to begin rebuilding this community."

One of the precepts of Skidian political theory was that the more concentrated the population the easier they were to control. Fewer numbers didn't mean fewer problems if they were spread all over the planet as far as Raele could see.

Mischief nodded quickly and before he could ask any questions Raele quickly stood and made to leave, not that he had any idea where he was going.

Back to Sietnuoc he supposed to Amatm and the others, the welcoming arms of the female back on the patrol ship. He felt his loins stir at the prospect and speculated about whether he would have to change Skid's procreation conventions to ensure rapid population growth.

He should also visit the organic plant he decided on the way out to the ship and visit at least once the grave of his father.

Soon Raele stood by the marker that showed the spot where Inel had been burnt in the traditional manner by the inhabitants of the organic plant, even if not with the usual ceremony accompanied by the passing of the planet's chief mati.

In the manner of Skid Raele and his father had never been close but he felt a little sorrow at his passing. He paused by the marker trying to understand what Inel had done at the organic plant.

What he had found stunned Raele. The technicians at the industrial complex were cowed and fearful of their future, but here the Skidians were happy and carefree as if they were really enjoying life. It wasn't merely their attitude, these Skidians looked different. From working on the organic plant on who's production they tried to exist, they said. Not that they relied on the on the organic plant for everything, if they couldn't produce something they ordered it through a service provider as all Skidians were used to doing.

But unlike the Skid that Raele knew they no longer relied totally on Skid's technical sophistication for their existence.

From what Raele could see Inel had gathered some of the younger independent thinking Skidians, the sort that would normally be sent to reeducation centres for conspiring against the Skidian Way. From their numbers and disparate origins Raele guessed that Inel must have been engaged in and encouraging this treasonable activity for sometime.

Here the hierarchical Skidian caste system had all but ceased to exist and even newcomers that had stumbled on the organic plant or had been found on the residents wide sweeps of the wilderness and trips to the devastated cities seemed to accept this as the way of things despite their previously carefully programmed lives.

More startling to Raele was that he seemed to be expected here. After he had spent an acceptable period beside his father's memorial they led him to the offices from where Inel had run Skid until he had died.

Here Raele found that he had access to the entire computer database of Skid and the secret archives passed from chief mati to chief mati and his trusted associates.

Raele knew all about the archives as previously he had limited access to them. He entered his password and found he not only had full access but also a long message from his father.

eleven

Sue looked around the gynaecologists' opulent office and saw where a fair chunk of his exorbitant fees went.

The man himself was leafing through a pile of files on his desk.

"Now Miss Clarke," he said appearing to be having trouble tracking down her file. A level of disorganization did nothing to put her at ease. She was already worried about her own doctor's insistence that she make this

appointment.

"A very interesting case my dear," he began, finally tracking down the right file. "Nothing for you to worry about, though you may possibly be about to make medical history."

'In more ways than one.' Sue still hadn't entirely ruled out the possibility of immaculate conception.

"Ok," he continued, unaware of the anguish he was causing. "I want to ask you some very personal questions which I hope you will answer frankly. Then I will attempt to explain these test results which, I don't mind telling you, baffle me."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh as I said nothing to worry about, yes most intriguing," he continued glancing at the open file. "At the moment," he added under his breath.

"Eh?"

"Sorry, what can you tell me about the father? If that's not a traumatic experience."

"I can't recall much about him." Sue faltered, more embarrassed than she could ever remember. "I don't know anything." She began quietly.

Sue watched the gynaecologist looking at her over the half glasses perched on his nose.

"Look Miss Clark, I've been a doctor for thirty years and I've heard or seen everything. I'm not here to censure you but to help you. I take it you do know the father?"

Sue thought hard before replying. It would hurt to tell the truth on the other hand a lie could be more destructive in the long term.

"I don't know," she said quietly.

"Oh." These cases were so sad, the gynaecologist thought with some sympathy. But this one was too interesting not to pursue a little further.

"What about explaining the situation to me then."

Sue wanted to believe that the gynaecologist genuinely sounded more interested and concerned with her plight than her own psychiatrist had been and she let her guard down a little.

"It's difficult to explain," Sue began, her mind crowded with images of angels, god, and a warm faceless body beside her on a bed. "I can't recall any sexual activity that would have led to my pregnancy, unless I was drugged or something at the time which I think is pretty unlikely."

One for the shrinks then?

"I guess I must be repressing memories, repressing memories of an unattractive experience. That's the best explanation that I can give anyway."

The gynaecologist was a little disappointed, he'd been expecting a story that showed a little more imagination. He expected a story along the lines of 'I was kidnapped by men from outer space.' He could only guess about the history of the woman sitting across the desk from him but there was certainly something odd about her pregnancy which couldn't be explained by a simple mix up of dates. He was certain she was still keeping something back.

"In all respects you appear to be a normal healthy young woman. However, there seems to be something quite fascinating about your pregnancy. No don't worry," he added quickly when he saw he had alarmed Sue. "I have every confidence that you will deliver a full term baby. But unless we can come up with another explanation you seem to be confounding medical history."

"Is everything all right?"

"I assure you it is and I won't spoil your fun by telling you the sex of the child unless you want me to either."

"Then what's wrong?"

"There's nothing wrong as such, tell me how advanced do you think you are?"

"I don't really know," Sue replied. How can I know when I don't even know how or when I got pregnant? She had taken the date of conception to be around that of the tramping trip that she had gone on almost six months before. "Six months or so?"

"Yes, that concurs with the tests that your own doctor carried out, the hormone levels don't usually lie but I'll tell you now to prepare for the birth in a few days, ten days at the outside. Your baby's development has been incredible and if your latest scan is to be believed it's almost full term."

"Oh god." Sue's composure finally broke and she began to sob. This on top of everything else, am I some kind of freak?

"Have one of these," the gynaecologist said handing over a box of tissues and he made a few sympathetic clucking noises while Sue dabbed at her eyes and blew her nose.

"As I said there's nothing to worry about, what I want to do is run a few tests and ask a few questions to see if we can't establish what happened. I think we can forget about Martians and such like," he chuckled.

Sue wasn't so sure.

"How can you say there's nothing to worry about?" Sue demanded through her tears, "there's so much I don't know."

"Just take your time and tell me about it dear, we've got all day if you need it."

"There's nothing much to tell, one day I woke up feeling sick. After a few days I went to the doctor and after a few tests he told me I was pregnant. Simple really, "Sue said sarcastically, "now all I need to know is how."

"Have you had any sexual contact that could have resulted in your pregnancy, taken any drugs that might enhance your reproductive capacity, anything like that?"

"Not that I can recall."

"Hmm, let me show you a diagram." The gynaecologist placed a sheet of paper on the desk where Sue could see it and began to explain it's significance.

"This shows the different levels of hormones in the blood stream of a normal woman during pregnancy. I won't go into the different names and the way they work. But generally these levels here are consistent at the beginning of a normal term. This is the usual concentration of the hormones in your bloodstream during pregnancy and this is the line that shows your levels." He pointed to a series of lines that rose and fell at odds with the others." Sue tried to work out in her own mind what the lines represented and failed.

"So what does this mean?"

"Well it means that according to this data you've had an unusually rapid gestation period and that you're about to give birth."

Sue stroked the large bulge beneath her best maternity dress. I thought you were Big Trouble, she thought. Sue'd taken to calling the unborn baby; Trouble simply because it had caused her so much.

Sue listened with half an ear as the gynaecologist rambled on about taking tests and making sure that she was prepared for the birth. Sue was past the stage of caring, all she wanted was the baby born so she could carry on with life and put the past behind her. The baby would always be a reminder of that unknown past but she thought she could cope with that.

Ambling out of the medical centre, a big modern place with lots of glass and polished metal, Sue was struck by how familiar it felt to her. She had been there several times by now of course but the feeling was more than that, as if she had been in another such building, a similar place but not quite the same. She ducked as a plane flew low overhead and took a suspicious look around. Just what she was looking for Sue had no idea, something anyway.

I'd better ring mom she decided as she pulled on the seatbelt, so she can be on hand while the baby's born.

Sue swung out onto the road, mercifully free of traffic and slammed the brakes on. She'd added driving on the wrong side of the road to her idiosyncrasies. Concentrate, she told herself as she swung across to the right side of the road, after all you're driving for two now.

While she was driving home it occurred to Sue that she was hungry and that the nice ethnic restaurant like no other was just around the corner.

Sue found the attractive waiter still in place who smiled at her with an

odd greeting for a restaurateur.

"No wonder you chucked when you were here last time lady. You'll have to bring the young fella in so we can help you wet his head," he added with a chuckle, a genuine display pleasure that Sue found somehow reassuring.

"Wet the baby's head?" Did he mean a christening, was he some kind of celebrant as well?

twelve

"You had a good sleep."

"Eh?" Bruce looked around and found the girl sitting alongside smiling at him.

"You had a good sleep, we're at least halfway there now."

"Oh bugger, I'd hoped to sleep the whole way," Bruce smiled back He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, yawned and rubbed a hand over the stubble on his chin. He probably should make the effort to have a shave he thought. On the other hand he couldn't really be bothered. He thought he'd like a smoke to but that was definitely out of the question.

"On holiday are you?" the girl asked.

"Yeah, what about yourself?"

"I'm off on my big trip, been planning it for months." She replied. "I'm meeting a friend in a few weeks and we're going off towards Europe, England of course and then back home through Greece and India probably. My names Carol, what's yours?"

Listening to the girl Bruce detected a hint of nervousness in her voice, as if she were saying I don't really know what I'm going to do or if my friend will actually turn up but I'm going to enjoy myself if it kills me.

"Bruce," replied Bruce.

"What about yourself then Bruce?"

"Oh well I've got no real plans, I've got a few months and I plan to work my way up the coast to see some friends."

"Oh that sounds neat," Carol said and they chatted away until eventually she dozed off.

Bruce had brought along a book he'd meant to read for a while and read until the flight attendant droned her blurb as the plane started it's descent.

"Please have you travel documentation ready when you disembark," the flight attendant droned lethargically, as she had many times before. She said a few other things as well that Bruce didn't catch.

Then the plane was on the tarmac and Bruce joined the general scramble to grab his hand luggage and join the queue to get off.

In the terminal Bruce ignored the no smoking signs plastered everywhere.

"Sir?" He felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to find himself confronted by a huge black security guard.

"I'm sorry sir but you're not allowed to smoke in here."

Bruce gave the guard a good look, noted his gun, rolled his eyes theatrically, and decided not to argue.

"No worries mate." Bruce handed the astonished guard the cigarette and stalked off to the toilet to have a smoke in peace.

Bruce brushed his teeth, left his designer stubble alone and had a few swigs of duty free whisky while he enjoyed his smoke before joining a queue to claim his luggage from the carousel and then another to pass through immigration. Then he was outside wondering what to do next.

Simple, find somewhere cheap to spend the night, but not too cheap he decided.

"What are you doing now?" A subdued voice asked at his elbow.

Carol, laden down with a big pack stood there hesitantly.

"Um, I'm going to suss out a place to stay for a night or two."

"I need a place to stay as well," Carol said and explained that her sister was going to meet her but at the last minute couldn't make it. Instead

Carol was going to make her own way to where she lived over the next few days. She also looked as if now confronted by the enormity of a strange country, travelling by herself wasn't such a good idea after all.

"You can tag along with me if you like." Bruce said half seriously and was a little surprised by Carol's enthusiastic response. He walked over to a bus stand clasping an accommodation guide, thinking strange things happen at sea.

"Dormitory or double room? The receptionist at the backpacker's hostel asked.

Bruce wasn't about to sleep with a whole load of yahoo's grunting and groaning all night and was prepared to pay for the privilege. Carol could do what she liked.

"Double please," he said handing over his youth hostel concession card.

"Oh New Zeaaaland," the receptionist gushed, "we sure get a lot of you guys here. Enjoy your stay." She added handing over the key to his room with a list of the house rules.

Bruce slung his bags over his shoulder and wandered along a corridor and into a lift.

Carol stepped in behind him.

"What are you doing?" He asked.

"Well you paid for a room, I thought I might as well share it," she replied with a nervous smile.

Bruce shrugged his shoulder's a little taken aback.

The room was small, dominated by the bed, but tidy and clean. Bruce dumped his bags on the floor and looked around. His eyes rested on Carol standing hesitantly in the doorway and he realised how young and innocent she looked.

A stab of guilt lanced Bruce's heart and he knew he wouldn't be able to restrain himself from taking advantage of her.

"OK," he said, "I don't know about you but I need a wash." Bruce opened one of his bags took out a towel, sponge bag and a bathrobe and headed for the shower down the hall leaving Carol to arrange herself as she saw fit.

Fifteen minutes later feeling much refreshed and supplied with the address of a decent local eatery off an English tourist he'd met in the bathroom, Bruce wandered back into the room. He planned to have a wander around, maybe have a drink somewhere, something to eat and then get an early night.

Carol had also managed a shower as well and stood in front of the dresser brushing her hair wrapped in a towel. She turned as Bruce entered and Bruce's eyes were drawn towards her breasts and then towards her barely covered thighs. He wanted desperately to reach out and touch them, to run his hands over the soft curves of her body, through her thick luxuriant hair. When Carol didn't utter a word Bruce reached over and kissed her.

She tasted fresh and sweet, and her lips were as eager as his own, her flesh firm but yielding to his touch. Carol's towel slipped to the floor and Bruce quickly shrugged off his robe and ran his hands over her body, cupping her breasts and then pressing his lips against her nipples.

Bruce marvelled at they seemed to swell and harden at his lightest touch. Carol gasped and pressed her lower body against his and then tried to hook a leg over his hips.

"Hey settle on woman!" Bruce muttered against her neck as he gently lowered her to the bed.

Carol chuckled lustily, wiggled her bottom and wrapped her arms around Bruce's neck.

"Shouldn't we?" Bruce began to ask but Carol put a finger to his lips to silence him. Who cares about condoms anyway? Bruce thought as their bodies merged into one.

Later as he lay awake staring at the ceiling of the dark stroking Carol's hair gently as she lay in his arms it occurred to Bruce that this wasn't the first occasion in recent times when he'd knocked off a woman totally

unexpectedly. But who was the other one?

Bruce knew that he had done it, but he was struggling to remember who. All he saw was a tangle of dark arms and legs. A black woman? He'd never bonked a black woman. Never even met one as far as he could recall. Bruce hoped that it wasn't a black bloke.

Sunning himself outside his kennel Cop turned his nose up in disgust. Bosses he thought, how come they could run everything and be so stupid at the same time? If I could walk on two legs and talk boss talk I'd rule everything he thought. Cop wasn't quite sure what everything was and the wonders he'd seen over the last few moons left him wondering whether his world, dominated by sheep and cattle was the world at all.

He looked at the female boss, they weren't too far apart now and it looked as if she were going to have pups and wanted the boss there. If the boss was anything like himself he wouldn't care less about the pups. However the female boss was another matter and Cop knew that the boss would never be happy until he found her again. Cop sighed and scratched at an itch that had been annoying him, what dog could ever understand a boss?

Bruce and Carol stayed for several days at the hostel, enjoying each other hungrily and seeing some of the sights of the famous town. They rode on the cable car, sampled the restaurants at the Fisherman's Wharf and generally played the tourist part. But after a day or so Bruce felt as if invisible threads were tugging at him, willing him away, he began to feel that he should be elsewhere. Even though he was enjoying himself a part of him wanted to be away and with somebody else.

At first Bruce didn't try and explain himself to Carol, but when he mentioned that he should be moving along she simply suggested that they both travel up to her sister's place.

"I'm sure she wouldn't mind."

Bruce was surprised at Carol's surprisingly tearful response.

Carol's suggestion was certainly tempting but surely she still wanted to carry on with her own trip? Bruce had no intention of changing his plans for her.

"Tell you what," he suggested, "let's go on to your sisters and then I'll be on my way and maybe I can catch up with you later on."

"Ok," Carol agreed almost reluctantly as if she realised that was as much of a commitment she was going to get out of Bruce.

Carol was keen to hitch her way northwards. "Two of us should be safe enough shouldn't we?"

"From what? Drive by gunmen and casual robbers and rapists. You can hitch if you like but I'm going to rent a car." Bruce retorted. Some people just didn't have a clue he thought. Silly girl, sometimes her complete innocence bordering on the inane made him want to shout at her: "Grow up!" Her cloying clinginess was beginning to grate on him.

Bruce was tempted to tell Carol to buzz off though he knew that wouldn't be fair. The problem was that in the space of a few days she had gone from the passenger in the seat beside him to a partner who seemed reliant on him for total comfort and support. Bruce didn't feel as if he needed or wanted that at the moment. It crossed his mind that maybe Carol had suddenly decided that the prospect of her big trip away was just too much to comprehend and had decided to latch onto him instead.

Oh well, might as well enjoy it while it lasts he thought sliding his hand over her thigh, marvelling at how Carol's legs spread to receive him at his slightest touch. Perhaps that was part of the plan as well?

thirteen

Raele felt a little guilty as he gazed comfortably at the plain. He knew

he should have long since completed the tour of Skid that he had been embarked on before stopping at the organic plant.

He sipped on his beer and puffed contentedly on his agbar. All around him the inhabitants of the organic plant that they still called Aotearoa, the unusual name that the offworlder had bestowed, twittered happily, but respectfully leaving him alone with his thoughts.

The Aotearoian's seemed to accept him as their rightful leader and accorded him the respect that befitted his stature. Though this didn't stop them from going about their own affairs pretty much as they pleased.

Raele had immersed himself in the affairs of the plant as just another inhabitant learning how to tend the organic food and after a trip to the space port to collect his crew had stayed put.

Amatm and the rest of the crew hadn't settled into their new life as well as he had. Not having experienced the destruction of the Skid they knew, they still hankered for the old ways and had formed their own uncooperative clique within the small community.

In the old days they would simply have had them disinfected or have them deported to one of the re-education cadres for correction of their antisocial tendencies. That wasn't a valid option these days Raele thought. Not least as according to the archives they would need every able-bodied Skidian to participate in the priority objective of re-populating the planet.

The archives also told him that this latest disaster wasn't the first time that Skid had been visited by a catastrophe that threatened to destroy the greatest civilisation that had ever graced the universe. That such events had occurred in the past served in Raele's mind to confirm that they were the greatest civilisation in the known universe simply because despite their reverses they had always emerged from these periodic crisis more powerful and sophisticated than ever before.

Still Raele could see many problems looming, not least Amatm and his small group that were like a cancer eating away at the harmony that existed at Aotearoa. The template for the society that in his last notes to him, Inel had suggested he use for restoring Skid to it's former glory.

Raele had been studying from afar the other communities that were slowly developing around Skid. The Skidians who had stayed in or around the industrial complexes were surviving quite well, though they still lived in fear of what disaster would befall them next.

These Skidians were arming themselves against unknown threats, would be leaders were tentatively trying to assert command functions to replace those that were lost. All of them were waiting for someone they recognised from the ancient legends to be resurrected and lead them to salvation. Raele wondered if he were the figure they expected. He surely had powers greater than their puny weapons could counter and far more power to assert his authority than he had ever suspected.

Unless he did something soon, these relatively comfortable groups would emulate the position of Amatm here at Aotearoa, unless he could bring them into the fold he would have to excise them.

There were other Skidians roaming the planet, many making for the fringes of the old cities after wandering through the wilderness living a hand to mouth existence as word spread that the cities were miraculously being rebuilt. Most of these survivors lived in the hope that somehow like the rebuilt cities their lives would once again become the comfortable existence they had known and they could get on with their lives.

These waifs and stragglers were from the vast majority of Skidians that had never had to do anything to justify their existence. They had simply lived out the allotted span of their years as untold millions of Skidians had done for generations before them.

Raele was sure that gradually these lost souls could be gathered to provide the breeding stock on the organic plants that Inel envisioned as the basis for the next leap great leap in the Skidian civilisation.

A civilisation based on Skidians earning rights not existing and

receiving as of right, one that controlled the technology that had developed over the generations and not one that was ruled and overtaken by it's multitude of achievements.

Raele wondered about the Skidians who had made Skid what it had become. While there were those who survived that could operate Skid's technology with the aid of the service crews. Who had, or how had the service crews had been established in the first place? It was as if the infrastructure for the technological development of Skid had always been there and regulated itself with minimal Skidian input. Surely at sometime in the past Skidians had developed this technology themselves? Raele hoped so, otherwise who, or what had?

The cities would remain mostly empty while the populace learnt to work for a living, gained the sort of training and skills that had always been reserved for those that had the right genetic profiles while the rest of the population had existed as a supply of mindless drones, simply existing.

Really, he thought, most Skidians had lived with little more rights than the Celcions for example. Skid had enslaved the Celcions for generations by depriving them of any technology that would allow them to even feed themselves.

Raele wondered how the Celcions were getting on without the regular shipments of food and other material from Skid. He knew from his recent visit that a fair number of them still survived. However from what he could see from the information he could sift through at his command console Raele was learning that survival was a relative concept.

There was a big difference between the almost idyllic life around Aotearoa and the lives of those trying to eke out an existence by scavenging in the wilderness and those cooped up in the industrial complexes that were evolving into prisons.

Raele finished his beer with a single gulp. In moments a full glass replaced the empty one. Mistril, the comforter he had used while aboard the patrol craft, of all the crew seemed to have settled into the new world of Aotearoa effortlessly. Raele had a sneaking suspicion that her attentiveness wasn't without reason, apart from anything else he was the chief mati of Skid for the moment and with the lack of any suitable consorts it probably wasn't a bad bet that she could become the vessel for his heirs.

There were other options Raele knew, more likely vessels, with better lineage, not just at Aotearoa but elsewhere around the planet. Obviously aware of his own mortality while he was compiling the messages he had left to his son, Inel had urged him to make sure that he make the production of offspring a priority.

Nobody knew it yet but Raele had ceased the addition of the contraceptives to all synfood products. Soon females would become pregnant and the communities around Skid would not only have to concern themselves with how to deal with offspring but with the birthings themselves. There would be no more prepackaged adolescents ready to enter Skidian society as there had been in the past, Skidians would be responsible for the production and development of their own offspring.

Raele didn't understand the full implications of that but he realised that he would have to begin to let others have access to his database so that at least they would have some idea of what to expect.

In the old days this would have been an unthinkable act, making information available on anything to any but the ruling classes. Access to information and the ability to use it was the main threat to the continuance of the Skidian way. But today there were physicians remaining and if the Skidian way was to remain in any form or other, then Skidians had to know how to go about rebuilding, if not creating a civilisation. The task was certainly beyond one Skidian.

That's something he could do for the Skidians here he thought, import some medical experts. There were one or two that survived wandering about the wilderness and a few more in each of the industrial complexes.

Despite the presence of people all around him and their chatter Raele couldn't get over the quiet, the stillness of the wilderness.

Always, except when on patrol missions he had been surrounded by the hustle and bustle, the never ceasing barely audible murmur of millions of other Skidians going about their business. At Aotearoa, especially in the early morning or evening there was nothing, just the occasional call from one of the ivops down on the plain and the noise the wind made rustling through the large organic structures around the house.

Raele had quickly come to realise that the reason why the wilderness had always seemed so awesome was the lack of noise and it's very emptiness. Apparent emptiness for Raele now knew that it had never been empty. There was nothing to fear out here at all.

"When are we going to return to Sietnuoc?" Amatm demanded angrily. Raele hadn't seen him approach and had barely registered the sudden silence that had settled around him.

Raele turned to look at Amatm and found himself looking at a dazierwogga, another unarmed dazierwogga. Skidians like Amatm simply expected everything they picked up to work. Poor fool, Raele thought. At least you have given me means to get rid of you that won't alienate the others here.

After making sure that his own dazierwogga was armed and ready in it's sheath, staring unconcernedly up at Amatm, Raele ran through his options. He had to get rid of Amatm now or he was simply allowing a rebellion of sorts to fester, one which would quickly get beyond his ability to control.

Raele watched with grim amusement as the hand that held the dazierwogga began to waver, Amatm obviously expected him to accede immediately. But as he had remained silent and outwardly unconcerned, Amatm's confusion was growing.

The other crew members from the patrol ship who had enthusiastically followed Amatm to this point now nervously backed away leaving Amatm by himself.

"We want to return to Sietnuoc now, the wilderness and living like primitive peoples is no place for Skidians." He added in a quavering high pitched voice, as if he suddenly didn't have the courage of his convictions and realised that whatever support he might have believed he had, had evaporated.

Raele had some admiration for Amatm, he was the type of Skidian that Inel suggested he gather about him, determined, with a high intelligence quotient and marked independent tendencies.

Raele had checked his profile and realised that Inel had specially selected the crew for his last mission. Unfortunately for Amatm his major failing was his conservatism, unlike most of the others at Aotearoa he didn't want to change, couldn't understand that the Skid he'd always known had changed irreccovably.

Oh well the profiles had never been an infallible tool.

"We are not going to return to Sietnuoc and live the old ways for a long time, if ever Amatm," Raele said calmly, making his feelings known publicly for the first time.

He heard grunts of approval from some quarters and a shuffling as the key members of the Aotearoian community began to flank his seat, according him the honour of openly accepting his leadership in a way they never had before.

"You want to give up these unknown freedoms, a life that has purpose and promise, for the life you used to lead in Sietnuoc Amatm?" Raele asked.

"Of course," Amatm replied fiercely, "who wants to live like the primitive beasts we tend down there," he pointed towards the plain.

The hand holding the dazierwogga shook even more as Amatm became more agitated, as he realised he was fighting a lonely, losing battle.

"What freedoms do we have?" Amatm demanded.

"You have the freedom to go," Raele suggested, waving vaguely at the wilderness.

"You cannot do that!" Amatm screamed shrilly as Raele ritualistically cast him out. "I'll kill you first."

"You have a choice Amatm." Raele began setting an unheard of precedent, "either leave now and wander forever," which was as good as signing his death warrant. "Or kill me now." Raele said knowing that even if he tried Amatm couldn't possibly do so.

Raele watched the indecision in Amatm's face as he grappled with emotions that generations of programming had long suppressed.

Raele didn't want to disinfect him, he wanted Amatm to wander off into the darkness and simply die as was the usual way when a Skidian was cast out. But he kept his finger on the trigger of his dazierwogga just in case.

Raele was also conscious that winning this confrontation would reinforce his leadership position. It would be a long while before anyone at Aotearoa sought to stand up to him if he ruthlessly dealt with Amatm now.

He watched Amatm's knuckles tighten on the grip of the dazierwogga and fired, suddenly tired by Amatm's indecision and despising the weakness of his convictions.

The sudden conversion of what had micro seconds before been a Skidian to a small hot glowing pile of ash stunned the crowd. Few Skidians had ever seen such a thing. The disinfection of a fellow Skidian always struck Raele as a little sad. But often there was no other way as had been the case here, to root out a disruptive influence on society.

As had always been the case when he had disinfecting Raele felt the need for a female, as if he could somehow put things to rights in the act of creating a new life. Tomorrow, with new found confidence due to his handling of the confrontation with Amatm and the reaction of the rest of the Skidians he would begin his work to bring the rest of what remained of Skid under his domain.

For the moment though he accepted the agbar ceremonially offered to him and stuck it in his nostril. For the first time since his arrival an attentive subject produced the glowing metal taper to light it for him.

fourteen

Bruce knew he didn't need a good excuse not to stick around longer than absolutely necessary when he met Carol's brother in law. Bruce didn't like the look of him one bit. He was one of those supercilious superior bastards that said he was a real estate developer, but was merely not a very good builder who had, had a run of luck from what little Bruce saw of his work.

His effortless good looks, pristine image and holier than thou sanctimonious attitude irritated Bruce from the moment that he walked through the door and shook the man's hand. In his opinion Carol's sister wasn't much of an improvement and he began to wonder how such a sweet woman could have such a bitch for a sister.

But they seemed fairly close and at least Carol's sister didn't try to demean him as much as her husband tried to.

Bruce's first inclination was to give the wanker a punch in the head. Not that he thought that would be a particularly diplomatic action. It would simply have given him a bit of satisfaction, but there was more than one way to skin a cat.

The brother in law seemed to feel he had to prove who was the better man and kept on baiting and challenging Bruce to various petty and childish tests of manhood. What did he have to prove, why the competition? What was his problem? Maybe Bruce's impression of the man was too apparent?

Eventually having achieved some sort of psychological dominance over Bruce or so he thought, John the brother in law, invited him to his health club in order to overwhelm with his physical prowess and prove who was the better man once and for all.

After all a man that had served his country with distinction in the US Marine Corp., the toughest fighting force in any mans' army should have no problems thrashing some hick farmer from a country he'd never heard of until

he had met his wife.

"Play squash?" He asked superciliously as Bruce stepped out of the car and headed for the sign that said: bar.

"Not much lately," replied the New Zealand junior champion of nineteen eighty and something.

"Would you like a quick game then?"

"Now? I wouldn't mind actually, might blow a few cobwebs away. But I don't have any gear." Bruce thought he might be able to whack John over the head or something while they were playing and shut him up for a while.

"I can sort that out if you like." John replied, struggling under the weight of flash gear bag that just happened to be in the boot.

"Ok."

John wasn't going to make things easy for Bruce and before he had hardly scored a point John had wrapped up the first game.

"I haven't played in a while." Bruce wheezed leaning against the wall between games trying to get his breath back and vowing for the umpteenth time to give up smoking.

The second game was a lot closer, Bruce only lost by a point this time and John had to fight hard for that. Bruce had got his second wind and decided that if it killed him he was going to teach the smart bastard a lesson he'd never forget.

Bruce was all warmed up and the cobwebs were being swatted away with each furious swipe of the racket.

"Sure you want to carry on?"

"Shut up and serve smartarse." Bruce grunted between gasps.

"Tutut. Temper temper," John laughed and served.

Bruce attacked the ball and bounded into mid court ready for the return. He took a mighty swipe at the return but at the last moment delicately placed it in the corner just above the tin where John had no chance of reaching it.

"Very clever Bruce, think you can do it again?" But Bruce was already serving for the next point.

"Wasn't ready." John protested.

He wasn't either which was just the opening Bruce was waiting for. Bruce stalked across the court waving his racket at John.

"Now look here shithead, if it was ok for you to pull a few fast ones' it's ok for me. Complain again and I'll punch you in the neck." With that Bruce turned and served before John had a chance to respond and promptly won the next two sets.

But in the fifth Bruce knew he was beaten, he just didn't have the wind to compete and at eight six down he knew he had to do something drastic if he were going to win.

He took the pace off John's serve and deftly tucked it into the corner. John raced in sensing that all Bruce needed to get back into the game was a few quick points. Bruce didn't even need to give John the planned kick as John slipped on a damp patch and cannoned nose first into the wall.

John got up holding his nose from which a thin trickle of blood flowed.

"I'm bleeding," he whined as the bell that rang to end their court time.

Bruce grinned reached for a towel and then in no uncertain terms, with a great deal of satisfaction, told John to fuck up.

It was customary for John to stay and have a beer with his victims after the on court demolitions that he seemed to get his kicks from. It was a custom that didn't find disfavour with Bruce.

John's fellow club members had enjoyed watching him get his comeuppance on the squash court and soon dragged Bruce away into their own conversations leaving John by himself, muttering darkly into his drinks.

"We're going," He spluttered thickly after sometime.

"Ok, see youse fulla's again." Bruce said waving to his new acquaintances as he followed John out to the car.

Bruce took John's keys away after watching him prod a few times at the door lock much to John's disgust.

By the time the two of them had returned to the house John was loudly accusing Bruce of purposely running him into the wall. The exertion caused by voicing his outrage made his nose start to bleed again.

Bruce knew he'd overstayed his welcome, which was a pretty good effort seeing as though he'd only been there a few hours.

From the looks Carol gave him he thought she might have overstayed her's as well and said as much as they were getting ready for dinner.

"We were never really close." Carol said. "I knew something was wrong when she said she couldn't meet me at the airport."

"Oh well not to worry, we can head off in the morning." Bruce said without thinking. Then cursed himself for forgetting that he really wanted to head off by himself.

"What about the friend you were meeting?" He asked, "weren't you planning on meeting here?"

"She's not coming either." Carol replied with a sob. "This whole trip's turning into a complete disaster."

That was one way of looking at it, though Bruce couldn't see much point in crying about it. There was nothing stopping Carol carrying on by herself.

On the other hand he had noticed that she wasn't particularly independent, sometimes Bruce felt that he couldn't even go to the toilet without Carol fretting.

Carol's sister appeared in the bedroom doorway and gave the two of them a disapproving frown. Bruce wasn't sure whether she just disapproved of him or him and Carol.

"Dinner is ready," she said icily.

"Thanks." Bruce replied, "we'll be down in a minute."

Dinner was a subdued affair, John and his wife were merely going through the motions with their hospitality, Carol hardly said a word. Bruce didn't let the atmosphere trouble him. He felt quite cheerful, a difficult evening was a fair price to pay for a decent free nights' sleep and he'd really enjoyed bringing John down a peg or two.

He didn't respond to John's continual flow of insults and gripped Carol's hand reassuringly when her sister made a few particularly nasty comments.

Bruce couldn't understand the acrimony, Carol was family after all and he had made it quite plain that he only intended staying the night. But neither of them had made the slightest effort at being cordial. Must be one weird family Bruce thought, and I thought mine was bad enough!

After a while though, Bruce just couldn't resist making a few digs of his own, he had nothing to lose.

"This food tastes like dog shit." He said and had the satisfaction of watching John's jaw drop and a mouthful of potato tumble out onto the table. Carol's sister immediately broke into tears and fled the room, she'd obviously had enough of something.

Carol's face turned red as she tried to suppress a giggle.

Bruce stabbed a piece of meat on his fork and sniffed, grimacing as if it was terribly offensive rather than a choice chunk of steak.

"What do you think Carol?" He asked brandishing the fork in her face. "I don't think I can eat anymore of this shit."

But Carol was almost in hysterics and couldn't reply as she watched John scrape up the potato that had fallen out of his mouth. Bruce watched John's mouth open and shut slowly as he tried to say something.

"How dare you!" He managed after a few moments.

"What are you talking about? You've been such an asshole all night that I thought it was acceptable behaviour around here."

"Don't take that attitude with me you commie bastard!" John yelled at the top of his voice, "we don't stand for the likes of you around here."

"At least I'm not a dickhead like you shit for brains." Bruce retorted rising from the table and having the satisfaction of watching John shy away from him.

Bruce felt a little silly, he'd should've just ignored the twit and left,

with or without Carol. Baiting John and his wife in the end hadn't even been fun. It was time to go, apart from the events of the day the insistent nagging idea that he should be on his way north was upon him again. He hurried up to the room he was sharing and felt his shadow close behind.

"Are we leaving tonight?" She asked.

"Well I think I'd better don't you?"

"And leave me here by myself?"

Bruce decided that wasn't such a good idea under the circumstances.

"Do you think it would be a good idea to ask for the lend of a car?"

"Well my sister might lend us her's for a few days just to get rid of us." Carol laughed and skipped off down the stairs.

She was back a few minutes later dangling a set of keys just as John started ranting at his wife.

"She really wanted to come with us but I told her that wouldn't be a good idea," said Carol who then turned somewhat alarmed as she heard her sister scream.

Bruce ran down the stairs, if there was one thing he couldn't stand; that was men beating up on their wives.

What he found stunned him for a moment and then caused him to collapse in hysterics.

Wives' beating up on their husbands was a different matter. John was curled up on the ground, moaning, clutching at his nether regions. His wife stood over him with a foot on his chest like a triumphant amazon, her chest heaving, her face wreathed in a triumphant smile.

"He won't be any more trouble." She said recognizing her would be champion for what he was and thanking him, "feel free to stay the night if you want."

fifteen

Sue groaned and cursed the absent and unknown father of her child as another painfull spasm ripped through her lower body. The gynaecologist had been right, her labour pains had started just three days after her visit.

She was alone bar the midwife, the doctor was on his way but the midwife seemed to fully expect that the baby would be born well before he arrived. She had a competent air, an air that didn't make Sue feel any easier. From the books she'd bought on child birth and all the movies where normality suddenly became tragedy she knew that anything could go wrong. Lately, anything that did happen to her did go wrong. At that moment she didn't care, all she wanted was for the baby to be born and an end to the pain.

"Push, gently now." The midwife said gently.

"What the hell do you think I'm doing?" Sue screamed.

"There look, he's coming, push again."

Sue felt the Midwife's hands between her crudely spread legs and felt something else give inside her. Just like on television she thought, except on television there was no pain, pain so intense that Sue wondered how any woman in her right mind would consider having any children, let alone a whole tribe of them.

Suddenly there was a spasm of agony much worse than she had experienced in the last few hours accompanied by a tearing sensation.

"What's going on?" Sue asked seeing the grin on the midwife's face looking down at the bloody mess between her legs as she put something a towel.

The midwife held the swaddled shape up for Sue to see.

"What's that?" she asked.

"A beautiful baby boy."

Sue watched the midwife cut the umbilical cord with a pair of scissors and then rub most of the mucus and blood from the tiny body.

"Can I hold him?" Sue sighed relieved at the baby's outward normality, relieved that it was all over at last. Relief anyway.

"Here you are dear." Said the midwife handing over the small bundle.

Sue and rested him against her breast guiding his tiny mouth towards a nipple. She looked her baby over and was relieved to note that he appeared to have all his fingers and toes. Though he looked a little pale, though his hair was thick and dark. But his skin was nowhere near as dark as her own. That's a bit odd she thought, looking at the wrinkled little face still damp and slightly red from the its passage from her womb.

Then the baby opened it's eyes which had been tightly closed till now to have a look at this strange new world.

His mother screamed which wasn't quite the welcome that one would expect, not that the baby cared much one way or another as it tried to come to grips with his new environment.

"It can't be mine, there must be some sort of mistake!"

The midwife who was used to distraught mothers tried to soothe Sue.

"There, there. Of course the he's yours, a very nice little chap he is too."

"But he's got blue eyes!"

"Lots of babies have blue eyes and light hair like this little one."

"But I'm . . ." Sue didn't complete the sentence and lapsed into silence for a few moments.

She thought about it for a moment. Of course the baby was hers. It was impossible for it to be otherwise.

She looked again for a glimpse of his eyes but they remained firmly shut.

"Shall I call the father in?" The midwife asked.

"No, he's not here. He's ah overseas." Sue lied. "This one came a bit sooner than expected." Sue didn't see much point in changing the story that her parents had accepted, if not believed.

What would they think when they saw the baby. An illegitimate child was one thing, but an off white illegitimate one?

Sue didn't know how they would react to that, her father had some peculiar ideas about racial purity which was one reason why she hadn't kept on at their church where he got these ideas after she'd left home.

"But you could let my mother in, she's waiting outside." Might as well get that over with as soon as possible. "N. . ." Sue was about to stop the midwife and then decided more matter of factly than she would have thought possible that she might as well get it over with. The midwife hadn't even broken her stride. No doubt she was used to distressed new mothers.

Sue's mother wore a radiant smile as she came through the door. The prospect of seeing another grandchild, even if not the first and not legitimate was something she looked forward to.

Sue watched her mother approach the bed, appraising the little nativity scene. The quickly re-freshed mother, the baby wrapped in a clean towel at her breast. She saw her mother stop and do a double take and then clutch the headboard for support.

The babies undoubted illegitimacy and her daughter's sluttish behaviour could be forgiven, if not forgotten. But this? It was the ultimate insult, her daughter had let some white trash boy take advantage of her.

Sue's mother had a guilty start. There had been a time before she had met her husband that she had all but sinned with a white man and he hadn't been trash, well not then anyway.

'I haven't thought of him in years,' she thought guiltily, the expression on her daughter's face shaming her.

"Hello dear," she said as if she meant it.

Sue held out her baby and was pleased to see that whatever her mother felt about the colour of his skin she couldn't resist holding her first grandson.

"What are you going to name him dear?" She asked as the thrill of the child overcome any other emotion for the moment.

"Bruce." Sue exclaimed drowsily, a bit of a disappointment to her mother. She had hoped that Sue might choose one of her own or her husband's family

names. Rufus Junior had a nice ring to it she thought. Maybe Rufus B Clarke Junior, yes that did have a nice ring to it she thought.

She looked at the baby which was trying to see past the skin and hair colour and the eyes. We obviously aren't as nigger as we thought, must be some white massa there somewhere in the background for this little one to be so pale.

Sue watched her mother glare at her baby, then watched her expression soften somewhat. But why Bruce? That's a bloody awful name. I'm sure mom has an idea, naming it after her father perhaps might soften the blow of the evidence of her bad behaviour. Even if she couldn't remember being bad. This time at least.

What was it about the name Bruce that had made her suggest it as a possible name for her child? Before she had spoken, she had been considering names, she hadn't given the idea of naming the child once it was born much at all, that was the least of her worries.

There was a book at home, more than one listing endless possible names for children. Sue had been aghast at some of them, who in their right mind would bestow a name like Saffron or Moonbeam or something else equally as weird and immediately start the poor kid off on the back foot.

Sue also had books on child rearing and baby care, sex after child birth. Not much need for that really. But she had barely begun shopping for the baby before her mother had arrived a few days previously. If her mother hadn't of come no doubt she still wouldn't have nappies, baby clothes and bottles, a bassinet and all the other things that needed to be bought for the baby.

Her credit cards had taken one hell of a beating and Hal on one of his regular calls had made noises about the liquidity of the Travel agency with all her recent spending.

Fuck Hal she thought, relishing the silent use of the obscenity, and how aptly it described the way she felt.

FUCK the father well. If he ever turns up, I don't know what I'll do to him. The effort of thinking about what she might do almost exhausted her.

Her mother watched Sue's eyes droop, blink a few times and then suddenly close for good.

Poor thing, she thought and satisfied that the baby wasn't in immediate need of feeding put it in the bassinet by the bed and quietly left the room.

She thought about what she would do to the father if he turned up. But her immediate concern was what to tell her husband about the boy. He would be waiting by the phone to hear the good news.

Waiting for the news was also a good excuse to stay glued to the television with a bottle of softdrink and a bowl of popcorn beside him instead of doing something useful like mowing the lawn or washing the car. She knew her husband had a secret fantasy that the father might be one of his football heros. A basketball or baseball player for second preference. How to tell him that the neither was likely?

He would have to accept that his daughter had strayed badly and learn to forgive. Not that Sue's straying meant that she had to tell him everything straight away, he hadn't yet come to terms with the fact that his daughter had strayed so badly.

He was also suffering in his own way for he had sought the advice and guidance of their pastor who on hearing the news had promptly begun to publicly voice doubts about brother Rufus's suitability to hold church offices.

Losing his position in the church might be a blow from which he would never recover. Having to retire had been bad enough, losing the roles that he had developed to fill the yawning gap left by not having to work again might be the end of him.

Sally Clarke was normally a mild mannered woman who always tried to see the best in people. But standing in the corridor outside her daughters room, if the child's father had been present she would have throttled him.

The birth had the potential to destroy her life and all she held dear.

She also knew in that moment it wasn't the baby's fault for being born, Sue's for that matter or even the father's, god rot his soul. She would nurture the baby as she would one of her own.

How everyone else would react and the shame that they as a family would be forced to bear in order to make everyone else feel righteous and pure would be the heaviest burden to bear.

The absent father was a different story, she'd wring his neck if she ever got the chance. How dare he do this to them!

Sally Clarke found a phone and dialled her husband to inform him he now had a grandson. The excitement in his voice convinced her not to disclose the rest of the details of the child other than both mother and child were well. There would be time enough for that out later, besides as his sight was no longer the best he might not notice anything amiss until it was too late.

Though she was exhausted from the birth Sue dozed fitfully. She was disturbed by visions of the man figure she thought might be god. She also got up several times to check on the baby, he was such a quiet soul that she thought he might have stopped breathing. Sue was quite paranoid about the baby suddenly dying on her. Everything about her pregnancy hadn't gone to plan from the unknown conception through to the full term, though apparently premature birth. Anything could and probably would happen she thought as she saw her mother slip back into the room. Soon doctors and nurses would be fussing over her and the specialist would no doubt want to take tests to figure out why she had given birth so soon. She dozed off only to awaken again after what seemed to be several minutes to find her mother arguing with someone.

There was something odd about the man, he held a little square box in front of her mother's face and was rattling on hardly giving her a chance to speak.

"The public has a right to know, Mrs ah, you're the mother right?"

"Yes, now. . ."

"Our paper will pay good money for an exclusive interview, lots of baby clothes, a slot on some high profile talk show, the skies the limit."

"Ah look she's waking up." The man had turned to look at Sue.

Sue clamped her eyes firmly shut and wished the man would just go away, not understanding or caring what was going on.

"Young man," Sue heard her mother say firmly, "there's a security guard down the hall, if you don't leave immediately I'll. . ."

"You wouldn't do that would you, I'm only trying to make a living you know." The man was changing tack, hustling, trying to pierce Sally Clarke's formidable defence's.

"Peddling scandal and lies in some trashy tabloid?" Sally Clarke retorted hotly.

"I'll have you know madam that our publication has the highest level of editorial integrity in the land and is read by thirty million Americans every week!"

"Trash!"

"No madam we do not print trash, only carefully researched human interest stories and such material that we think the public has a right to know."

"So what does the public need to know about my daughter?"

"We have it on good authority that your daughter slept with an alien."

"What!"

Sue sat bolt upright in the bed stunned by the accusation and the wind was taken out of her mother's sails. Sue watched her visibly sag, almost crumple to the ground and then after a moment straighten again holding the partially open door for support.

"Get out!" She screeched at the top of her voice. "Get out of here this instant, how dare you make such obscene accusations about my daughter!"

Before Sue had a chance to react, her mother was trying to shut the door on the reporter to force him out of the room. She also heard the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps in the corridor.

The door burst open and a man brandishing a large, heavy revolver in one

hand and a card in the other burst into the room.

Just like on the movies Sue thought as she dropped back and drew the bedcovers over her head.

"Freeze!" He yelled at the top of his voice. "Everybody down!" The command was superfluous as both the reporter and Sally Clarke were on the ground. Then to cap it all off the baby started howling.

"FBI," the man with the gun yelled a little less loudly.

"Are we a police state, this is police brutality." The reporter was the first to regain his wits. He was already barking into his small tape deck while the FBI agent was still darting anxious looks around the room trying to work out what was happening.

"Give that here." The agent said holding out his hand for the tape deck.

When the reporter said: "You can't do that." The agent replied, "Yes I can." He took the recorder and handed it to another man who had appeared in the doorway.

"You can't do that." The reporter insisted again.

"I just did," The agent replied, whipping out a set of handcuff's and before the reporter knew what was happening, cuffed both hands behind his back.

"Take him away," He said after listening to a few moments invective "and lock him up with the other nutters."

"Wait till we print this outrage," the reporter yelled at the top of his voice as the second agent dragged him screaming from the room. "You'll wish you'd never been born."

"So will you when we've finished with you," the first agent called after his retreating figure.

Sue pushed the covers back and reached out for the baby to try and soothe it. She was in time to watch the FBI agent slip his revolver back into it's holster and reach out to help her mother to her feet. He looked a lot less intimidating, a child with a dangerous toy Sue thought as he smiled sheepishly at them.

While she made cooing noises and held the baby to her breast Sue tried to appear unconcerned at the reporter's accusations. How had he found out?

Were the agents here to arrest her or keep an eye on her?

"I'm sorry we had to disturb you ladies." He said. "But we're guarding a special patient down the corridor."

Just as well he didn't have a gun, Sue said to herself a little relieved that she wasn't the one that the FBI were interested in. Unless of course she was and the agent simply wasn't letting on.

"Why don't you stick him somewhere else instead of putting my daughter in danger," Sally Clarke insisted having regained her composure.

"I'm not at liberty to say madam," the agent responded trying not to watch Sue suckle her baby.

"Well what are you at liberty to say young man?"

"Nothing madam, except that you are quite safe."

"Hah!" Sally Clarke snorted, "Who do you think you're kidding sonny? You can't even keep a reporter out of here."

"Yes madam, well I must be off ladies, please stay away from the far end of the corridor if you haven't already been informed," the agent told them backing out of the room.

They hadn't been informed of course, another stuff up of were they, she, the object of their interest?

sixteen

Raele returned to Sietnuoc to pick up a longer range patrol ship. He liked the idea of being able to go anywhere in the known universe at a moments notice. Being in charge must have some perks afterall.

At Sietnuoc's space port he found the patrol ship that he had used to

return the offworlders to their planet all serviced and waiting for him.

Raele had half expected to find, half hoped really, that other patrol craft had returned. Fellow pilots, used to employing a little initiative, the cream of what remained of the Skidian technocracy were the sort of Skidians he needed to help rebuild Skid.

Skid had been a world where admission to the ranks of the technocracy was a jealously guarded privilege. Skidian society worked so well because most of the population not only knew nothing, they didn't know how to do anything except live from day to day either.

Raele found the space port as empty as he had found it on his arrival. Even more unfortunately, once he climbed aboard the patrol craft and taken off he found that the service crew had made a few modifications to the auto pilot when he tried to enter his the coordinates for his intended destination. Normally the problem would have been picked up and rectified by the supervisor. But there was no supervisor anymore. Raele wondered what else around Skid might not be as it seemed after a service crew had worked on it without supervision.

Raele wasn't too concerned about the auto pilot system. After all he had plenty of time and no distractions to correct the problem, it was a long way back to the offworlders' planet.

Later, panels, modules, and fasteners strewn across the floor, replacement modules stacked alongside a diagnostics and repair kit Raele had to admit that he was beat. Somehow the service crew had placed an override on the outbound navsystem. Until he worked out what they had done he couldn't alter the patrol craft's course. If he couldn't discover a way to circumvent it then it looked as if he were locked into a course back to the offworlders planet.

Raele tried punching in a Skidian bound course and saw it entered in the priority schedule. He hoped this meant the patrol ship would set course for Skid after it completed it's program. Which was? The log said a routine patrol of carbon based planet 100083L. The schedule also noted that he had full manual control so Raele didn't have a lot of faith in the log.

Throughout the trip Raele tried to bypass the override without success, despite almost rebuilding the whole system from scratch so he could manually pilot the craft. As he got closer to the offworlder's planet he began to wonder what the service crews had programmed for him. More importantly whether the program would return manual control of the craft to him once he got close to the planet in case evasive action was necessary.

Raele hoped so. He didn't really look forward to waiting on the planet for a rescue crew without a 'comfortor 'if something went wrong. He really should have brought one along just in case he thought.

Too late, he was almost there. Raele felt the patrol craft begin decelerating as it passed the planets single moon and made the default approach. He watched the planet grow larger on the screen and noted not for the first time it's superficial similarity to his own planet.

Give them a few thousand more years and they might be where Skid is he thought, remembering the primitive nature of the offworlders. He'd inspected the craft they'd left on their moon, or intercepted in space and wondered how they had managed to get so far with them. He also knew that all kinds of debris, primitive expended fuel packs, satellites and other space junk orbited the planet.

Why don't they clean it up? He wondered, could they? What race in their right mind would advertise their lack of concern for their environment the way these offworlder's did?

A warning light began to flash. Raele scanned the read out on the screen and saw a shape almost directly in front of him rapidly growing larger and larger. One of their patrol ships, space shuttles they called them. Craft that were only able to orbit the planet at fairly low altitudes, hardly worth the tag of space craft at all he decided with a superior grin.

Raele had encountered these shuttles before at a distance, always he was

able to steer well clear of them and rely on his own ship's cloaking devices to avoid detection. This time he had no control over the ship but still expected it to veer away, leaving the unarmed shuttle to continue it's way completely unaware of his presence.

This time however his craft didn't change course and the shuttle grew larger and larger on the screen. Raele became a little concerned. What was going on here, what had the service crew done to his patrol craft?

He glanced at the schedule again, the preprogrammed patrol would be complete within minutes. Just enough time to orbit the planet once at a low altitude and then it would be away again, released to his control. Raele hoped so anyway.

Raele watched as their approach velocities slowed, cloaking devices or not the people aboard the shuttle couldn't help but see him out their windows now. The communications channel scrolling through all possible frequencies suddenly opened between the two craft so Raele could listen to the frantic conversations both on board and between the shuttle and it's ground controllers.

"Columbia to ground control. We have encountered an unmarked object that appears to be an alien space ship."

"A what? Columbia, our sensors show nothing."

"Neither do ours control, hold on a moment we'll vector a camera on him. There do you see?"

"Holy shit!"

"What's he up to do you think?"

"No idea control, what do you think we should do?"

Raele's craft slowed and swung around to keep station on the shuttle, so close that Raele could see right onto their flight deck. He could see the excitement of the offworlders. Some of them pointed up at him, one waved so Raele waved back, others seemed to be working frantically at their consoles.

"He's right beside us now. Bastard waved at us. Is this some kind of joke control?"

"No it's not," snapped back a voice. "Have you tried making contact with the vessel?"

"No control, though Commander Hasset did wave at him."

"Is the ship showing any aggressive tendencies?"

"No it has just changed course and is now on the same heading as ourselves. We'll try making contact."

Raele wondered whether he should open communications with the shuttle but before he had time to consider the idea which was strictly forbidden. Forbidden by whom, he was the leader of the Skidians now his patrol ship abruptly swung away and resumed it's previous course.

"He's gone control, heading your way." The owner of the voice sounded relieved Raele thought, he was somebody else's problem now.

But who's?

"Ok Columbia, we think we've got him now. You will now abort your mission and return immediately to base immediately. Repeat abort your mission and return immediately. And maintain radio silence except for mission related communications."

Raele took another look at the schedule. Hopefully in a couple of minutes he would regain control of the ship and then he would head back to Skid.

No doubt his unscheduled presence would confound and confuse the offworlders but he had more important matters to attend to back on Skid.

The planet loomed larger in his screen and then he was flying through the atmosphere the patrol craft changing course regularly to make a wide berth around the other craft sharing the same airspace.

"Unidentified craft entering US controlled airspace please identify yourself or we will take defensive action." A voice demanded over the communications channel.

Raele almost laughed out loud, but he didn't reply. The offworlders had nothing to that could touch him. Without any concern for his safety he watched

ungainly craft loaded with primitive missiles labour into the air.

"Unidentified craft please identify yourself." Raele knew they were getting worried down on the planet's surface now and didn't really blame them. It must come as quite a shock to discover a space craft from another planet suddenly flying through your airspace and realise there wasn't much you could do about it.

Raele watched the scene beneath him unfold as his patrol craft sped across the planet. One moment he was crossing a great salty water, the next the craft jinked across a large city that didn't look unlike a city on Skid, then over vast empty spaces.

The offworlders could track him easily now Raele thought, his craft had slowed somewhat and their offensive craft could almost keep up with him. As he thought this a ball of fire bloomed to his left, then another ahead of him and shockwaves generated by the explosions rocked his craft slightly. They're firing at me Raele noted as his ships defensive systems identified, tracked and then destroyed the incoming missiles. Then there were more explosions far behind as the craft that had fired the missiles were also destroyed.

"Unidentified craft you have destroyed several of our aircraft that were simply tracking you without aggressive intent. We now deem you to be a hostile and will take steps to destroy you unless you immediately turn to heading one four five true and form on an aircraft who will lead you to one of our bases where you will land."

Raele thought about the unknown speaker's words, not sure if he had understood him correctly. Hadn't they fired first? He certainly had no intention of landing to explain that he was only defending himself.

Beep beep beep. The control console announced that the override that had been placed over the auto navigation system would be released in thirty seconds, or so Raele hoped. Nothing was working out at the moment as it should. He just hoped that the service crew hadn't done some other programming that he didn't know about.

The craft was approaching a high mountain range and smoothly ascended to crest it. It had accelerated now leaving any potential pursuers far behind, though his monitors detected sudden bursts of fire told Raele that they were still trying to attack him. As Raele wondered at how the range was covered in a white material near it's summit he realised that his craft was barely going to clear it on it's present course.

Raele watched the timer count down estimating that he might have a few seconds to save himself and the ship from disaster if control reverted to him at the end of the program. He flicked the manual control switch and placed his hand on the joy stick that stuck up like a pistol grip from the console ready to wrench the craft over the obstacle.

With one eye on the timer Raele still had time to marvel at how the white material smoothed out the harsh rock that threatened to smash into his craft. Raele decided that the white material must be some kind of powder as it blew out behind the craft as it passed. Maybe that's why the service crew programmed the trip like this he thought, they wanted to see what the white material, to see if it had any possible utility on Skid.

They were cutting it pretty fine if that was their idea. Raele felt that if he could reach outside the craft he would be able to touch the ground.

He watched the timer scroll down to zero and wrenched back on the joystick putting the craft almost on it's end. Raele felt a slight bump, the service crew had slightly miscalculated. A quick glance at the control console told Raele that the outer integrity of the craft's hull had been breached as it crested the summit.

Raele pondered his options for a moment. He wouldn't be able to traverse true space until that breach was repaired, though otherwise his craft was operational. He had to find somewhere to land and if he couldn't repair the breach himself await the arrival of a service crew to complete the task. He armed his distress beacon and began the task of selecting a suitably isolated site to land and inspect the damage.

The chasing craft seemed to have lost him for the moment, perhaps believing that he had ploughed into the mountain Raele thought. He swung back over the mountain and headed for the ground knowing it would be almost impossible to be tracked at low levels and that a reciprocal heading would be the last thing they expected.

Voices still called to him over the communications channel, but they obviously didn't know whether he was hearing them or not because the same warning was repeated over and over. Warning him of the dire consequences of not following their demands to land and promising sure destruction if he didn't.

Raele began to search ahead of him for a large open space where he could land his patrol craft.

It didn't occur to Raele that there were many such places on the planet but far from being isolated and largely empty of people they were often bustling places called airports.

After a detailed search he found what he was looking for. A large open space that conveniently had some kind of large buildings at one end. Raele thought he might be able to park his craft in one of the large buildings while awaiting the service crew who were already on their way in case he needed them.

There seemed to be few offworlders about and only the occasional traffic leaving or entering the area, so Raele decided to trust in his cloaking device and land.

As the patrol craft came to a stop outside the open door of one of the large buildings Raele caught sight of some figures fleeing out the back. They didn't concern him overly, how could they hurt him? Gingerly he rolled the craft into the building and parked it beside one of the offworld craft inside.

Raele wondered how such a large and unwieldy craft could fly with it's wings and large externally propulsion units engines. He wanted to have a good look at it once he had surveyed the damage to his own craft. Perhaps he could even take it for a test flight he thought.

As he stepped out of his patrol craft Raele heard a loud piercing wail and rumbling noises that seemed to be approaching him. Somewhere a distorted voice called unintelligible commands. There were other sounds that Raele couldn't identify, like the sound of heavy rain on a metal roof that he'd only heard at Aotearoa. But it wasn't rain.

Raele wasn't perturbed, he carefully checked the hull and found a large ragged gash in the outer hull. He peered inside the gash and saw that the inner hull was undamaged. In between the two hulls he could see a repair crew cautiously making it's way along on the inspection rail, surveying for possible damage as it did so.

Raele watched as it's metal arms ran along the smooth skin of the hulls checking for more holes and other structural damage.

When it came to the large gash where it's rails had been damaged Raele watched as always in a little awe as the small robot rapidly rebuilt it's pathway. Once that was done, it began work on tidying the damage so that the service crew could begin work immediately they landed.

There wasn't much Raele could do for the moment except wait. He sauntered over to the offworlder craft and sat himself on one of the large round things that it seemed to be supported by. What were they? He wondered rolling himself some agbar, blissfully unaware of the no smoking signs around the building.

He thought he could possibly repair the damage to the hull himself if he had the right materials. Judging from the alloys used on the offworld craft he sat under he decided it probably wasn't worth the effort.

Raele could see out the door of the building from where he sat and was satisfied that the area in front was quite clear. If he stayed where he was, he was sure the offworlders would never locate him. He got up and strolled around the offworlder's craft wondering how it managed to claw it's way into the sky and how he might enter it to make a survey. It looked to be a vast

craft but much of it's bulk consisted of the wings and it's propulsion units.

He found what looked to be an access way leading up to the fuselage. Did it have sensors that would prevent unauthorised entry similar to his own craft.

Raele climbed the stairway and peered inside the empty fuselage. A cargo ship then?

As he considered whether to enter a loud distorted voice, similar to the one he'd heard earlier suddenly called out.

"You there, stop right there and put your hands' up."

Raele walked down the stairs so he could see where all the noise had suddenly come from. There in the doorway was a crowd of men holding a variety of simple weapons, not dissimilar to the one that the offworlder had used on Skid to destroy the beasts called ivops when he wished to consume one.

"And put that damn cigarette out!" Another voice called.

Raele put his agbar in his nostril and considered the situation. He didn't see the crowd of offworlders as any real threat. One blast from his dazierwogga would deal with them. Maybe he thought, if I just ignore them they'll go away.

He saw several of the offworlders slowly approach him, gesturing with their weapons while others moved across to his patrol craft no doubt hoping to cut him off from it. Well it's not going anywhere for the moment he thought wondering what the gestures meant.

Raele watched as one of them cautiously walked up the short gangway and peered nervously inside. Then he went one step too far and suddenly disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Raele's nose wrinkled at the offensive smell and saw the crowd of offworlders was visibly shaken and those closest to him quickly stepped back.

"Do you understand?" The harsh distorted voice demanded.

Raele didn't bother dignifying the question with an answer. Just who did this offworlder think he was? Of course he understood.

"Now what?" He asked himself just wanting to be left alone until his ship was repaired.

"Do you understand me?" The voice from before repeated.

Raele ignored the questioner once more and decided he might be better off back in his own craft.

He walked to the bottom of the stairs and began to cross the floor.

"Get him," the voice called and Raele suddenly found himself surrounded by offworlders reaching out and clutching at him. He was so stunned by the offensive manners that he didn't know how to react for a moment. By the time he decided to reach for his dazierwogga he found that his arms had been restrained by two metal bracelets.

The offworlder with the loud voice approached Raele and looked up at him.

"Well what have we here?"

Raele stared down at the pompous little offworlder who wore a uniform of colours and braid like a Celcion peasant pretending to be a warrior and remained silent. He'd met his kind before on official trips to Celcious and always found that the best way to deal with them was to ignore them.

"Take him to the infirmary and see he is well guarded." The little man said. "The people from the government will want to see him as soon as they arrive."

Raele felt himself pushed toward the doorway and an odd vehicle that stood there. Raele thought about using his dazierwogga, again, the offworlders hadn't found it. Why bother he decided I might as well use the time while I wait for the service crew. Might even learn something from the offworlders. But as he watched the pompous little offworlder stride up the ramp into his patrol craft and immolate himself Raele thought that hardly likely.

'Haute Tucker,' read the sign over the restaurant when Bruce finally found it in an area that seemed given over to trendy boutiques and eateries. Not the sort of place he expected at all, nor did he expect to be a half-expected visitor. Dick had come through for once it seemed.

A little bit of work about the place for the both of them for free board and tucker, grog not included seemed a pretty decent deal to Bruce.

"Business was a bit slow at first," Trev said as he poured Bruce a beer in the bar." But it's picking up nicely now. There's quite a few Kiwis and Aussies floating about the place who provide the hard core clientele and more of the locals are coming in. I think the antipodes are the in thing at the moment."

"Oh yeah." Bruce said diffidently more interested in the rugby game on the television if the truth was known, even though he'd watched it live before he left home.

"By the way, what happened to that girl that was with you?"

"Dunno really, she just decided she wanted the car for a while. Dunno why she asked really, her sister's car."

"Thought she was shooting through actually, she took all her gear with her."

"She didn't say anything to me, maybe she's gone to the laundromat or something." Bruce suggested .

"Don't think so mate, she looked like a woman on a mission that one."

Bruce secretly hoped that Carol might have slipped away, though he was a little miffed that she hadn't said anything. Come to think of it he thought, she hasn't said much for the last couple of days.

Oh well, Bruce thought not to worry.

"I'd better have a look upstairs I guess." Bruce decided finishing off his beer.

Upstairs in the room that Trev had given them Bruce found his bags and clothes discarded untidily on the bed where he'd dropped them earlier. Of Carols' belongings there was no sign. As if she had never been except for the slight trace of her perfume and the envelope on the pillow where she must have intended he'd see it.

Dear Bruce, the note began. Well didn't they all?

I've decided to go and meet my boyfriend as planned.

Boyfriend? Bruce had thought all along that Carol was going to trip around with one of her girlfriends.

Thank you for the wonderful time over the last few days but I'm going to sneak off now, without saying goodbye.

Bruce didn't bother reading the rest, except to note that Carol added a few 'x's after name. He actually felt a great sense of relief as he walked back down to the bar. That was one job that he wasn't looking forward to out of the way.

"Gone?" Trev asked.

"Yeah." Bruce replied, crumpling the note and envelope in his hand and tossing it into an ashtray.

"Oh well not to worry."

"Yeah you get that on the big jobs," Bruce replied eyeing up a couple of sophisticated looking woman who had just walked in to try out the latest in ethnic eateries.

"What are you doing tomorrow night?" Trev asked.

"Dunno, don't I have to work?"

"I've got some tickets to a State of Origin game that's being played here tomorrow night. Wanna come?"

"Yeah sure," Bruce replied not really interested in what Trev had to say, beginning to smart over Carol's hasty exit.

Then he laughed, she'd had one over on him all the time.

The rest of the night was a blur of raised raucous voices and glasses and conviviality. Bruce knew he should have slowed, stopped drinking when he was all but legless. But he couldn't stop himself.

The beer flowed easily down his throat, half smoked cigarettes filled an ashtray at his elbow. Squint eyed, he tried to concentrate on another video but the picture wouldn't stay still.

He felt sick, he had another beer and then he saw that the bar was empty, the lights going off one by one and Trev was telling him to go up to bed.

"What for?" Bruce asked, looking at his watch and deciding that it was only about eleven o'clock. "I wanna go raging," but he allowed himself to be led away to his room.

"Take my bike and have a look around the place, "Trev suggested the next morning as the two of them sat around a table eating breakfast.

Bruce didn't feel like doing much at all. He had a shit of a hangover but a good feed of bacon and eggs, a cup of coffee and several aspirin soon had him feeling much better.

After demolishing the big greasy breakfast, managing to hold it down without too much effort he wondered whether the previous evening had been nothing more than just another dream. What had he done?

"Ok Trev, that sounds like a good scheme to me." Domestic duties around the restaurant didn't really appeal to him.

Outside Bruce kicked the bike into life and carefully made his way out into the midmorning stream of traffic trying to decide which way to head. He was still thinking about it five minutes later as he stopped at a set of traffic lights.

A sign caught his eye as he waited for the lights to change and somewhere in his subconscious a recognition signal flashed.

'Nah bullshit." Bruce thought, 'I'm out of my mind.' He started as a horn tooted from behind him.

Bruce rode through the lights and pulled across the road, oblivious to the squeal of brakes and toots of the angry motorists he cut across in front of. He pulled the bike onto its stand lit himself a smoke and then sauntered back the way he had ridden so he could get a look at the sign that had caught his eye.

'Trekking Tours,' it read with, 'Travel Agents for the Intrepid,' in smaller lettering underneath.

The name rang a bell with Bruce, but he couldn't say where it had rung for him. He walked up to the sign, rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment then pushed inside.

Bruce looked at the travel posters of inviting tropical beaches, snow and mountains, a promotional map of Australia and the like.

"Can I help sir?" Asked a giant of a man who had silently appeared at his side.

"Nah, actually I dunno really." Bruce tried to rationalise his decision to walk in off the street.

"Can I see your boss please?" He asked before he knew what he was saying in his best business like manner.

"I am the manager sir, how can I help you?"

"Who owns the place mate?"

"I am delegated by the owner to operate the business, while she," he hesitated for a moment.

A her then, that rang a bell somewhere.

"While she is er absent."

"Oh, I'm running an Adventure Tour Company in New Zealand and had a proposal to put to her. I guess I should really speak to her about it. When she will be back?"

Bruce felt that he really did have something to say to the owner of the travel company. But what? He remembered saying something about travel to somebody, perhaps last night when I was pissed he thought.

"Would you like to come into my office sir, we can talk there." Hal said.

The imposing bulk of the man standing over him gave Bruce little choice in the matter for the moment, especially as Hal grabbed Bruce by the arm and

almost marched him away.

"You have credentials?"

"I have positive identification if that's what you mean."

"Australian you said?" Was this bloke for real Bruce thought.

Calls himself a travel agent. He decided to let the man conjure himself up visions of Australian entrepreneurs and their well known unorthodox modes of operation.

"Hal Lindstrom," Hal said proffering his hand for Bruce to shake. "Your approach is a little unusual, took me by surprise." Hal said trying to crush Bruce's hand in his awesome fist.

Bruce saw that Hal was the type of man that like to dominate others by the sheer force of his presence, which Bruce had to admit was pretty impressive. He squeezed back and a thirty-second test of strength began until Bruce tried to retrieve his hand. He wasn't comfortable with the way some men liked to hang onto other men's hands.

"You have a business proposition, which you are loath to discuss with me?"

"We've looked over this place pretty carefully and decided that you're our best shot with the type of market that we're aiming at." Bruce didn't believe he was saying these things but he was beginning to enjoy playing the big shot. Surely Hal must smell a rat, if I'd really checked the place out I'd know all about the boss. Maybe Hal was as gullible and impressionable as he was big?

Bruce was wondering what to say next when saw a letter addressed to a Mss Sue Clarke laying on the. That name also rang a bell.

"I've just returned from a trip home and decided to make a direct approach to." Mss or missus? "Mss Clarke."

"Mss Clarke is indisposed presently, I could pass on a message if you'd like to give me a general outline." Hal suggested.

Bruce felt an irrational imperative need to meet Mss Clarke but couldn't work out why. It was as if a part of his brain knew why but wasn't letting him know. Bruce felt as if he had been impelled by an unknown force all these months towards a hidden goal and suddenly realised it was almost within reach.

'I'll get the bitch.' A con artist! It stood out a mile. What a good way to get back at the bitch, he thought and grinned secretly, the bitch that had rebuffed his advances. Hal still smarted at this setback, he wasn't used to being rebuffed.

Hal was a vindictive man by nature and he saw in front of him the weapon he'd been waiting for to exact his revenge. He'll fuck this outfit for sure he thought.

"Look," he said, "I think the best I can do is give you a phone number and an address where you might be able to contact her. I'll leave it you how you do it."

Bruce watched Hal laboriously write out a phone number on a piece of paper. "Here you are." Hal said hand it over.

All Bruce could think of was that the culmination of months of unfounded yearnings and anxieties was almost imminent, an awareness that Bruce hadn't really been aware of until precisely that moment.

Bruce picked his nose unconsciously considering the proffered note and without thinking pulled out his smokes and lit one up.

Hal's nose twitched distastefully as he held out the note.

"Oh yeah, thanks mate," he said grabbing the piece of paper wondering what was on it but not wanting to show himself up by looking at it in the office. "Well we'll see ya later eh?" Bruce said standing to shake Hal's hand.

Hal looked at the hand, ignored it but automatically stood to hold the door open for Bruce as he wandered out of the office wondering what the hell he was doing.

"Thank's." Bruce muttered as he wandered out onto the street and found himself looking at a phone box.

He rang the number and immediately wished he hadn't. He heard the phone

connect and then the warble of an answer phone kicking in.

"Hello, Sue here. I'm not able to come to....."

Bruce hung up and found to his surprise that he was breathing heavily as if he had just run a mile or so up the road in his gumboots. He was also grateful that Mss Clarke hadn't answered, he needed sometime to think about what was going on.

This calls for a bit of thought. He decided that a beer or so was needed before he did anything and headed back to Trev's restaurant.

eighteen

The noisy roar of a motorbike going down the street outside woke Sue from her afternoon sleep. Woke the baby which squalled disconsolately in the cot beside the bed.

Sue wanted to get out of bed and soothe the child with milk from her heavy swollen breasts. But I'm so tired, she thought. It was turning out to be a tiring occupation raising a child.

The bedroom door opened and her mother poked her head inside the room.

"Aren't you going to feed him, do you want me to look after him for a moment dear?"

"I'll feed him in a few minutes, he'll be all right then."

"You can't keep calling the baby 'him' for ever dear. Why not call him Bruce like you said?" Sally Clarke caught the look on her daughter's face and decided to let the matter drop. It was unnatural for the baby not to have a name, even more unnatural to announce a name and then decide to change it as soon as she got home. But then the whole business of Sue's pregnancy had been unnatural. Sally Clarke didn't know the half of it.

"I'll make us a cup of coffee then."

Sue nodded tiredly and wondered whether having and then caring for a baby was always this fatiguing. Having a baby, watching it develop day by day should be a fulfilling and wonderful experience, all the books said so. It wasn't working out that way for Sue.

She felt as if the baby was sucking her dry, he drank insatiably and seemed to grow in front of her eyes. There was something strange about this baby, she could see it written in the doctors and visiting specialists face's when they came to check up on her.

Sue was sure the baby wouldn't survive long, even though he looked healthy enough, they just hadn't let on yet what it was. This was why Sue had forgotten about the name even though the baby was a few weeks old.

For the last few days he had cried a lot more than usual and no amount of feeding, the usual remedy for his distress would quieten him. His gums were hard upon her nipples, making them feel bruised and tender.

Sue could hear the motorbike that had roared up the street earlier returning like an irritating fly buzzing around the house.

She heard the engine noise die, then stop completely as it seemed to stop outside the house. Must be going next door Sue decided, she didn't know anybody that rode a motorcycle.

"Sue, Sue!" Her mother yelled bursting into the room a few minutes later, "there's a man, a white man," she didn't forget to say, "coming to the door. What shall I do?"

"Who, what?" Sue asked tiredly. "Hal didn't ride a motorcycle did he?"

"He's probably lost or something. Just answer the door and see what he wants. He probably won't bite." Sue added as her mother hovered nervously by the bedroom door.

"He might be dangerous." Sally Clarke was more than a little apprehensive and didn't mind admitting it.

"Oh mum, don't be so silly." Sue forced herself out of bed, picked up the baby, draped a bathrobe around her shoulders and walked up to the front door. Her mother stood anxiously looking over her shoulder a hammer in her hand just

in case as Sue opened the door.

"Hello."

Bruce stood on the doorstep wondering if the people inside were ever going to open the door. He'd seen a disembodied face peer down at him through the curtains from an upper story window and then just as quickly disappear when he waved. What sort of place was this he wondered? Maybe I'd have been better off to ring instead of being clever and getting the address out of the phone book he thought. But when he found the address was so close to where he was, it seemed silly not to just truck on down there.

Bruce was just about to give up and ride away when he saw a figure through the glass door. He stood there shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot and waited for the door to open, scratching his bum through the fabric of his trousers and smoothing his tousled hair.

"Giddae." He muttered awkwardly wondering what he was going to find as he heard the door being unlocked and watched it swing open. "I'm looking for . . . " Bruce didn't complete the sentence as he was confronted by a sight that left him temporarily stunned.

"You?" The recognition was mutual. Then Bruce had to duck as a hammer came flying through the air at him.

"You'd better come in." Sue managed to say after a moment or two. God had come to her as she had secretly hoped he would.

Bruce nodded and wiped his boots on the door mat. He didn't say anything because he was a little bit dazed. This was the black woman that inhabited his dreams but where did the baby come into the picture? He stepped carefully over the inert body of Sally Clarke who had fainted in the hallway after throwing the hammer at him.

"Hold your baby while I make sure she's all right." Sue said handing over the baby and bending over her mother.

"My baby? How can that be?" Bruce asked taking the baby in his arms and suddenly overwhelmed by an incredible sense of achievement.

Wow, my very own sprog he thought as holding the little bundle seemed to be the most natural thing in the world.

Bruce looked at the baby's face and saw how familiar it looked. How the features reminded him of his own baby photo's, indeed of photo's of his father and those of a cousins kid who was unfortunate enough to have a striking resemblance to both himself and his father. Only the skin colour was a little dark. Though it was surely impossible, there was little doubt in Bruce's mind that he could well be the child's father.

He sat himself on the sofa with the baby while Sue revived her mother and dragged her into the kitchen.

Sue watched god play with their child. Was it time to broach the problem of his name? She was going to suggest that they call him Joseph but perhaps that could wait. Sue decided that god seemed to have a way with the child, it gurgled contentedly in his arms. But then god would have a way with children, wouldn't he?

Bruce sensed that the woman was looking at him and looked up with a depreciating smile.

The woman looked familiar, in fact Bruce felt he knew her almost as well as himself, except that he'd only ever come across her in his dreams.

"He's a cute little bugger isn't he?"

Sue didn't know how to answer that one, she wanted to kneel before god and receive his benediction. But she was afraid to do anything until she was told. Perhaps she should kneel in front of him?

Bruce looked up expectantly. "I think he might need a feed don't you?"

Sue nodded dumbly.

What the hell have I stumbled into here? Bruce wondered watching the woman kneeling at his feet and trying to work out what she wanted.

"Here." Bruce thrust the baby at her.

Sue grasped her, their child and still kneeling on the floor pulled her nightgown apart and let the child suckle hungrily at her breast.

Sally Clarke entered the room bearing a tray of steaming cups.

"What are you doing Sue?" She asked shocked to find her daughter breast feeding her baby in front of a total stranger.

"It's ok mom," Sue mumbled trancelike.

"I think it's disgusting," Sally Clarke screeched and then it dawned on her who Bruce might be. "As for you." She said turning on Bruce remembering her intention to kill the father if she ever came across him. But she saw that the two of them were totally ignoring her.

Sally Clarke threw up her hands in despair and ran out of the room. She ran up the stairs and quickly threw her clothes into a suitcase.

Minutes later she had stomped out of the house to her car and was sitting there waiting for Sue to come and out and say she was sorry. Say something. But the minutes ticked by and Sally Clarke realised that at least for the moment as far as her daughter was concerned she didn't exist.

Bruce for his part was watching in silence as his baby sucked away at one large dark breast and then watched as Sue unconcernedly swapped the baby to the other breast.

Bruce grabbed one of the cups of coffee that the old woman had left and balanced it on the arm rest while he rolled a smoke.

God had human weaknesses then Sue saw. If only one of those blood and thunder television evangelists could see him.

The baby rested in the woman's lap now apparently sated a little white liquid dribbling from his lips.

"I'll just change him." Sue said rising to her feet.

"I'm sure he will." Bruce said watching as Sue grabbed an old-fashioned nappy from a pile by the door and an absorbent pad. He watched the blissful domestic scene with a warm heart. It was almost as if by some strange twist of fate that he'd stumbled on what he had been searching for all these years.

Bruce got up and watched Sue put the baby in it's cot, kissing it's forehead before quietly backing out of the room and closing the door.

Bruce picked his smoke out of the pot plant that he was using as an ashtray and polished off the remainder of his coffee while Sue stood before him.

"Sit down."

Sue sat stiff and straight alongside Bruce on the sofa waiting for god's next command, not that god knew what to say.

"I s'pose my turning up here must come as a bit of a shock." Bruce said, "I mean you probably don't even know who I am."

"Yes I do."

"Eh? You do?"

"Yes."

"Well how come I didn't know who you were today? Though I've dreamed about you for ages."

"Oh." It was Sue's turn to be surprised, "was she only one of god's vessels then?"

"What's your name?"

"Bruce."

Sue thought that god must be travelling incognito. Deep down though she knew she wasn't dealing with a divine being but a flesh and blood man who like herself was trying to find some missing pieces of his life.

To Sue it was obvious who the father of her baby was and Bruce thought he must be. Both of them were at a loss as to explain how.

"How long have you been here Bruce?"

"Where?"

"Here in Portland I mean."

"Oh just since yesterday morning."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah of course, what do you think I am?"

"I'm just trying to work that out you fuckwit." Sue clapped a hand over her mouth. She had never spoken like that to anyone, never.

But Bruce didn't seem to notice.

"Look at what you did to me."

Bruce looked at Sue and couldn't see what her problem was.

"What?"

"Isn't that obvious?" Sue yelled at him. "What do you think that is in the bedroom, a blow up doll?"

"No of course not, it's a mystery to me as well." He muttered.

How was it that this woman had a baby that was the spitting image of himself at the same age?

"It must be you." Sue accused him, "I've had dreams about you."

"I've had dreams about you as well." Bruce said, "and tall weird looking men wearing dresses." He added not sure how he could admit responsibility for the baby.

Bruce scratched his nose contemplatively. "Can you tell me something?"

"What?" Sue snapped back.

"Who the hell are you and what am I doing here?" Bruce asked a little more harshly than he had intended.

"My name is Sue, as if you didn't know. You found me didn't you?"

"Yeah but only by accident really. Well I dunno about that quite so much." Bruce didn't know how to explain how he had come to be there yet.

"Well what you did to me was no accident." Sue retorted. "You took advantage of me and that baby is the result."

"But where did we meet? I haven't been to this part of the world before have you been down our way recently?"

"Your way, I don't even know where your way is."

"New Zealand."

That stumped Sue for a moment. It didn't occur to her that the man sitting alongside her might be from the other side of the world.

"New Zealand? I don't even know where that is."

"I know." Bruce replied absently. "You told me."

"So you have met me?"

"Well I must have, but I don't know where."

"I've seen you in my dreams." Sue admitted after a while. "Do you think we shared a former life somehow?"

"Shit!" Bruce snorted, "get a grip on yourself, another life indeed!"

"Well we must have shared something, somewhere!" Sue snapped at Bruce.

"Well I'm not disclaiming responsibility for the mite you know, It just doesn't seem possible to me that's all."

"There are tests you know."

"Yeah I know, but all they'll prove is what we probably already know."

"Would they?"

"Yeah, the little bugger's the spitting image of me when I was a kid, poor bugger." The idea of being a father was really growing on Bruce. He scratched his nose free of the chunk of snot that had been irritating him.

"Something really weird's going on here you know." And he began telling Sue about the recurring dreams in which she had played a part. How he thought for a long time that he was losing his grip on reality, how he had the nagging feeling that somehow he had not been there in spirit at least for some length of time. How all of a sudden he and his dogs had put on weight and other minor events that put together must mean something. And how for months now he's felt an invisible thread dragging him along to this meeting.

Sue in turn told Bruce about her dreams of him and how she thought he must be god.

"Do you have dogs?" She asked.

"Yeah three of them." Which explained the dogs.

"Well they were there too and those men who looked like angels."

"Yeah they had me stumped as well....."

"By the way?" Sue asked. "What's your name, did you tell me?"

"Bruce, Bruce Harwood"

"I thought my dreams of you were actually visions." Sue confessed, "I

thought you were god and I was your vessel."

"Christ." Bruce guffawed and chuckled to himself for a few minutes.

"And now we've met I have this weird sensation that we have met." Sue continued undeterred. "But where?"

Bruce didn't know what to think, but he had a pretty vivid imagination.

"Do you hear voices calling to you, talking about you?" Sue continued just as Bruce was opening his mouth to speak.

"Well not exactly you know."

Bruce was saved from elaborating by the telephone. He picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" Bruce liked disconcerting people when answering telephones in other people's business and homes. "What can I do you for?" But he wasn't quite prepared for the earful he received this time.

"I want to talk to you, you lecherous immoral bastard." A loud, obviously angry, male voice roared down the telephone.

Bruce held the handpiece away from his ear while the tirade went on. In the background Bruce could hear someone crying, soothing voices and the clatter of crockery as if somebody was making a cup of tea.

"Not a problem." Bruce said when the tirade had stopped, replaced by tortured sounding heavy breathing. "I think it's for you." He said passing the handpiece to an astonished Sue.

"Sue speaking."

"What have you done to your mother?" An angry voice demanded, one that Bruce could clearly hear even though he had stood and moved discreetly across the other side of the room, close to the door. He needed to get away and think.

"Ok well come up now." Bruce heard Sue say and his heart stopped. He definitely didn't want to face her irate father.

"We can't, your mother crashed the car on the way home, she was in such a state." Sue's father roared in a way that made Sue wonder whether he was more angry about his car or her behaviour.

"That was my father." Sue said switching off the phone a few seconds later.

"I'd never have guessed."

"He want's to tear your head off."

"Chance will be a fine thing." Bruce decided making for the door, he wasn't planning to be around for that.

nineteen

Cop gave up disgustedly.

"Into him Punch." He muttered, or rather, thought in simple doggie terms.

Punch leapt at the two disbelieving listeners biting and snarling viciously. He wasn't a big dog, however since their trip away, the tourists found themselves beneficiaries of all kinds of super dog capabilities.

Cop was able to communicate and articulate in a manner he'd never imagined possible. One day he'd tell the bosses boss what a silly old duffer he was. He couldn't wait to have a decent chat with his own boss. But until the boss returned Cop wasn't about to put his new powers to the real test. Unfortunately Can and Punch were as thick as they'd always been. Pretty thick.

Can could now view the world about her in colour, but could make limited use of this ability.

Punch, well if Punch had a brain it would be lonely. A gangly overgrown puppy if ever there was one who could run tirelessly for hours, barking constantly as he loped along. He liked nothing better than to drool over the boss or any other boss for that matter while they were eating in the hope of some titbit of boss tucker. Somewhere along the line Punch had acquired a ten-fold increase in strength which meant that he would have been quite capable of tearing the two doubting rovers to pieces if they had not been

separated by a few well placed whacks with a baton by the bosses boss.

"Bruce's dogs have always been trouble." Rangi Tauroa, the Harwood's nearest neighbour complained as he gave his dogs a whack, believing they'd picked on his Bruce's pup. Bruce's father eyed the three dogs who now sat watching him.

"Ya know, they're a strange team, seem to know what you want before you do. Can't stand know all dogs."

"They'll let you down when you least need it or expect it." Rangi expounded philosophically.

Cop listened to the discussion of the two old bosses. It had been Rangi's arrival that had sparked off the little fracas.

Rangi, one of his dogs maintained was the blackest boss in the world and his mate was even blacker. Cop of course had seen a blacker one and said so and what's more his boss had mated with her. He also told the other dogs about the trip on the big silver bird with his still limited vocabulary.

It was a silly issue to have a fight about but Punch was keen and Cop was sick of all the doubting rovers. He reckoned that all the other dogs in the district were jealous of their travels.

Rangi might say that there would be trouble sometime but Cop, Can and Punch were content to wait for their next trip on the big silver bird that Cop was sure would happen sooner or later.

"Better lock them up before they create any more mischief." Bruce's father said. Before he could make a move the three dogs trotted over to their kennels and leapt in.

"See what I mean?"

"Trouble." Rangi said darkly.

"Where did that come from?" The stunned air traffic controller muttered as an unidentified signal appeared on his screen without warning. "Shit it's almost ready to land." He quickly told the only other inbound aircraft to abort it's landing approach and maintain a designated holding pattern while he furiously tried to contact the inbound craft.

"What is it Tom?" The senior controller asked as the jets of a Starlifter suddenly went to full thrust over their heads, shaking the control tower.

"Unidentified aircraft approaching runway oh-three-oh at, I don't believe this 2500 kilometres per hour. Correction unidentified craft landing on runway oh-three-oh." Tom stood up and looked out his window searching the horizon for incoming missiles and saw instead a small oval object making for the hanger. The hanger that had a security blanket draped over it like none he had ever seen.

Half the bases staff had been unceremoniously confined to quarters and the base was ringed by an almost solid wall of armed guards to prevent anyone entering or leaving the area. Tom himself hadn't been home in a week and was worrying what his wife might be up to.

The two air traffic controllers watched the small craft speed down the runway. It hadn't actually landed yet Tom saw, it just seemed to hug the runway. Soon it was lost from sight between the hangers and other buildings but neither of them had any doubt where it was headed.

One of the hangers down that way was the centre of attention. Whatever was in there somebody was powerful enough to keep it well under wraps.

The senior controller knew what was in there but didn't let his junior colleague in on the secret, it was probably more than his life was worth. Though it seemed that life was pretty worthless around here anyway.

Apart from the bases security commander who had been first to try and enter the space craft soon after it had landed no fewer than thirteen technicians had been zapped trying to enter the aircraft. No amount of tinkering and testing had yet allowed anyone aboard let alone told them anything about the craft bar it's exterior dimensions.

What had become of the sole occupant nobody knew except that he had been whisked away to some same place where security was even tighter than it was at

the base.

The service craft stopped outside the doors of the building that housed the craft they had come to repair. The craft's sensors told them that the building was surrounded by inhabitants of the planet. The sensors also showed that most if not all of them were carrying primitive weapons, armed and aimed in their direction.

It also appeared that the inhabitants were trying to communicate with the service crew. Probably in an attempt to deter them their task. However, the service crew wasn't about to be deterred. The craft hovered outside the entrance to the hanger and waited for the inhabitants to disperse.

The hanger door wouldn't respond to commands to open either, until the service crew realised that the motor driving the pulley system that lifted the door didn't have a computer memory that they could hook into. The patrol craft moved close to the hanger door until the front of the craft was nudging the door.

"Remain stationary or we will open fire." A loudspeaker called to the patrol craft which ignored the message. It continued to nudg forward until the hanger door bowed and then fell inwards startling the technicians and guards inside and sparking an indiscriminate broadside aimed at the craft as it hovered at the entrance.

Soldiers opened up with rifles, antitank missiles, grenade launchers and surface to air missiles. Several tanks and armoured personnel carriers that had been stationed opposite the hanger added their fire power to the fusillade. The firing kept up for several minutes and it was testimony to the training of the soldiers and the accuracy of their weapons that the hanger became a raging inferno and all the surrounding buildings were peppered with holes caused by shells and shrapnel.

The aircraft controllers watched from the relative safety of their control tower as a pall of thick black smoke rose above the base and fire crews raced across the runways headed to the scene.

To the astonishment of everybody watching the raging fire was extinguished as if somebody had suddenly turned the gas off the barbecue. As the smoke dissipated, a few shapes could be seen moving around inside through the thick greasy smoke.

The soldiers stood around looking haplessly at their commanders wondering what it was they had fired at.

Still, the alien space craft had disappeared in the inferno which was a great weight off everybody's mind. Nothing could survive that sort of heat and live to tell the tale.

As the smoke cleared the shapes moving around in the wreckage were revealed as not twisted hunks of metal swaying in the breeze but robots. Robots that looked as if they were clearing up what was left of the hanger. Before the eyes of the startled soldiers the debris was being sucked up by a vast vacuum cleaner that was even larger than the small space ship it had emerged out of. Other smaller machines were clearing an area around both the space ships which miraculously had appeared to have survived the inferno intact.

Nobody knew what to do.

The smaller space ship had survived intact an assault to that of any battleships broadside intact. Nothing short of an atomic bomb would probably shift that and nobody was prepared to order one of those up, yet.

The robots went about their business in ignorance, apparently in ignorance of the intense scrutiny aimed in their direction.

Tirelessly they worked, clearing what remained of the hanger away and then turning their attention to the first space ship.

One of the robots disappeared inside and several others began to work on the gash in the hull which proved that the ships weren't invulnerable. Then shortly all the robots piled back into the ship they had arrived on.

Raele watched the service crew on the small box that the offworlders had brought into the room they had provided for him. An offworlder stood beside

the box asking him questions. He wanted to know what was happening, whether his people were planning to invade and several others that Raele had already forgotten.

Raele didn't bother answering any of the questions for they were so obviously stupid. What would Skidians want here? And wasn't it obvious that the second craft was the service crew that had arrived to repair his craft so he could go home?

Were the offworlders so primitive as not to understand these things and that by Federation convention, travellers on non hostile missions were supposed to be allowed to come and go as they chose?

Maybe the offworlders didn't know this.

Whatever, Raele wasn't very impressed with the hospitality he had received though he was most interested to find that he had been housed in an offworld baby factory.

The offworlders had unceremoniously bundled him into a vehicle and whisked him away to a room where a lot of angry rude offworlders had begun to interrogate him. Raele quickly decided that if they weren't going to accord him the necessary respect as a visiting leader of another planet then he wasn't about to answer any of their impertinent questions.

He had been searched given some kind of medical examination, though what they hoped to find eluded him. He wasn't diseased or ill, the offworlders were the ones that were most likely in need of medical attention Raele thought. None of them seemed too happy, all of them wore masks as if to hide unsightly disfigurements, some of them had even marched importantly about in clumsy suits glaring at him through helmet visors pressed up against his face.

Even though they had stripped him and then provided him with offworld clothing that Raele found stiff and constricting, basically uncomfortable, they hadn't detected his dazierwogga. Raele had considered using it so that he could have a rest while waiting for the service crew.

The next indignity was that an imperious sort of fellow that Raele gathered was from one of the offworld security forces had shown up and apparently taken over the task of looking after him.

Raele wasn't impressed with his idea of hospitality either.

The security officer had whisked him away on a longer journey in another primitive craft that beat the sky with three long blades. Whup whup whup it went across the sky, in an irritating fashion over the vast empty spaces that reminded Raele of Skid.

This craft moved so much slower than his own which gave Raele a good opportunity to have a closer look at the offworld. The offworld wilderness looked much like Skid's, though it was dotted with what looked like small settlements. Offworlders obviously lived there and travelled across it in fairly large numbers. How did their leader control them when they were so spread out? He wondered meaning to ask when he found somebody that looked as if they might be able to explain this and many other things that he had noticed.

The passed over larger settlements that looked much like smaller versions of Skid's cities, except that the air above them was often dirty and smelly.

After a while the noisy craft began to descend towards what Raele now knew was an offworld baby factory. Though all he knew about offworld baby factories was that they were noisy places full of screaming offworlders and people dressed in funny white clothing.

"What's happening over there mister?" The offworlder beside the small picture box asked for what seemed to Raele the hundredth time.

Wasn't it obvious? Couldn't the offworlder see that the service crew had repaired his craft and were waiting for him to set off his personal beacon so they could come and get him?

Raele didn't want to do that yet, he still hoped the offworlders would bring their leader to him so they could have a talk.

"I want something to eat." Raele replied, which was about the only thing he said to the offworlders. Though he didn't much like their food. Somewhere

between what he was used to on Skid and the few meals of organic food that the offworlder Bruce had produced from time to time.

Raele thought about the offworlder Bruce and wondered if he might see him. Maybe after he got back on his ship.

"No more food until you begin to cooperate with us?" The security agent said.

How was he supposed to cooperate? Raele wondered. After all he had let the offworld medical teams strip his clothing away, allowed himself to be subjected to all their primitive testing without taking offence and then they turned around and said he wasn't cooperating. There was no satisfying these offworlders.

"I want to learn about your baby factory." Raele countered. "I want to look around your cities, I want to meet your leader, I want a female." Raele recited his list of what he considered were reasonable requirements.

"You aren't getting anything buddy unless you start cooperating with us. Why are you here?"

Raele wasn't about to admit that a service crew had made a navigation error, what would these offworlders think of Skid if he admitted that sometimes they made mistakes?

Not that Raele had said anything about Skid yet, he didn't want to talk about important matters with a minor security functionary that wouldn't understand.

"Look buddy, we're gonaa keep you here for ever if you don't start answering some questions, you ain't never going to leave this room or one like it unless we say so."

Raele glanced around the room and decided that he'd been in there long enough anyway. The security people had let him walk up and down the corridor outside and escorted him each time he used the washing device and rerlived himself but now Raele decided he wanted to go further. Maybe he could find the offworld leader by himself.

"Where do you think you're going buddy?" The security agent asked as Raele stood up and made for the door. Raele didn't bother answering and opened the door.

"Stop or I'll shoot."

Raele flipped out his dazierwogga, turned and blew the offworlder's primitive projectile weapon out of his hand.

The offworlder wrung his hand that must have been affected by the latent heat of his weapon disintegrating and looked up to find himself staring down the short rectangular muzzle of Raele's dazierwogga.

"Where did you get that from?" he asked weakly. But Raele just smiled.

"Do you still want to stop me or be my guide? He replied. The agent watched helplessly as Raele walked out of the room and decided his best course of action was to try and follow the alien and see that no harm came to him.

Raele dealt with resistance to his passage with the other guards as he had done the first and began to make his way around the building.

"Let the director know what's going on." The first agent gasped as he hustled by the other agents supposedly guarding the alien.

Whose idea was it to keep him in a public hospital anyway?

The agent got to the end of the corridor and found Raele being pushed out of a delivery room.

"You can't come in here sir. Your wife must be in another room."

The woman bemused Raele because the nearest thing he had to a wife was untold light years away. Why couldn't he just watch?

"You can't go in there buddy." The agent said grabbing Raele by the arm and leading him away. "Lets' go outside and have a drive around." The agent added trying to gain some sort of control over the situation.

Raele let himself be dragged away. They entered a lift and minutes later were walking across the vehicle park to where a vehicle was waiting for them.

Raele was glad of the company, he didn't really know where he wanted to go. He also doubted that the offworlder leader was close by, otherwise he

would surely have seen him by now.

"Feel like a burger?" The agent asked, wanting to keep the alien busy while they organised a more secure place to keep him. Though he also wondered that short of drugging him or forcibly restraining him nowhere would be secure enough. An even bigger worry was how they were going to contain these aliens if there were more of them on the way.

Raele was intrigued by the way offworlders seemed to have to provide tokens in return for food, it was quite a novel idea he decided. Pity about the food though. It was fairly bland and tasteless, packaged in non-disposable materials which Raele thought was something of a waste.

After weeks of being cooped up in the hospital, special agent Watts was beginning to enjoy himself. The alien didn't seem to be too hard to please and didn't appear to be much of a threat to anybody even though he was obviously capable of inflicting considerable damage. Maybe he was on some kind of jaunt after all.

Now he thought about it the second space ship looked a lot like a mechanic called out to repair a broken down car. Besides if there really was an invasion fleet of aliens out there maybe it would be a good idea to make friends with this one. Watts didn't really believe there was an alien invasion fleet waiting out by the moon or the sun like some of the military and FBI people he reported to did but a man could never be too sure.

As they passed down one of the wide streets filled with ground vehicles Raele spotted a sign that made him think back of Skid for the first time in days.

For some unknown reason the offworld male had built something in one of the organic plants in the wilderness with lengths of organic material. Nobody had been able to work out what he had done or why, especially as the shape was only clear if you looked down on it from above.

Raele had noticed that the organic material had now changed colour and the shape was much easier to discern. Nobody knew what it meant but Raele was sure he had just seen a shape very much like it outside a building they had past.

Much to the astonishment of Agent Watts sitting in the drivers seat beside him Raele flipped open the panel on his wrist and noted the coordinates of the sign. It was too much of a coincidence to ignore.

twenty

Sue couldn't find it within her to blame Bruce for getting out of the house as fast as possible. She thought he'd be back, for she believed that he sincerely like the idea of being a father. If he didn't want to see her, he would most likely be back to see the baby. When he did perhaps they might be able to sit and work out what had happened to them.

Sue didn't blame Bruce for not wanting to be around when her father and possibly her brothers turned up either. Sue didn't really feel like being around herself. What would they do if she wasn't there? She thought she might as well find out.

It had been sometime since she had promised Trev down at the weird restaurant that she would bring along her baby to show it off. Maybe today would be a good day to do just that.

Sue had a shower and felt much better, she woke little Bruce, cleaned him up and put him in his pushchair. It was a nice day and a short walk would do them both good. Sue felt as if she hadn't been out of the house in ages.

Mrs Pratt caught up with her as she left the house. Sue saw she had her gun with her. Sue thought she might have to borrow it later on when she had to face her father.

"That's a nice little boy you've got there." Mrs Pratt said shoving her face at the pram and peering myopically at the baby. At least Mrs Pratt didn't persist in asking awkward questions about the father for which Sue was

grateful and even better had offered to babysit for a few hours if Sue ever felt the need to get out by herself. Sue wasn't sure about that, she didn't think that Mrs Pratt lived sufficiently in the real world to be entrusted with a teddy bear, let alone a real baby.

"You can borrow my gun if you like to shoot the father if he comes back." Mrs Pratt said helpfully handing out the weapon. "I'd like to see it put to good use before I go."

"Not today I think Mrs Pratt." Sue replied declining both offers for the moment. "But if you hear a commotion over here later feel free to come over."

The restaurant was a bit further Sue remembered so she was a little hot and bothered by the time she got there. Trev fussed over her like a broody hen when she arrived, sat her down brought her a pitcher of iced water and without asking picked the baby out of the pushchair and dangled it on his knee.

"Handsome little devil ain't he." He said. "Just the sort I always like, all care and no responsibility. Gotta name for him yet?"

"Bruce I think."

"That's funny." Trev said, "I've got a Bruce here too, just showed up yesterday."

Sue's heart missed a beat. It couldn't be she thought, coincidences like that just weren't possible.

"Hey Trev." A voice called from the kitchen. "How the fuck do you connect these kegs up?"

"Ah Bruce mate, could you please tone it down we do have customers you know." Trev called back winking at Sue. "He's a bit of a hard case that one." He murmured.

"I bet." Said Sue who's heart was beginning to pound knowing what was coming.

"Hey Bruce. Come here and meet a friend of mine."

"You!" They both snapped at the same time as Bruce emerged carrying a rag in one hand which he threw it to the ground as hard as he could and stood there with his hands on his hips.

"Did you follow me or something?" He demanded.

"No. Of course not. I just did the same thing as you and walked out when the going got too tough."

"You know each other?" Trev asked in surprise, "do you mean to tell me that this yours?" He asked pointing at the baby, putting two and two together.

"We um think so." Bruce admitted, but didn't really want to commit himself.

"I know so." Sue snorted.

"Tell me about it then." Bruce retorted. "Cos I don't recall ever meeting you he lied. He vaguely did recall meeting Sue. It was the when and how that were a mystery to him. He watched Trev dangle his baby on his knee and decided it would be a good idea to throttle Trev. Instead he poured himself a large whisky and gulped it down.

"What gives here?" Trev asked.

"It's a long story." Bruce replied pouring himself another whisky. "Problem is we don't know the half of it."

"Would you mind telling me what's going on here?"

"I wouldn't mind Trev, except that neither of us really know." Bruce replied somewhat enigmatically joining the other two at the table.

"How are you boy?" Bruce asked of his son. He dipped his little finger into the glass and held it out for the baby to suck on.

"Don't do that!"

"Why not?" Bruce asked as Sue grabbed his hand and pulled it away from the baby who was looking for something to suck on. "It can't hurt him."

"Look will you two tell me what's going on here?" Trev asked a little exasperated.

"How can we tell you when we don't know ourselves?"

"What do you mean, you don't know, you both act as if you know each other, you." He said pointing at Sue, "call your baby Bruce and you turn up

out of the blue and find out that you're a dad. Don't tell me that you don't know."

"Well it's true I tell you." Bruce protested. "Ask her."

"This is god's baby." Sue said recognising Bruce's bantering tone, "and Bruce is god." Sue laughed for the first time in ages and felt much better for it.

"I don't understand you two." Trev said shaking his head sadly thinking that the both of them were a pair of nutcases or they had set him up a beauty. He looked at the baby and wondered. It did look a little like Bruce but then could anybody really tell?

Bruce stared moodily into his glass and Sue wondered whether she should grab little Bruce back from Trev.

Trev for his part was wondering what was going on, he'd met some pretty weird ones on his travels. He didn't have to look very far, his own family was full of weirdos, eccentrics some people called them. He thought he was pretty normal himself but there was no real telling. He could start foaming at the mouth any moment and start chewing on table legs like a dog gnawing a bone. One of his uncles was infamous for doing that sort of thing. What really worried Trev was that he actually felt like chewing on table legs from time to time.

Bruce stood up and walked over to the bar. He didn't content himself with a large glassful of whisky this time but brought the whole bottle back to the table and a couple more glasses.

"I've got a restaurant to run." Trev protested as Bruce poured him a glass.

"And you think you've got problems!"

"You won't solve them by looking in a whisky bottle. Sue said rather piously.

"Yeah but it might give me some inspiration or the balls to tell our little story to Trev here." Bruce said splashing whisky into the third glass. "One won't do you any harm." He said pushing it toward Sue, who didn't argue.

Bruce felt decidedly warm and fuzzy. You're already half pissed he thought.

"It's like this Trev." Bruce began, not sure that he should. But they had to tell someone. "We think we have met, we think the sprog here is ours, we don't know when or how. Sue thinks that the baby was conceived immaculately and I have dreams about her." Bruce didn't think Trev would appreciate the other bits about angels and what not, just at the moment. "Personally I think we were abducted by little green men. Big white men in dresses actually." Bruce added without thinking.

"I think you're both nuts." Trev said getting to his feet. "And if you'll excuse me I do have a restaurant to run." Shaking his head sadly Trev stalked out to the kitchen leaving them to it.

Bruce and Sue sat there eying each other up warily, neither wanting to say something that would upset the other but both with a desperate need to talk with the only other person that might be able to solve their own nightmare.

"Are we both nuts?" Bruce asked after a long silence.

"Well I don't know about you." Sue retorted but I certainly aren't.

"I wasn't sure about myself there for a while." Bruce replied thoughtfully picking up his son. "But this little bloke really defies any explanation now I've met you I know that it isn't for the first time."

"Do you really think that aliens might have got us?"

"Not really Sue, but I can't really think of a better explanation can you? Until the last week or so I was back in New Zealand and had been as far as I know for several years. You have never been there. So how did we meet?"

"I don't know."

"So what do we do now? Get married? Try to track down the people in our dreams whoever they are? If everything else is real are they? Or What?"

"Or what?"

"Well I dunno." Bruce shrugged his shoulders. He didn't know what to do, what to think, didn't know if he wanted to know anything. All he wanted to do was find somewhere warm and cosy and hide for a while. He looked at Sue and decided he wasn't likely to get away that easily.

"Maybe we should just settle for getting to know each other." Bruce suggested warily.

"I thought maybe you might know me better than you seem to be admitting." Sue snorted cursing herself as she did. She didn't want to sound or act bitchy, Bruce was obviously at as much of a loss to explain things as she was. She softened her tone and realised Bruce must have said something similar to her at some other time. Earlier in the day, or before? Sue had no idea.

"You've suggested that to me before."

"Yeah it's as if we've been through this once already. Sort of conjures up visions of a room somewhere and just the two of us. And me dogs." Bruce added.

"And funny looking men, tall men wearing white robes with funny names."

"Yeah that's it, I dreamt that sort of stuff too. Dreamt about all kinds of weird and wonderful stuff in my. . . ." Bruce stopped in mid sentence. "Maybe they weren't dreams, maybe it was real."

"So all we've got to do is find one of these men and he'll be able to unravel the mystery for us. Fat chance." Sue said as the car carrying Raelle and Agent Watts drove past the restaurant. "Anyhow I have to go, my parents are probably waiting for me so they can have the satisfaction of disowning me."

"I s'pose I'd better come along to then." Said Bruce wondering what his own parents would make of the him turning up with a woman and a baby in tow.

Sue gave Bruce a long look and wondered whether she should let him know what he was in for. But it would be nice to have some support on her side so she didn't bother.

"But what are we going to tell them?" Bruce asked.

"We'll think of something between us I'm sure." Sue smiled feeling particularly chirpy all of a sudden. "No worries eh?"

"Yeah." Replied Bruce who hoped Sue's old man wasn't in the habit of carting a shotgun around.

twenty two

"Is it safe to have a closer look?"

The replacement base security commander looked over the head of the president at the secret service guard behind him who was rolling his eyes and screwing up his face.

The honest reply would have been to say: "We don't really know."

But he didn't know if that answer would satisfy a man reknown for his recklessness.

The commander decided that the truth might not be such a bad thing anyway.

"We don't really know Mr President, neither craft has made any aggressive moves and have only retaliated to our own fire so far. But there is no real way of telling sir."

"And what of the alien aboard? I'd like to meet him."

"He's been kept at a secure location sir." That was a lie as the commander had just been informed that the alien had broken out of the hospital and was driving around Portland. Hopefully he wouldn't run amok and the situation could be controlled.

"I'd like to meet him as soon as possible." The president said, clearly meaning to be obeyed whatever misgivings his various advisors might have.

What a coup! The president was thinking, me on national television shaking hands with an alien, me on national television pledging intergalactic mutual support and cooperation. The rating's will go through the roof and

there's an election in six months.

The president eyed the two space craft with interest. They even looked like space craft. His only real worry was that this might just be another right wing ruse to discredit him. But he didn't think so, the discovery of the first ship and the way it had delivered itself and their passenger into the military's hands and the arrival of the second one had sent a shock wave through the military establishment that had to be seen to be believed. The idiots had just been given a clear indication that despite all their fancy toys the whole country, the world perhaps was wide open to an attack from a power from outer space. It was the stuff of the cheap sci fi books and the comics he used to read as a kid.

The president wasn't a vindictive man but he had taken great pleasure in watching the might of the military and the military-industrial complex rendered impotent by something they couldn't understand. The weight of opinion was that the alien was dangerous and should be neutralised. He on the other hand felt that the alien should be treated like any ambassador from a foreign power. For what if he were some kind of ambassador or the vanguard of some unknown civilisation that wished to make contact with the inhabitants of earth?

Nobody else seemed to realise that any alien power that had the capability to land on earth more or less with impunity probably had nothing much to fear from any military power that earth could muster. All he had seen and been briefed on so far served to emphasise how right he had been.

"I don't think we have much to worry about. The president said to nobody in particular." And began walking towards what was left of the hanger.

He felt most of those around him fall unhappily into stride with him, he didn't blame them really he could well be leading the lot of them to their deaths. He saw however that the security commander didn't seem too perturbed.

"What do you make of this?" The president asked.

"I think it's pretty clear that the first ship got damaged in some way and had to land and the second one came to repair it." The commander said after his initial surprise at being asked for an opinion.

"That's what I think son, but the biggest brains in the space administration, the military and everyone else thinks differently." The president turned and saw that his normal human shield had clearly lost it's collective bottle. "And the secret service think I'm nuts." He said a little louder. "Oh stay where you are." He added as his guards hurried up to him. "You don't have to worry about the aliens." He laughed. "Just make sure nobody else wants to shoot me."

The security commander had never seen his president up close before. He was surprised at how haggard, grey and strained the man looked. But he also noted the jaunty glint in his eye.

"Well let's have a closer look eh Mr?"

"Wisneski Sir."

The two men approached the space craft a little warily. But really there was nothing to fear. Both had been extensively surveyed, on the outside anyway, it was only when somebody tried to enter either that the trouble began.

"It's pretty hard to believe isn't it." The President said quietly, running his hand over the smooth cool surface of the smaller craft. "Makes you realise how insignificant we really are when these things can come to earth and go about their business and we can't do a thing about it. Can't even keep one solitary alien under control." The president grinned as he caught the look of alarm on Wisneski's face. "Oh yes I know he's done a runner with a bevy of the FBI's top agents in tow."

"I'm sure they have the situation in hand."

"Well you've got greater faith in them that I have. These people can't be told that we're dealing with something far beyond their experience. Personally I think the alien will do just about whatever he wants, we've just got to hope that whatever he does is in our best interests."

"I think so to Sir." Wisneski ventured a hesitant suggestion. "I don't think the owners of these craft, the pilot also are concerned at all about landing here. They don't perceive any personal danger."

"That's right son and if we do the alien a mischief there's no telling what might happen. The whole situation is almost out of hands anyway." The president continued. "Did you know that the first UFO ran into the space shuttle Columbia and gave the crew such a fright that they're still cleaning the brown stains off the seats?"

"No Sir."

"Once the crew starts talking or some other highly placed big mouth wanting to make a splash in the news the situation will really go ballistic. The media will be screaming invasion, will want immediate access to the alien. The churches will start talking about Armageddon and the devil's arrival, you know the sort of bullshit."

"Yessir." Wisneski tried to suppress a grin and failed. But the president if he noticed didn't seem to mind.

"And that's only in our own country, can you imagine the drama in the rest of the world? It's a diplomatic nightmare. That's why we've got find out what this alien wants and get him off the planet as quickly as possible."

"But don't too many people know about him already?"

"Yes but once he, is he a he? Is gone there won't be any evidence, no evidence and then I can just say it's all a figment of the imagination." The president knew it wouldn't be quite that easy but at least there were plenty of previous hoaxes to set a precedent.

"You let me worry about that, you just go get this alien and bring him here."

Wisneski wasn't sure he had heard right and wasn't sure that he wanted the job, who knows what an angry alien might do to him? By all accounts he carried around a small arsenal secreted about his body.

"He does want to see me you know, I've listened to some of the tapes they have of his interrogations. The chain of command won't let him, doesn't think it's a good idea, think I might offer, say the wrong thing. What do they know?" The president scoffed.

He walked around the larger craft and rubbed his hand over the scar on the hull where it had been repaired.

"You boy's sure made a mess of this place didn't you?" He said looking around at the ruins of the hanger. "And not a scratch on these beauties except for that?" He pointed to the scar that marred the smooth lines of the hull.

Wisneski remembered the way his pants had almost filled when the first craft had appeared at the end of the runway. How tense and frightened they had all been when they confronted the second craft and how it was worse when the firing had stopped and the robots had got out and they all realised that they were dead men.

The silent ufo's didn't seem particularly lethal now. Though neither had the alien when they had taken him into custody and look what he had done since.

"Our engineers think he must have hit something pretty hard. Rock probably, they discovered traces rock on the hull, as if he snagged the Rockies as he whipped over them. Similar sort of material apparently."

"Yes I noticed that, makes me think that these aliens might not be as clever as they think they are."

"I wouldn't know sir."

"Oh come on Wisneski, the arse lickers are over there." The President waved vaguely in the direction of his entourage who were looking on but not game to approach the ufo's.

"Well it did occur to me that the alien was somewhat disorganised, as if he didn't know what he was getting into. Why did he land here when there must be untold other places where he could have hidden himself away while his ship was being repaired?"

"You know what I think? I think this particular group of aliens don't

think very highly of us at all. They obviously don't consider us a threat."

Wisneski recalled the way the alien had nonchalantly strolled around the hanger when he had first arrived. Even a company of fully armed soldiers had failed to concern him. It was only when a few of the soldiers worked up enough courage to ring the alien that they had taken him into custody.

"I wouldn't be surprised." He said. After all if they can travel through space undetected by us then they probably do have nothing to fear from us." That would explain a lot Wisneski thought. The idea that he might be considered a primitive being didn't make Wisneski feel all that special.

"Ok Wisneski." The president slapped the hull of the smaller ship and started to turn away. "Take whoever or whatever you need and bring that alien back here as soon as you can."

Wisneski nodded and watched his commander in chief stride purposefully back to where his entourage waited for him. The president was immediately engulfed and hustled away, presumably to somewhere safer. But with these things here was anywhere safe?

twenty three

Bruce walked past the car parked in Sue's driveway and felt the hostile glares of the passengers on the back of his head as he stood behind Sue on the doorstep.

"Are you coming in?" Sue asked as she turned the key in the door.

After a moments hesitation and what seemed to be a hurried conversation three car doors fell open and three men climbed out.

Bruce's heart missed a beat, they were huge and as black as the ace of spades. Bruce had never considered Sue as being black, but these three certainly were. The older man must be her father he decided and the other two her brothers, who were big and so black they looked almost purple. And they didn't look all that friendly either. Bruce heaved a sigh of relief when he saw none of them was carrying a shotgun or any other visible weapon.

The three men sat wordlessly on chairs in the lounge while Sue put the baby in it's cot. Bruce leaned uncomfortably against the table and took out his smokes. He watched three sets of lips curl distastefully in his direction and then remembered his manners.

"Hi I'm Bruce Harwood." He said moving over to where the men sat and offering his hand to be shaken.

One of the younger men shook Bruce's hand. "John Clarke." He said. An angry glare from their father made the other brother sink back into his seat.

"Huh." The man who Bruce thought must be Sue's father grunted.

"Likewise I'm sure." Bruce said politely, feeling much less intimidated. The old boy was just being difficult he decided.

Sue walked into the room and kissed her father on the top of his head as the older man tried to brush her away.

"Hello John, Michael." She greeted her brothers. "I see you've met my fiance Bruce already."

Bruce was a little taken aback at this sudden elevation in status but did his best not to choke on his cigarette.

"Fiance?"

"Yes didn't mom tell you?"

"No." The old man sounded surprised.

Bruce felt the atmosphere in the room ease a little. Up till then he felt it could have been cut by a knife and then two pieces would simply fall apart.

"I didn't expect Bruce back so soon, he's been overseas working." Sue explained mysteriously.

"Whereabouts?" One of the brothers asked. Bruce wasn't sure which one.

"Umm, I can't really talk about it." Bruce replied. Which was true because how can you explain what you don't know. "Commercial sensitivity you know."

"Oh I see." The brother said. Bruce couldn't decide whether he was believed or not but that didn't really matter.

"Where are you from son?" Sue's father asked.

"All over really." Bruce said.

"But I can't pick your accent son, you're not an American are you?"

Sue came to Bruce's rescue, since she was telling the story.

"I don't think Bruce is allowed to say at the moment dad."

"Well is he allowed to say when he's going to marry my daughter?"

"Soon dad, there's just a few things to work out yet." Bruce felt that he was almost superfluous to the conversation. This was probably just as well because more than likely he would have put his foot in it. However, the strain of being on his best behaviour was beginning to tell. He still wasn't feeling particularly comfortable as he pulled on his smoke.

"Um Mr Harwood," the old man began, "we know so little about you can't you tell us anything?"

"Oh we'll invite you to the wedding," Bruce joked. A statement that effectively ended the conversation as the old man's jaw dropped open and the two brothers looked at him in surprise.

Sue tried to get her father and brothers to stay a while and talk a little but she was fighting a losing battle. Her brothers seemed keen to stick around but her father had evidently had enough, just as his wife could no longer stomach being in the presence of his daughter.

Bruce thought the old man's reaction was a bit much really, he'd only been joking. The old man seemed crushed as if the whole weight of the world was bearing down on his frail shoulders.

"He'll get over it Sue, it's just a surprise that's all," John the oldest brother said to Sue as he shook Bruce's hand firmly.

"As far as he's concerned this sort of thing only happens to other people." Bruce thought that all the members of Sue's family were lucky they only knew the half of it.

"Give him a few weeks to get used to the idea and then you two go down for a visit," the second brother suggested.

The old man showed his impatience by angrily tooting the horn until the two brothers emerged from the house. Sue waved at her father and wasn't surprised when her father didn't wave back.

"I'm sorry," said Bruce standing behind her and wrapping his arms about Sue's waist. Sue relaxed a little and lent against him as she watched the car disappear down the road.

"For what?" She asked.

"For saying something stupid, that's what got the old boy all wound up."

"Oh don't worry about that," Sue replied. "Like John said he'll come around. Or at least I hope he will, I don't think he really realises sometimes that the christian principles of charity and forgiveness that he sets so much store by should start in the home." Sue's words were tinged with bitterness as if she felt let down by her father's behaviour. He hadn't even wanted to take a look at his latest grandchild.

Sue twisted in Bruce's arms so that she was facing him.

"How will your parents react when they find out you've got a child, that you had it by a black woman and are going to live thousands of miles away from them?"

"My grandma once asked me if I was a pouf, I guess being a dad will put that worry to rest. As to you, the colour won't worry them, one of our neighbours is blacker than you and I used to go out with their daughter for a while."

"What about living here?" Sue insisted.

"What about it?" Bruce replied evasively. He didn't believe Sue would understand the obligations he had at home, obligations that he desperately wanted to fulfil. How could he explain his almost spiritual attachment to the land first farmed by his family four generations previously?

"I don't think you'd fit in around here somehow." Sue suggested, "I don't

think I do any more come to that," Sue added much to Bruce's surprise.

"Well we've got a month or so to decide what we do." Bruce said after a moment.

Sue saw Mrs Pratt looking out behind a curtain at them and could just see the barrel of her pistol protruding over the windowsill. The pistol was quickly removed from view Mrs Pratt caught sight of Sue looking at her.

"I'm going to need at least that long to sell my the Agency," Sue said looking Bruce in the face deciding one issue.

Bruce didn't realise how tense he had become in the last few minutes until he relaxed and Sue's body moulded itself against his own. Bruce didn't think it was the right time to explain to Sue that living three quarters of an hours' drive from the nearest shop in a fairly isolated area was quite a big step from living in the guts of a large city.

He relaxed his grip on her waist and led her inside, kicking the door closed with his foot. Sue looked at him expectantly but not a word passed between them as Bruce led her through the house and into the bedroom. He kissed her passionately and letting his lips roam over her shoulders and neck as he unbuttoned her blouse, released her bra and exposed her large breasts heavy with milk. Just like a dairy cow he thought teasing a nipple with his tongue.

Bruce felt Sue's hands at the waist band of his trousers and wiggled his hips to help her ease his trousers down and then they were both frantically tearing at each others clothing in their urgency until they lay naked on the bed in each others arms.

"I don't know why I'm doing this," Sue giggled, " I hardly know you."

"I think we've done this before though," Bruce said his lips buried in her hair as he rolled over and made himself comfortable on the bed. Then the baby started to cry.

"Oh shit," Bruce said stopping what he was doing and rolling over on his back.

"I guess we'll just have to get used to that," Sue said as she got up and brought the baby to the bed.

It suddenly dawned on Bruce the size of the commitment he was apparently taking on and wasn't sure that he was ready for it. He felt like backing away as he saw his child suckling at it's mothers breast, was he responsible enough to help bring up the infant?

For a moment he seriously doubted it.

"Say hello to your son Bruce," Sue said passing the baby to him. Bruce didn't know what to do, how to hold it? How tight to hold it and wasn't particularly enthralled when it both vomited on him and wet it's nappies simultaneously.

Who'd want to be a father? Bruce thought, not seeing the fruit of his loins or something to cherish but a millstone around his neck. How are you going to get out of this one? He asked himself nicely gamely trying to play the role of a doting father. Maybe I'll enjoy it more when it's got big enough to hold a cricket bat or pass a rugby ball he thought.

twenty four

Raele had always thought that he and those who kept watch on the offworlders knew almost all there was to know about them. As he became exposed to more of the offworlders as they moved aimlessly around the city Raele began to realise that their understanding was flawed. The offworlders were at the same time far more sophisticated and more primitive than they had imagined.

Maybe the service crews or the computer network that controlled them was trying to tell him something? Surely there must be some reason for their routing his craft this way? In passing he wondered what was happening back on Skid, whether the small community at Aotearoa and it's idyllic life style

still survived much as he had left it. Or had the technicians from the industrial centres begun to flex their muscles in an attempt to define what strength they had. Or had some of the roving bands of desperate Skidians who in ignorance of both those communities lived on whatever they could find come into conflict with either group and if so what was the result?

Raele was torn between wanting to return to Skid as soon as possible and seeing what he could learn from the offworlders seeing as though he was already there on the planet.

Raele didn't think that he had much to learn from their security apparatus from what he had seen of it. The offworlders didn't seem to have the capability to deter even a service craft, let alone a fully armed medium range patrol craft. Nor did their security forces seem capable of controlling a single Skidian patrol craft pilot he thought rather arrogantly.

The planet seemed rich and prosperous and bustling with the sort of activity that made Skid in some respects seem like a peaceful backwater by comparison. Ground vehicles of various shapes and sizes sped by and the offworlders seemed to hurry as if there was some purpose in their lives, though what that might be Raele couldn't tell.

Raele was shocked when Watts informed him that people had to offer their efforts in return for food and shelter. There were no service crews here to keep their industries in production.

This was a foreign concept to Raele who had always lived in a society where all that an individual required to lead a satisfactory existence was provided without any form of transaction taking place, a Skidian simply existed to live.

Away from the hustle and bustle of what Raele figured must be the centre of the city he saw much that reminded him of Skid. Wide open spaces dotted with tidy pleasant looking homes, where offworlders strolled around and the pace appeared slow and more peaceful, Skidlike.

Then Watts muttered something that Raele took to mean he had made a mistake in his navigation.

"Made a wrong turn there, don't worry we should be ok."

Raele couldn't see anything wrong but he did note that they had entered an area that seemed to have been neglected by whoever looked after that sort of thing on this planet, away from the leafy suburbs and the hustle and bustle of the city. Raele felt a little depressed just looking at it. The large houses, apartment blocks, Watts called them, had an air of neglect and the people here were obviously less well cared for. There was a furtive hopeless air to them as they went about their business. The streets were choked with rubbish and the rusting bodies of unused ground vehicles and people could be seen accosting each other on the street.

Raele couldn't understand how a society that on one hand appeared fairly prosperous could allow such a blot on the landscape to exist alongside it. Nor could he understand how the offworlders could allow their industrial complexes to sprawl unchecked over the landscape spewing smoke into the air and pouring waste into the ground and the moving water that ran through the city. He could feel the grit in the air on his skin and the smell was terrible, something like what he had experienced in the parts of Sietnuoc that the service crews had yet to rebuild, the smell of death and decay.

These offworlders had much to learn, and that it seemed to Raele might be the sum total of what he had to learn from them.

Suddenly Raele felt Watts tense in the seat beside him and mutter something under his breath.

"Shit!" He grunted.

Raele looked about without alarm and saw a crowd of offworlders approaching them as they sat at one of the trees with lights on it waiting for the green light to shine. He thought they didn't look to happy. Many of them were gesticulating angrily and waved pieces of metal and masonry above their heads.

Beside him he could sense Watts getting more agitated. He called for

something called backup on his communication's device and then tried to move the ground vehicle which then stopped for some reason.

"Start you bastard," Watts said as the vehicle made an odd noise. No amount of talking to the thing would make it move. Funny sort of vehicle Raele thought.

One of the offworlders ran towards them and brought his metal bar down on the windscreen which shattered under the force of the blow. Suddenly they were surrounded by a mob who beat the car, rocked it from side to side and then tried to grab Raele and Watts and pull them out through the shattered window.

Raele looked at Watts to see what he was going to do about this outrage, but Watts was too busy screaming curses, trying to free his weapon from it's holster and beat away the hands that grabbed at him. Then a chunk of masonry hit him on the head which snapped back. The crowd growled and cheered as Watts slumped forward with blood pouring from a deep gash in his forehead.

While he was unclear as to what was happening Raele thought he'd better do something. As the first cheer at the sight of blood pouring from Watts's head wound subsided, Raele had flipped his dazierwogga out and raked the area in front of the ground vehicle.

A sudden silence greeted the fourteen or fifteen piles of glowing ash that appeared. The rest of the mob froze, gaped at the sight and then simply vanished into thin air. Raele slipped his dazierwogga back into it's compartment and got out of the vehicle.

Across the street someone was pointing some sort of weapon at him, he flipped his dazierwogga out but the offworlder disappeared around the side of a building and Raele let him go.

In the distance he could hear some sort of mechanical screaming noise that seemed to be getting closer. Watts began to moan and talk to himself.

"Where am I?" He asked. Raele wasn't about to bother answering such an obvious question.

Raele looked at Watts and decided that he wasn't going to be much use for a while, especially as the ground vehicle seemed to have given up. Typical of the offworlders Raele thought, to put faith in technology that was so unreliable. He checked his position in relation to the sign that had caught his eye a little earlier, worked out a course and headed in that direction. As he crossed the street several vehicles carrying flashing lights screamed towards him. By the time they stopped, still wailing and screaming around Watts's ground vehicle he was already out of sight.

The silence on the streets was vaguely disquieting to Raele. Avenues that had been pulsing with life only minutes ago were now empty, though Raele felt that more than one set of hostile eyes upon him.

A few minutes later Raele heard a ground vehicle draw up beside him. He stopped and looked at the vehicle as an offworlder dressed in the uniform of their security forces got out.

"I've come to take you to our President." The offworlder said opening the door for him.

Raele didn't know who the president was but getting a ride in another ground vehicle seemed to be a good idea, so he got in without a word.

"My name is Wisneski," the security officer said.

Raele nodded but didn't say anything, wondering whether he should make Wisneski take him where he wanted to go or go with him to see this president. Raele decided he didn't have anything better to do for the moment, the other task could wait.

While they travelled in silence to the Airforce Base, a man hurried to a local television station easily evading the security net that had been thrown around the block where the riot had occurred. In the pocket that he nudged, to make sure it was still there at each hurried step he took, was a video tape that he hoped would bring him fame and fortune.

Raele recognised the Airforce Base, though he didn't know it by that name while they were still some way away. Oh well he'd just have to take the patrol craft to check out the building on his way home he thought pleased now that he

had accepted the ride from the security officer. Raelle suddenly found that he was eager to get back onto his craft, where he could find some decent clothing, eat some decent food and have a decent sleep without the offworlders security devices watching every move he made.

But Wisneski had other plans as he pulled up beside - under - one of the large ungainly offworld craft. A group of offworlders stood around the stairway that led up into the side of the craft. Raelle felt their intense scrutiny as he stepped out of the ground vehicle and followed Wisneski to the steps.

"Where do you think you're going Mr?" One of the agents asked.

"The President wants to see us as soon as we arrive, I have my orders," Wisneski snapped at the senior Secret Service man. "And may I remind you that my authority on this base exceeds your own." He added for good measure. Wisneski wasn't sure that it did but in his experience the man with the biggest, angriest bark usually won the day in these situations.

The secret service man knew who Wisneski was, but he didn't think he knew his companion even though he looked vaguely familiar.

After a moment, withering under Wisneski's glare he gave in, deciding that Raelle looked soft and harmless enough and decided to forgo even waving his metal detector over Raelle. Besides it would be on Wisneski's head if anything went wrong.

The president must have been warned that he had visitors because as the two men walked up the stairway he appeared at the door in the fuselage ready to greet them.

The Secret Service agent watched the president shake hands with Wisneski's companion. As the three men disappeared from sight the Secret Service agent suddenly remembered where he had seen Wisneski's companion, it was the alien!

"Shit!" He said tearing up the stairway only to find his way barred at the doorway by one of his own junior agents.

"Let me past, Jones!"

"Sorry Sir, I have my orders," the man said a little sheepishly, not wanting to antagonise his boss even more than he already was.

"I'll have you for this Jones!"

"Yessir."

A gale of hearty laughter issued from the cabin that was barred to the Secret Service man, laughter that he recognised as coming from his president. Perhaps there was nothing to worry about he decided.

Inside the aircraft Raelle felt a little bemused. He was obviously meeting a man of great importance, but one who didn't appear to have the requisite dignity of a leader.

"You are the president?" Raelle had asked as they had been introduced.

"Why yes I am The President of the United States."

"Oh I thought I was going to see the ruler of the whole planet," Raelle replied disappointed that he'd been so gullible as to believe this man ruled the planet.

"What does he mean?" The president asked Wisneski more than little bemused himself.

"I think Mr, er Raelle was under the impression that he was about to meet the President of Earth and not the most powerful man on the planet sir." This was the observation that caused the president to double up with laughter.

Raelle didn't know what to make of this and decided that the best place for him was back on his patrol craft, safely on the return trip to Skid.

Raelle flipped open the control panel on his wrist and preprogrammed his patrol craft for takeoff as soon as he was aboard. He noticed the sudden alertness of the offworlders in his presence and noted the weapons pointed in his direction as he completed his programming.

"What are you doing?" The president asked with interest as Raelle flipped the compartment closed and looked back at his host.

The president unlike most of his advisors was almost overawed with the

potential that this alien with the funny name presented.

He, they'd established beyond doubt that he was a he, was the key to providing them with a great technological advantage over the rest of the world if only they could somehow make him believe that it was to the alien's advantage to help them.

The only problem was the how and that was the biggie which was why the president had decided, despite the possible dangers to meet with the alien himself.

"Pre-flighting my patrol craft," Raele replied as an idea occurred to him?

"You're planning on leaving then?" The president asked, the regret showing in his voice as he knew he probably couldn't stop the alien even if he tried and there was so much he wanted to know. Where was he from, why was he really here, what kind of planet did he come from?

"Yes," Raele replied without elaborating as a sudden commotion began outside the aircraft.

There was the sound of small arms fire, a few yelled commands and suddenly the President was surrounded by his guards who had whipped out their weapons, pushing Raele and Wisneski aside in the process.

"What's going on?"

"One of the alien motherfucking spaceships is moving," the most senior agent panted, wondering what he was supposed to do now.

Raele bent down and peered through one of the small windows in the side of the offworld aircraft just in time to watch the service craft skim along the ground and then streak upwards into the sky where it was quickly lost from sight.

"What about the other one?"

"No sign of movement," called an agent tapping nervously his earpiece.

"Your doing?" The president asked Raele.

Of course, Raele didn't say, once the preflight checks were completed successfully there was no need for the service crew to remain.

"I sure would like to see inside your ship mister," the president said somewhat wistfully much to the horror of everybody but Raele.

"If you wish," Raele replied and started toward the door, deciding that it was time to go and also deciding that it might be a good idea to take this president back to Skid with him. Raele was beginning to see the possibilities in having a leader of the offworlders around to help him return Skid to it's former glory.

That the use of offworlders had proved to be difficult and non productive in the recent past didn't deter Raele in the least.

"Well come on then boys lets go," the president said with boyish enthusiasm to the further disquiet of those charged with his safety.

Raele wasn't too happy with the idea of a whole tribe of offworlders parading about his patrol craft, cleaning up the mess after he had disposed of them would be a trial if nothing else.

So he said in the slightly high-pitched voice that made everyone he met on the planet wonder, along with his mincing steps if he were a queer or not: "I have only room for one guest." Which made people wonder what else might be inside an outwardly commodious craft.

"Very well," the president agreed, effectively forestalling the insistent stares and whispers that sought to forbid him his childish whim.

Raele walked out of the aircraft and down the steps ignoring the hostile, fearful looks from the large numbers of offworlders below and behind him as he made his way to his patrol craft.

He walked up the ramp that had miraculously lowered unnoticed by all and sundry and beckoned to the president to follow him aboard.

Bruce quickly tired of watching Sue suckle their son and must have drifted off to sleep. He was enjoying a particularly lurid dream of no particular form when somebody started to scream into his ear. Bruce woke with vague recollections of another time and an erection that he gazed at fondly for a few moments until the screaming. No somebody was yelling at him to get his attention.

"Come here quickly," Sue yelled at him from the direction of the lounge.

Remembering where he was he came fully awake with a start and moved in the direction of the noise picking up his strides but not bothering to pull them on.

"What's the racket all about?" He grumbled looking at Sue who to his astonishment looked as if she were about to have a fit. Her complexion had turned grey as blood drained from her face and she was pointing at the television and trembling like a leaf.

Dramatic music issued from the television and a newsflash graphic appeared.

"What's going on?" He asked sitting and draping an arm over Sue's shoulder.

"It's them," she gasped as one of the toothy mass produced newscasters gave his audience the benefit of his stern frown.

"Who?"

"We have grave news about the president of the United States of America," he began sombrely but with a smile that Bruce thought was out of step with the gravity of the situation.

"Several hours ago the president was allegedly kidnapped by an unknown assailant, we have just received this footage from the Rowlands Airforce Base outside Portland, Oregon." The shot cut to a reporter who could hardly keep his excitement in check, backgrounded by what appeared to be a bombed out aircraft hanger.

"Thank's Roger," another pair of glistening white teeth chomped behind a pair of carefully shaped lips. "Yes well it seems that the authorities have been hiding something from the people of America, the world. And that is that they have been entertaining an envoy from outer space here at the airforce base."

Bruce felt Sue flinch as a still photograph of what was an inhabitant of his own dreams, if not Sue's flashed up on the screen.

"Several hours ago," the reporter droned, "President Mitchell was coerced onto the aliens space craft which then promptly lifted off for parts unknown." A shot of the president, an indistinct figure walking toward and inside something that might have been a stealth bomber or a ufo replaced the earnest face of the reporter which then to the evident surprise of all and sundry promptly shot out of the hanger and disappeared into the sky.

"Was the president forced on board Wilt?" The anchorman asked.

"Not as far as we can figure out Roger," the reporter replied. Wilt had already heard from several sources that the president had voluntarily gone aboard, alone, against the wishes of the secret services, the national security advisor and half a dozen other people. But it wouldn't be half the story if the truth was told. America didn't want to hear that.

"What is the constitutional position Wilt?"

"Vice president Wilmot is at this moment conferring with constitutional advisors as to the legal position but I must say Roger that for all intensive purposes until we know what has happened and where the president is, Vice president Wilmot is in charge."

"Thanks Wilt," the anchorman purred, "special reporter Sissy Bucktooth is standing by at the White House at a special news conference."

"Thanks Roger," Sissy took up the commentary in her huskiest most sensual voice. "It has just been announced that Vice President Wilmot will assume the executive role until the issue of President Mitchell's disappearance has been resolved."

Vice President Wilmot appeared on screen and made the necessary

regrettable noises, but even Bruce could see that he relished the chance to have a go at the top job. Who wouldn't?

"You reckon it's them?" He asked Sue incredulously.

"Shhh," Sue hushed him as the report continued.

"In a separate, apparently unrelated incident Roger, everybody's trustworthy source of news confided," an individual answering the description of the alleged alien that allegedly kidnapped President Mitchell was implicated in the slaying of fifteen youths who were peacefully protesting Portland Cities decision to increase apartment rentals in municipal housing estates."

Honest Roger's face was replaced by a series of clips with an amcam logo on the bottom of the screen. A mob tore down a street brandishing lumps of wood, metal bars and what looked to be rocks or bricks. They paused at an intersection and attacked a car that had stopped at the lights. The image jumped about as if the photographer of the scene was jostled or running with the mob.

Images of a frightened face suddenly disintegrating behind a shattered windscreen and a sudden spray of blood filled the screen. Then there was only a tall pale man climbing out of the car onto a suddenly empty street.

The tall figure calmly surveyed the scene and then casually strode off as sirens could be heard in the distance.

Suddenly the door crashed open and a voice called out: "Freeze you fucker." A shot which Bruce reckoned later almost parted his hair rang out and he flipped over the top of the couch dragging Sue with him.

Somewhere in the background the television was still droning on and Sue was struggling in his arms.

"Let me go you idiot," she grunted, "and put that gun away Mrs Pratt!"

"Are you sure dear?" A rather mild, tremulous voice asked.

"I'm sure Mrs Pratt," Sue said struggling to stand up while Bruce struggled with his strides.

"It's ok Mrs Pratt, I want you to meet Bruce, my er. My fiance, little Bruce's dad."

"Pleased to meet you Mrs Pratt," Bruce said peering over the top of the sofa wondering whether it was polite to shake hands with some old bat that had just tried to shoot him.

"Pleased to meet you."

"What are you doing here Mrs Pratt?" Sue asked angrily, Mrs Pratt had woken the baby with the racket she made, which annoyed Sue more than her grand entrance. Almost as much as missing the end of the special news bulletin who's graphics were fading.

Sue felt as if the whole day had been some sort of weird dream, soon she would wake up and be back in the real world. First Bruce arriving, then the strained abortive arrival of her father and brothers, one of the men from her dreams on tv., and then Mrs Pratt firing shots in the house and putting a hole in the ceiling that would have to be patched before it rained.

When would all the madness stop? Sue looked at Mrs Pratt and caught the eerie glow in her eyes. She glanced at Bruce scratching his chest, registered the baby's cries above everything else.

"Why don't you go and see to little Bruce, Bruce?" She asked feeling as if she were teetering on the edge of an emotional precipice.

"I'll get him," Mrs Pratt volunteered to Sue's surprise, handing Bruce her pistol and heading in the direction of the crying baby.

"Now what are we going to do?" Sue hissed as soon as Mrs Pratt was out of earshot.

"Do what?" Bruce wanted to know. The poorly defined figure on the television might or might not have been one of the figures of his dreams. Even if it was, Bruce's inclination was to lay low, to do or say nothing that might draw attention to himself. What could he do anyhow?

"We've got to do something," Sue whispered in something between a hiss and a whisper as Mrs Pratt came back into the room holding the baby.

"He's such a handsome little chap, I could just eat him up," she said somewhat ominously Bruce thought.

Sue reached for the baby and then decided little Bruce would be safe in Mrs Pratt's care for a while.

"Bruce and I have got to go out for a while, could you possibly look after little Bruce for a half hour or so Mrs Pratt?"

"Oh I'd love to Sue."

"There's some milk in the fridge if he gets hungry, clean nappies...."

"Oh don't worry Sue, even though it's been a long time I do know how to look after a baby," Mrs Pratt said cutting her off. She sat as if Bruce and Sue weren't there, started talking to the baby as if a six week old child was a fully articulate member of the human race.

Just like some people talked to their dog's Bruce thought, at least the little bugger had stopped crying.

"Come on."

"Come on where Sue?"

"Lets go for a walk or something," she said picking up Mrs Pratt's pistol and handing it to Bruce.

"What do I want this for?" He asked sticking it in his waistband like he'd seen people do on television. Then frightened that he might shoot himself in the foot or worse blow his dick off, he left it on the sideboard.

"Lets go and see Trev."

"Ok." Bruce wondered whether he should pick up his gear and bring it back to Sue's place. Did she expect him to move in or what?

"What are we going to do Bruce?" Sue asked, waving her arms about, clearly agitated.

Bruce didn't know what her problem was, the alien could be well, any alien at all. Could you believe anything that happened on television at all these days?

"Come on Bruce you're not being too helpful."

"Well what do you want me to say?"

"Say anything you like Bruce," an odd voice said in his head.

"What?"

"Yes it's me!" An image of a dog that looked remarkably like Cop insisted.

Bruce tried to blank out the image in his mind but it refused to go away.

"What are you doing boss?"

"Eh?"

"Bruce! Are you listening to me?" Sue demanded looking at him strangely.

"What?" Bruce was having great difficulty coping with two conversations, one with Sue and one imaginary one going on inside his head. He felt a sudden urge for a drink. Perhaps two.

"What's going on Bruce?" Sue asked as if coming to the end of her tether.

"Oh I don't know," Bruce replied truthfully. "Bugger off Cop!" He muttered and the dog obediently faded away.

"What did you say, bugger the cops?"

"Something like that," Bruce mumbled.

"Well who do we tell about our suspicions then?"

"Your suspicions you mean, you can leave me out of this," Bruce said wondering why his life had suddenly become so complex and surreal. Perhaps that was what happened when people were losing their marbles.

"But. . ." Sue's voice trailed away. She was outraged, she wanted to do something. The president was missing after all and a dangerous alien was on the loose, one that she might somehow know. She had to do something, didn't she? Surely Bruce wanted to do something as well, go to the authorities, tell their story. To whom? Sue realised that to tell their story was to tell the world and become creatures of the media. She had no desire to be paraded as one of the weirdo's that opened their souls to the world on every available talk show, on the cover of Time or some sleazy tabloid.

With a shudder Sue remembered the journalist that had somehow got into

her hospital room and his claims that she had slept with an alien.

Bruce found the door to the restaurant locked which was a little odd.

"Fucking wanker," he said giving it a good kick as his key was upstairs inside his room.

"Shouldn't it be open?" Sue asked. "Who ever heard of a restaurant being closed at lunchtime?"

"Should be," Bruce agreed, wondering what the story was. "Trev!" He bellowed through the door, "let me in will ya, ya wanker! I'm sure there's somebody in there," Bruce said turning to Sue wondering if Trev might be bonking one of his waitresses on a table or something.

"I can hear somebody coming," Sue said pressing her ear against the door.

"'bout bloody time too," Bruce grunted as the door swung open to reveal a very unhappy looking Trev.

"What's the matter mate? " Bruce asked, "you look as if you've seen a ghost or something."

Bruce pushed past Trev who appeared to be trying to say something, his mouth opening and shutting like a gasping fish but no sounds came out.

"Been robbed or something Trev?" Sue thought that was more likely and suddenly wished Bruce still had Mrs Pratt's gun stuck down the waistband of his pants.

"Nnnnooo." Trev stuttered and slammed the door shut behind Sue and fumbled with the chain that secured it.

"Oh fuck."

Sue bumped into Bruce who had stopped part way into the restaurant.

"Do you need to swear Bruce? It gets a bit much at times." She complained.

"Well what do you think of that then?" Bruce said pointing to one of the shapes that sat at the bar in the darkened room.

As her eyes became accustomed to the dim light Sue found herself in a quandary, should she be frightened by the unmistakable presence of the alien or awed by the presence of the President of the United States who seemed to be happy enough sitting comfortably by the bar with a drink in his hand.

Sue stepped closer to the alien and thought he looked vaguely familiar without realising that she was more than familiar to him.

Raele wrinkled his nose distastefully as he recognised the offworld female, he was a bit better disposed towards the offworld male standing in front of her whom he also recognised.

"Good day sir." Raele greeted Bruce. If Raele was surprised that among the teeming billions that inhabited the planet the two offworlders that he was familiar had just walked in the door he didn't show it.

"Where are your companions?"

"What companions?" Bruce asked genuinely surprised that the alien if that's what he was, seemed to know him.

"Us you fucken half wit," Cop said in a voice that almost exactly reproduced Bruce's.

"Oh them, back home I guess."

"What's he talking about Bruce?"

"Dunno really," Bruce didn't think this was quite the time to tell Sue that one of his dogs seemed to be talking to him. He had enough on his plate dealing with the real world at the moment.

"What's going on here?" Bruce turned to Trev who was nursing a bottle of whisky.

Trev took a rather large swig at his bottle before replying, he wasn't just frightened out of his wits, he was also drunk.

"Don't ask me Bruce. This big chap here just appeared out of nowhere and asked me where the offworlder was that drew the sign outside the door. Can you believe it?"

"What sign?"

"Oh you know the kiwi sign hanging up outside the door. I told him that some signwriter painted it for me and that it was a symbol, nobody owned it."

But he was pretty insistent."

"Would somebody please tell me what's going on here?" The other man who looked most out of place demanded.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Bruce," Sue tugged at Bruce's arm trying to keep him quiet.

"The President of the United States," the man responded with dignity.

"And I'm the Queen of Sheba," Bruce retorted. Bruce looked at Sue planning to ask her what she thought she was doing by stamping on his foot, saw the furious look on her face heard and Trev laughing hysterically behind him.

Bruce took a closer look at the man and thought maybe he'd better apologise.

"Sorry mate," he mumbled and went around behind the bar to pour himself a drink. All we need now is the pope and the queen and we can have ourselves a party he thought.

Raele couldn't believe his luck, not only did he have experts in organic food production but he also had some sort of expert in offworld government. It was time to finally leave this planet he thought and stood abruptly.

"Are you ready to leave?" He asked his passengers.

"Leave where?"

"What about us?" Cop asked.

"What about you?" Bruce retorted forgetting where he was.

"Bruce are you all right?" Sue was alarmed by the way Bruce had suddenly started talking to himself.

"What do you think?"

President Mitchell looked on wondering what sort of nuthouse he was in and starting to get a bit worried about the way events were unfolding. For a start it had been quite an adventure but he was sure that by now people were starting to worry about his absence.

"Where are you taking us?" The President asked Raele.

"Back to Skid." Where did this offworlder think they were going Raele wondered?

"Skid?"

"My home."

"I don't know anything about a place called Skid." Bruce said even though, like the alien the name was vaguely familiar to him.

That stopped Raele for a moment, the offworlder was right. But he could change all that once they were all aboard the patrol craft. He flipped open his wrist and tapped several keys.

Suddenly without noticing anything except that their stomachs seemed to be left behind momentarily Bruce, Sue, and President Mitchell found themselves standing with the alien on what could only be the alien's space ship.

Trev watched the empty space where the four of them had been and wondered if they would be back. Then he wondered what he was going to say about the events of the past hour or so. Nobody would believe him that was for sure. Maybe he'd just make it his secret and tell nobody.

Trev morosely finished off what was left of the whisky and silently bemoaned being left behind and being denied the chance of going off on some great adventure.

end of book two.