

Skid3 by sam

Welcome to SKID3

What is SKID3?

SKID3 is an electronic book, the 'threequel' 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 the first novel download it from my home page or email me for a copy. SKID2 the second 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 programs to you I won't refuse them.

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one

Raele walked over to the ship's controls and set a course for Skid while the three offworlders stared wordlessly at each other.

"What do you think you're doing?" President Mitchell asked, the first to break the spell as Sue and Bruce regarded the familiar surroundings.

"Those dreams Bruce, they were real." Sue said a last.

"Yeah," Bruce grunted ambiguously, not really knowing what to think or say. He did feel as if he'd been here, or some other place like this before, and wondered how that could have been.

"We are returning to my planet."

"Don't forget us!" Cop pleaded.

Bruce thought about it for a moment and then decided to ask the alien, after all the alien had asked after them.

"My dogs want to come as well, can we pick them up?"

"Is this some sort of conspiracy on your part mister?" President Mitchell asked, "do you know this man?"

"Sort of," Bruce said uncertainly, "we've dreamed about him."

Raele looked up from his work and wondered whether he should risk trying to re establish the offworlders memories of his home planet. Those memories were stored in small transparent bubbles that he now held in his hand. Under normal circumstances they would have been returned to storage on Skid and probably forgotten for ever, luckily for him or them? These weren't normal times.

His only problem was remembering which bubble belonged to which offworlder. Or was it, these offworlders were so simple that it probably wouldn't matter he decided after a moment.

Raele gave the bubble marked with an 'x' to the male offworlder and the other to the female who had just realised she had left something behind.

"Bruce!" She shrieked suddenly recalling little Bruce. "What about the baby?"

"What about the baby?"

"Can we go back and get my baby?"

"Baby?" Raelle tested the word in his mouth and realised that the offworlder was talking about an infant. He was about to regard her with his normal distaste, rearing your own infants indeed! Then he remembered that before long some of his own people would be producing their own offspring. It might be a good idea to have somebody about the place who knew how to deal with them.

"Yes we can retrieve your infant," Raelle replied reasonably and your companions," he added turning to Bruce. "But first you must place this in your ear." Raelle demonstrated what he meant the offworlders to do with the bubble.

"What about me?" The President asked. He was used to being the centre of attention whether he was being supported, congratulated or attacked by any number of detractors, and was feeling a bit left out of things.

Bruce sniffed the little bubble he had been given and wondered why he was supposed to stick it against his ear. Bloody thing wouldn't fit into his ear, it was too big. To his surprise when he did place the bubble to his ear it seemed to shrink and slip into his head of it's own accord. Frantically Bruce tried to pull it free panicking that the alien might have slipped him, something noxious, and cursed himself for being so gullible.

Then the memories flooded back and the bubble slipped out of his ear and fell to the ground looking like a used condom.

Bruce felt as if somebody had slipped another chapter of the book that was his life into his ear. Suddenly everything made sense, it didn't make him any happier that everything suddenly made sense but he was relieved by the sense of knowing.

He looked across at Sue and watched his own emotions mirrored on her face as she realised that she wasn't going crazy after all.

"Fuck," Bruce muttered trying to make some sense of the unusual disorder in his head as he tried to rank experiences and memories. His head whirled and he reached out for support. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Sue had fallen to the ground and that the President was standing over her trying to draw her back to her feet. I hope one of those bloody great vacuum cleaners doesn't come and suck me up Bruce thought with some alarm as he slowly regained the use of his limbs and stood upright.

"You all right?" He asked Sue solicitously not knowing whether to laugh or cry as he remembered the good times, the despair and frustration of the time he had spent on Skid.

It wasn't really all that bad he thought after a moment and silently remonstrated with himself that he had not made better use of his time back then. But what exactly he could have done better he didn't know yet.

"Oh Bruce." The voice inside his head that sounded like his own but wasn't called out to him. Bruce thought it sounded a lot like the silky ironic tone that he used when he was calling one of the dogs close so he could boot it in the ribs when it knew without a doubt that it had done something wrong.

Before he could turn a large hairy shape jumped up at him, causing Bruce some alarm until he caught the smell of a dog that had been tied up for too long without a decent run. The dogs started barking, well Punch and Can did. Cop just looked up at him like a coy child that had just shit it's pants despite it's efforts at potty training and said: "Hello boss."

"Is that really you Cop?"

"Sure is boss," the dog replied with a wolfish grin.

Oh shit Bruce thought.

"Bruce! Are you talking to your dog?"

"Yeah can't you hear him?"

"What is this, some kind of nut house?" President Mitchell demand, clearly wanting to strike out at something but not sure what at. He'd obviously decided that the alien was too tough a target for him to tackle by himself and suddenly it appeared that the two people that he should be able to count on support from had lost their marbles.

"Get fucked," Bruce replied with a total lack of awe and respect that the

President wasn't used to.

"You can't speak to me like that!" President Mitchell almost screamed, "I'm, the president of the United States of America."

"Do you think that means anything where we're going?"

Raele wondered whether he had made the right decision in taking on this leader of mankind. He turned back to the patrol craft's controls. Finding the female offworlders infant was a slightly trickier task than finding the male offworlders companions. At least one of them had a tracking device implanted so they could be located easily.

As the Patrol craft orbited high above the city where he had recently spent so much time Raele did a DNA scan.

Mrs Pratt was sitting in Sue's living room watching the drama caused by the President's disappearance unfold on the television.

Personally she suspected the Russians were behind the whole thing even though the Russians had long since ceased being a threat to anyone. She also blamed the Russians when she went into little Bruce's room and found his cot empty.

The police had different ideas, especially when they found her pistol and empty cartridge case on the floor of the living room and carted Mrs Pratt away to the station. It was several hours later after Ms Clarke and her mysterious 'fiance' couldn't be located that a possible link to the president's disappearance was made. A link that soon led to the authorities visiting a local restaurant where they found the drunken proprietor with a fantastic story to tell.

Little Bruce duly turned up on the floor of the space craft and Bruce wondered what Mrs Pratt would make of that, aware that unlike last time their disappearance would certainly be noticed this time, even as he wondered how it hadn't been last time.

Raele just shrugged his shoulders in the Skidian way when he had asked and Bruce now knew enough not to bother pressing him for an answer.

President Mitchell seemed to have settled down for the moment and sat in on the side of the corner of the room with his head in his hands. Sue sat further away with little Bruce suckling at her breast and Raele was headed for another wall where Bruce thought the accommodation area must be. Bruce looked at the three dogs that lay together not too far from his feet. Can and Punch had the usual expectant grins on their faces while Cop just looked at him expectantly.

"They are stupid," he seemed to say.

"Are you really talking to me?"

"You bet your black arse." Cop still hadn't quite got to grips with the English language yet but he was working on it.

"How come?" Bruce asked squatting in front of the dog.

"Dunno really," Cop replied.

"Hmmp." Bruce didn't really know how to handle the idea of a dog being able to communicate telepathically with him, especially one as cocky as Cop appeared to be. True to form the Skidians seemed to have done something carefully and precisely that made no sense at all.

"What are they going to do with us son?" President Mitchell asked tiredly from where he sat against the wall.

"Dunno mate, dunno at all." Bruce was well used to the oblique way that the Skidians operated. It had always frustrated him. Now that he had got his memory back, Bruce took a more benign view of those events.

"Has whatshisface said anything to you?"

"He muttered something about how I was a leader of men and he would be interested in talking to me some more about the development of self governing communities. I may be a politician but I don't know much about that sort of stuff. I'm a businessman doing my best to uphold the expectations of others and get some sanity back into our economy."

"Well it's not actually a bad place to stay, apart from the fact that you don't want to be there in the first place." Bruce realised for the first time

that it was the fact that he was on Skid against his will that had made his stay so unpalatable, that and being told that he'd never return home. That he had actually got back home was an additional complication that Bruce didn't want to bother himself with for the moment. "And if you get comfortable with the idea that despite what they say they want you to do, the Skidians will do their best to make sure you fail."

"Sounds like what experience I have as a politician will stand me in good stead then, is this place really called Skid?"

"Yep really."

"You say that you have been there before?" Mitchell asked.

"I reckon so, Skid is a really weird place," added Bruce, without elaborating much to the disgust of Mitchell. "Didn't remember until I stuffed that little plastic ball in my ear though."

"You mean you didn't know until then?" Mitchell asked incredulously.

"Well I dreamt about things that I couldn't understand," Sue piped up. Like Bruce now that she actually remembered everything she felt much happier. Finding herself on a Skidian space ship again didn't really trouble her unduly now that she and little Bruce, she and big Bruce for that matter were reunited.

Mitchell shook his head sadly and withdrew into his corner wondering how he was going to survive this latest crisis in his life.

two

Bruce spent much of the journey wondering where the rest of the crew was only to be told by Raele that there were none. Bruce had been looking forward to seeing some of his old friends, Cyprus and Mulgoon, maybe even Toytoo. Raele said maybe.

To Bruce's surprise Raele also showed him how to operate the patrol ship's flight controls. He was so absorbed with learning that it never occurred to him as to why Raele might be providing him with a possible escape route.

Apart from that, the trip to Skid was uneventful. Mitchell kept himself to himself apart from venting his fury at losing his clothes to a large robot as he had a shower and grumbling about the standard of food.

Bruce thought that the man had a truly bemused look about him and was about to make a disparaging remark about the intellectual calibre of the American President when Sue reminded him that he had worn a similar bemused look himself for much of the first few weeks that he had spent on Skid.

"It's just shock that's all," she said, "culture shock they call it."

"I seem to recall that you weren't too happy either," Bruce retorted. But he was also uncomfortable in his new knowledge that at times Sue had handled their previous sojourn on Skid better than he had. This time it will be different he assured himself without having any idea how different it would be.

Immediately they stepped off the patrol craft at the space port in Sietnuoc Bruce realised that something was different, sensed as Raele had, that something was definitely wrong.

The space port was empty for one thing, their own patrol craft was the only one evident in the vast open space and the subdued murmur that Bruce later associated with the hustle and bustle of an incredibly large city was gone. The only sound was that of their own footsteps on the cobbles as they made their way from the patrol craft to the port buildings. The dogs were subdued also sensing there was something wrong and stayed close to Bruce, dogging his heels.

"There's nobody here at all," Cop told him.

"There must be!" Bruce thought back. On the trip to Skid he had found that Cop could read his thoughts just as readily as he could hear them. Bruce was thankful for that because he felt a little silly talking to the dog and

the sidelong looks he got from Mitch and Sue made him feel even sillier.

"There's nobody here you halfwit!"

Bruce aimed a kick at the cheeky dog but Cop easily skipped out of his reach.

"Don't you ever leave those dogs alone?" Sue protested on their behalf.

"Only when they're not having me on," he replied ambiguously.

"What happened here?" Sue asked. To her the city looked the same. It took her a while to put a finger on what was nagging at her. It wasn't just the lack of people it was that the city looked more ordered than she remembered, as if the lack of people somehow made the place tidier, or if it was new like an upmarket new housing subdivision, just before all everybody moved in.

"Where is everyone?"

"You mean there's nobody here?" Mitch asked.

"Well what does it look like Mitch, do those robots over there," Bruce pointed to a service crew that seemed to be tidying up a small park, "look like people to you?"

"Do you need to be so rude Bruce?" Sue asked coming to Mitch's aid. It infuriated her how Bruce always seemed to expect people to understand what was obvious to him. "Perhaps they're on holiday Mitch," she suggested.

Bruce guffawed at the very idea. Sue was sure that the dog called Cop sniggered at her and gave her a knowing look. She thought for half a minute that the dog could understand what they were saying but then dismissed the idea. Bruce she knew wasn't beyond creating an elaborate ruse just for fun. Who ever heard of a talking dog?

"Who ever heard of a brainy female?" Sue heard the words as clearly as if they had been spoken. She looked for Bruce but he was too far away now and her gaze rested on Cop.

"I always thought you were a strange dog," she said.

"You don't know how strange," Cop said trotting away.

Raele was beginning to worry. What had happened to the craft that had been parked at the space port? They couldn't just have vanished. The service crews must have parked them somewhere else. Raele hoped they had been parked somewhere else. He had been planning to leave his patrol craft at the space port and use a smaller craft for the short journey to Aotearoa but now decided that he'd better go in the bigger craft so that he could escape the planet if he needed to one. As if parking it at Aotearoa would be totally secure.

"This is um, Inel's office isn't it?" Bruce asked as Raele led them into an empty room.

"Yes."

Bruce was quite looking forward to meeting the old boy again and was stunned to find that like most of the rest of the Skidians he was dead.

Raele showed the computer history that had dutifully recorded the events of the past few months on Skid which left his offworld audience speechless.

"I don't believe it, surely some of them survived."

"Some of them did," Raele replied, "but not very many," he added without elaborating.

"I thought the city was wrecked?" Mitch asked.

"It was, but the service crews have almost rebuilt them, they are operating as they always have," Raele replied, not having any idea how the service crews operated. Like everything else on the Skid he had always known they were and had been for all time. He guessed that once he had a chance to work his way through all of Inel's secret archives he might find the answer, if he lived that long as the record base was enormous.

For a moment he wished his old friend Yarad was still alive, he would have known what to do, would have been in rapture over getting access to these records. Sadly Yarad had been disinfected by Raele himself when he had destroyed the nest of subversives at Aotearoa on Inel's orders.

To Bruce and Sue who had experienced Skid as it was the scale of the disaster was beyond their comprehension. Mitch, who was almost totally disorientated by this stage, didn't know what to believe. Though what he could

see of the records over the shoulders of Sue and Bruce, and Raele who stood around the console over which the words scrolled were certainly impressive.

"So who is in charge around this place?" He asked feeling that a direct plea to the leader of this planet might ensure his speedy return to earth. Mitch shuddered to think what was happening back there, not only would the economy be in turmoil, all the policies and deals that he was working on would go out the window if Wilmot was in control. Wilmot was window dressing, Wilmot as President would be a puppet in the hands of any skilled operator and there were more than enough in Washington.

"When I left, I was acknowledged as the hereditary leader of Skid by two of the surviving communities."

Mitch's shoulders slumped. He landed in a bigger mess than his own domestic situation if he understood what the strange alien was saying.

"So what do you want me to do about it?"

"You're supposed to work that out yourself," Sue told him.

Bruce cringed, Sue had voiced his thoughts exactly. Although he didn't think it was all that polite to say so in front of Raele, whatever he might think of the Skidians themselves.

"If the Skidians had listened to us they would never have got into this mess," continued Sue without feeling.

Bruce waited for Raele to say something but he merely sat impassively staring at the words over the console.

"Is this true?"

Bruce shrugged his shoulders and walked away, he couldn't be stuffed getting into some sort of philosophic arguments or dwell on the failure of the Skidians to recognise the danger they were in and do something to prevent the inevitable. He felt sorry for Raele, the disaster probably hadn't had anything to do with him and here he was left to pick up the pieces, but he also felt a secret glow in his heart that his predictions of a few months previously had proved correct.

It was a hollow victory. Perhaps if he had tried harder the catastrophe that had befallen Skid might never have happened.

On the other hand he realised the natural conservatism of the Skidian's meant that even their leaders were incapable of acting until it was far too late.

"We tried to help, Bruce tried to set up farms so they could eat. . . ." Bruce heard Sue say across the other side of the room to Mitch.

"And they didn't listen?" Mitch asked, he was familiar with the thankless task of trying to help people only to have all his efforts thrown back in his face. Maybe I won't find this place all that different from home after all, he thought. Though there was no denying despite all the associated problems, continual setbacks and disappointments where he would rather be.

"The synplants and all that sort of stuff are working ok?" Bruce asked Raele.

"Yes."

"Synfood?"

"Yeah Mitch, you know that stuff you ate on the space ship, well that's the sort of crap they eat here. It was because they broke down, don't ask me how, that everything fell apart. It's odd that they've just started working all by themselves if you ask me."

"Not entirely." Raele wasn't happy with the way the offworlders were talking about Skid, as if he wasn't there, as if the great civilisation he had known most of his life was no more, even if they were right.

"What do you mean Raele?"

"My father rebuilt your organic plant after he charged me with returning you to your planet."

Bruce wasn't interested in the fact that Inel was Raele's old man so much, but the prospect of seeing his farm immediately got his attention.

"You mean Inel was your father?" Bruce asked wondering whether he should change his appraisal of the old man who had always seemed disinterested and

difficult.

"Yes."

"Can we go out there and have a look?"

Mitch didn't know that he was all that keen on flying about this odd planet, however it looked as if he had little choice in the matter. Bruce and Sue were obviously keen to go and it seemed that Raele was prepared to take them especially when he realised that the place they were headed for was out in the hinterland somewhere. The wilderness had an ominous sound to it. Mitch would have much preferred to stick around the city, he was comfortable in cities and had a sneaking suspicion he had some kind of phobia about open areas. It hadn't been a problem in recent years as he was continually surrounded by Secret service agents and other hangers on. In the days before he had achieved any sort of prominence he had always had an aversion to open areas.

He didn't realise that this disquieting sensation gave him a strong affinity with most Skidians that he would never have believed possible. He also harboured the faint hope that somehow he would find somebody, some way of getting back to earth before it was too late, before he was forgotten and he felt that sticking around the city was probably his best chance of that happening.

Still when the others started back in the direction of the space ship, he followed them. He didn't want to be left behind by himself either. The other three showed little interest in him and he sensed that they didn't give a shit whether he was with them or not.

Raele was relieved to find the patrol craft where he had left it and none of the service crews in evidence. He had worried all the way back from Inel's office that a service crew might have removed it, or tampered with the navsystem system or devised some other trick to annoy him. He completed his preflight check more carefully than usual and found to his relief that everything seemed normal. Though for the first time he began to question who or what actually was in, had always been in control of Skid.

The idea that machines, the service crews and their central control system might actually run Skid and not Skidians as they had always believed frightened and disgusted Raele. Part of him, the part that said that Skid and Skidians were superior to anything else in the universe because that's what he'd been brought up to believe, refused to accept that Skid was run by machines and the Skidians were merely there to give them something to look after.

They'd developed and built the machines at some point in the past, hadn't they?

But the part of Raele, that secret, hidden part that had always questioned, always wanted to know why, said that the dependency Skidians had on the machines that provided for all their needs was probably almost as destructive to Skidians as if the machines were really running Skid. He couldn't really believe that the service crews were operating on their own. They must be following a preset program, what continued to worry him, was who or what was in control of that program.

Suddenly the prospect of living the rest of his days at the organic plant and never leaving it again seemed more attractive to Raele than it ever had.

three

Bruce wondered why he had never thought of hijacking one of the patrol ships before as piloting one was just like playing space invaders. He blissfully ignored the fact that he would never have got even close to one of them previously. He also ignored the probability that even if he had got aboard he would just as likely have blown the space port and himself to bits rather than getting off the ground, let alone manage to get back to earth.

Raele had shown him what most of the controls did, showed him how to set

a course to anywhere on Skid and back to earth, but nowhere else. Raele had also suggested that he not fiddle with various knobs and buttons on one side of the console in a most un Skidlike manner. This was like a red rag to a bull to Bruce who suspected they must control the ships weapons systems and he itched to give them a try.

Bruce enjoyed piloting the space craft, though he was looking forward to seeing what had become of his farm even more. He felt as if he was coming home after a long trip away, which after he thought about it for a moment felt odd. Odd because not so long ago he hated the place, hated the planet and the people that inhabited it. Now he felt some sort of proprietary interest in what was happening there as if it was his and not the property of those that lived there. He wondered if he would feel the same way if he ever got back to his real home again. He thought about that possibility for a moment and found to his surprise that going home or not going home didn't seem to mean as much to him as he believed it once had.

Bruce shook his head in disbelief. It was as if whatever bound him there had been shattered, the chains broken. If he did ever go back home his homecoming would certainly be different. While his absence had not been missed before, this time his departure had been far more public.

It wasn't hard to conjure up a vision of Trev being grilled by the thought police, or of Mrs Pratt who must be having a hard time explaining the disappearance of little Bruce.

In the distance Bruce could see the meandering line of trees that marked the river beside which he had built his home on Skid, more correctly the house that had been built for him. He thought he recognised the line of low hills close to the farm and looked around nervously for Raele.

How did you land these things? He wondered. He needn't have worried. As the patrol craft skimmed over the trees the farm came into view and after making a circuit of the farm it descended, slowed and landed gently beside the barn all without any input from Bruce who was left wondering whether he had actually been in control at all.

During the circuit Bruce had seen people running towards the house from various points about the farm and wondered why they would do that. None of them had turned up where the craft had landed, though as he walked outside behind Raele he could see some Skidians looking down the hill at them. That struck him as a little strange. But he was more interested in the farm which from the air looked much as he'd left it.

Looking around where they had landed Bruce wasn't so sure. The garden they had so carefully planted and tended looked like a wilderness and the fence around it sagged as if something had tried to jump over it and landed on it instead.

Bruce wrinkled his nose distastefully, the place had an air of sad neglect, like a rental house, where nobody really cared about the place because it wasn't their's.

The dogs ran out of the space ship and reacquainted themselves with their old stamping ground as Sue and Bruce followed Raele up the hill towards the house.

Mitch stood uncertainly at the door of the space ship and looked out. Nobody had told him anything so he wasn't sure what he should be doing. Should he follow the others or stay put? He could see some people peering down the hill at them and wasn't sure whether they were friendly or not. They didn't look too happy, some looked as if they were brandishing objects that looked very much like weapons.

Fear of being left behind made Mitch move and the door closing behind him as he stepped out made the move final. He trotted off after the others as fast as his out of condition body would allow him and came abreast of them puffing and coughing wondering if he had the energy to make the climb up the hill.

Raele recognised most of the people standing on the hill and saw them relax as soon as they realised who it was. Perhaps they have had other less welcome visitors he decided, wandering bands of desperate Skidians looking for

food and shelter or maybe more formidable, more demanding visitors from the better appointed industrial complexes. Maybe the likes of Mischief had learnt of his absence and decided to test the limits of their power.

At the top of the hill beside the house Raele was greeted by the Aotearoians with the sort of reverence Bruce thought might be akin to that of the second coming of Jesus. Bruce shrugged his shoulders and wandered off down the race to see what had become of his farm.

Sue headed for the house without asking anybody and saw to her surprise that the house was much bigger than she remembered and there were several other buildings there as well. The original homestead was almost a small village now. She stood there for a moment wondering where she could go to feed the baby and find something to use as a nappy because the one little Bruce now wore ponged a fair bit and headed for the main house.

If Mitch had felt lost before, it was even worse now. For years, wherever he had been he had been the focus of attention.

Whether he be at a football game, a dinner or some kind of meeting he had always been the most important person at any gathering. Now as well as being a stranger in a very strange land he felt as lost as a boy on his first day at school. He thought about following Sue, but he decided correctly that she was looking for a private place to feed her baby. He didn't know what Bruce was up to, but he was already too far away to chase so he simply sat where he was and waited for something to happen.

This was another indication of his depressed state, Mitch had always been a doer, never one to stand back and wait for things to happen, he felt totally beaten down.

Mitch felt that he was almost on the verge of crying and looking for a weapon to do himself a mischief with, when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Is there anything you require good sir?"

Mitch looked up in surprise and found a woman? A Skidian that looked like a woman towering over him anyway.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Do you require any sustenance, something to drink?" The Skidian female asked with elaborate formality.

The thought of something to eat and drink perked Mitch up slightly. Surely they would have something decent to eat here? Then he remembered what Bruce had said earlier about their food and he shook his head.

"Something to drink perhaps?"

"That would be great, thankyou," he replied wondering what she would bring down. He was sure that the Skidian was a she now, because as she straightened up a gust of wind caught her loose shirt and revealed a large breast.

Despite his despair Mitch felt an urgent sexual desire of the like that he'd not experienced in months. Even though there were many opportunities to slake his legendary sexual drive in his life he been almost celibate in the past months. With his administration performing badly as it lurched from crisis to crisis, always reacting finding it increasingly difficult to be proactive, his own popularity sagging and assailed on all sides by what he generally termed the forces of evil and greed a burden almost too great to bear, his libido had declined proportionately.

He had seen the arrival of the alien as a possible solution to all his problems. With the election coming up the sort of sideshow that the alien could provide if properly handled could deflect attention away from the really important issues that faced the nation. Mitch chuckled at the thought that he would be remembered as the only United States President to be kidnapped by an alien.

Perhaps that would overshadow the fact that his achievements as president had been limited.

Mitch heard somebody behind him and looked up to see the Skidian woman looking down at him with a worried expression on her face.

"Are you all right?" She asked.

"Yes thankyou."

The woman set the tray she was carrying on the ground, poured the contents of a large pitcher into a glass and handed it to Mitch.

"What is it?" He asked.

"I don't know," the woman shrugged her shoulders as if she didn't care either.

Mitch sniffed contents of the glass and found to his surprise that it smelt like beer. He sipped some of the liquid and found that it also tasted like beer. Mitch couldn't remember the last time he'd had the time to simply sit down and relax with a beer and nothing better to do. Maybe things won't be so bad here afterall he thought.

"What's your name dear?" He asked after noticing that the woman was still kneeling beside him.

"Mistril." Mistril replied sullenly, unhappy that Raele had commanded her to resume her role of concubine to this offworlder, a life she believed was behind her forever.

"Mistril, that's a nice name," Mitch said carelessly, the politician in him coping easily with the need to make small talk no matter how he felt.

He took another swallow of beer and though he was in another world his natural hospitality showed through.

"Are you going to have a drink as well?"

The offworlder astonished Mistril. She had been wondering what strange and demeaning sexual preferences she might have to accommodate from him. Now he was offering her a drink which was something none of her Skidian partners had done while they performed all manner of humiliating indignities on her.

Mitch watched Mistril walk away in the direction of what he thought must be a house of some kind and wondered sadly what he had said to make the woman disappear so suddenly.

He was still trying to work out what he had said wrong when he saw the woman coming back with another tray, glass and pitcher. He was pleased at the appearance of another pitcher of beer, it was good stuff.

Mistril sat beside him, replenished Mitch's glass and after filling her own picked up what looked like a tobacco pouch and rolled them both a cigarette each. Mitch had given up smoking years ago and didn't know whether he wanted to start again.

'But what the hell?' He thought holding the cigarette and watching incredulously as Mistril stuck her own cigarette into her left nostril and lit it with a glowing metal plug.

Mitch threw back his head and laughed, laughed harder and with more genuine mirth than he could remember in a long time. He fell back and lay on the ground his chest heaving unable to speak which must have concerned Mistril because she leant over him with the cigarette still dangling from a nostril which made him laugh even harder.

"It's ok," he said holding up a hand, "I'll be ok in a moment," he added struggling back into a sitting position and noticing that several Skidians from the group around Raele were looking nervously in his direction.

He lit his own cigarette and inhaled gently. The smoke tickled his throat and he immediately coughed. "Excuse me," he said.

Offworlders! Mistril was disgusted with the offworlders obscenity. But then she wondered what it would be like to take agbar in that fashion which a life time of conformity prevented her from trying.

Mitch sat quietly smoking and drinking, wondering what he could say to the woman beside him. Despite the store of patter he had developed over the years he found that he had nothing to say to Mistril. Not that it seemed to matter, she seemed quite content just to sit there.

Faint angry sounding voices made Mitch stare down at the plain where he thought he could see Bruce sadly shaking his head.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw some of the large cow like animals running around chased by two of the dogs. He thought he could hear Bruce yelling but it must have been some other noise.

After a while Mitch forgot where he was and lay back on the grass. He closed his eyes struggling to remember when he had ever felt so peaceful. Peaceful! It was peaceful, apart from the sound of the breeze ruffling his clothing and shaking the leaves in the trees behind him, he could hear no sound at all apart from the quiet murmuring from the Skidians clustered around Raele.

Mitch must have fallen asleep for a while because the next thing he knew something damp and smelly was sniffing at his face. Mitch came awake with a start as he felt wet a tongue flick his face. He smiled and wondered what Mistril was up to because he had just been enjoying a rather erotic dream about her. He opened his eyes and found a great brute of a dog standing over him, pawing his chest, a dog that smelt as if he had just been for a roll in something that had been dead for a while.

"Fuck off Punch you wanker," Bruce yelled as he slumped down beside Mitch and reached over to grab some of Mitch's beer.

four

Bruce had high hopes that the Skidians might have learnt something from him. As he walked around the farm he realised he should have known better. Signs of neglect around the barn and the garden should have warned him of worse to come but he had ignored those in his excitement at just being back.

What he saw had the effect of depressing him even though he knew he would be able to put things right in a matter of days. It was only a matter of repairing a few fences gates and water pipes and sorting out the mobs of ivops that had become all mixed up. It wasn't so much that these things had happened, for they were a part of farming. The depressing bit was that nobody had bothered attempting to put things right as far as he could see.

Not to worry, he told himself. It's not your problem. But Bruce couldn't get rid of the idea that it was his fault.

With that in mind Bruce made a half hearted attempt to run the handiest mob of ivops into the yards to have a look at them but when they simply ran out through some broken railings and into another paddock Bruce gave up in disgust.

Raele must have been joking when he proudly said there were people living off the organic plant Bruce thought. Then he remembered that Skidian's didn't joke, they just didn't know any better.

Cop didn't make things any better by apparently deciding that work was beneath him now that he could talk to people. Bruce used every threat he knew to get the dog to work but Cop just laughed at him and stayed well out of reach until Bruce threatened to find a gun and shoot him.

Cop's response was to laugh and threaten to tell Sue. Then Bruce knew he had him licked.

'What do you think Sue'll do for you? He jeeringly thought and conjured up a picture in his mind of him shooting her as well.

Cop kept quiet while he mulled that one over.

"Got yourself a girlfriend already Mitch?" Bruce remarked casually wiping the froth from his lips, nodding at Mistril and recognising the signs from his previous time on Skid.

"What do you mean?" Mitch asked immediately on the defensive. Was that so obvious? He felt vaguely embarrassed about Mistril now and wished she would go away. But she stayed and Bruce leered at him knowingly.

"Don't worry about me Mitch, I won't say a thing." Bruce wondered where Leaf might be, he hadn't seen her and decided that she wasn't around anymore, otherwise the garden would be in a much better state.

Punch had got over his recent reprimand and was now trying to force his attentions on Mitch by poking his head over Mitch's shoulder and licking his neck.

"If he annoys you, just whack him one Mitch," Bruce said watching Cop sit himself down beside Raele and wondering what he was trying to prove.

Mitch didn't really want to hit the dog, but he did wish he didn't smell so bad. Finally he did hit the dog hard enough to make him move away.

Punch took the rebuff like the good-natured mutt he was and began to try and rub the itch away that he'd hoped Mitch would scratch for him by running the side of his head along the ground while he ran at top speed round and round and circles. Before too long he grew dizzy and his legs gave away so he collapsed in a heap on the ground.

"Bloody stupid animal," Bruce who had been half watching him muttered. "What do you suppose they're on about Mitch?"

"I've no idea," Mitch said with a total lack of interest.

"Do you know?" Bruce asked Mistril. Mistril didn't realise for a minute that the other offworlder was addressing her and when she did, decided it wasn't any of his business.

"I don't know," she replied shrugging her shoulders in the fashion that annoyed Bruce. He knew very well that Mistril knew what was making Raele appear so agitated.

'What are they talking about Cop?' Bruce thought.

'Piss off Bruce,' Cop thought back.

'I don't care anyhow.'

'Liar.'

The bloody dog was right Bruce decided unhappily. Though apart from giving him a fucken good hiding or shooting him as promised he didn't see that he could do anything about him for the moment.

"Why did they let you go before?" Mitch asked after a while.

"I don't really know," Bruce replied. His recollection of the actual events leading up to that were rather hazy which wasn't all that surprising has he had been pretty pissed at the time. "But now I come to think about it, it was a bit odd because we were told we'd never go back."

"What about this time?"

"Well Raele hasn't actually said anything, but I think it would be a little more difficult this time, I don't exactly think it's a secret that we've left."

"Didn't anyone realise that you'd gone the first time?"

"Nup, don't ask me how but nobody did."

Mitch seemed to brood for a moment.

"What's it really like to live here Bruce? I mean what's it really like?"

The question surprised Bruce a little. He had the happy knack of regarding his past through rose tinted spectacles until some jarring memory sobered him for a day or a week at a time. Till that moment he'd believed that he had a pretty happy time on Skid but Mitch's question had released a flood of less happy memories. He hadn't been very happy most of the time he suddenly realised. Not happy and filled with a deep sense of failure that somehow he hadn't made the best use of his time. It didn't occur to him to wonder how he might have done any better given the circumstances.

Bruce looked over at Mitch, noted his sad expression and wondered what he would do if he told him the truth. He decided it wasn't worth totally discouraging him right at that moment.

"Oh, it's not a bad place really, once you get used to it." Though it might take you a lifetime to get used to it and the fact that you didn't want to be here in the first place, he didn't add.

Bruce was embarrassed to see tears running down Mitch's face. He might have understood how the man felt but that didn't mean he could handle the sight of a grown man crying. What was he supposed to do now?

"What have you been saying to Mitch Bruce?"

"Nothing at all! ." Bruce insisted to Sue who had snuck up on them.

"I bet," Sue retorted knowingly. She dropped little Bruce into Bruce's lap, sat beside Mitch and tried to comfort him.

"Don't worry about Bruce, he's just a negative sonofabitch."

"I am not."

"Stop yelling Bruce or you'll wake the baby up." The baby wasn't asleep anyway. It seemed to be regarding him with interest. Bruce hoped that the kid wouldn't start talking to him like his dog had.

"It's nothing Bruce said," Mitch sobbed through his tears, "it's just that I feel a little overwhelmed that's all."

"That's all right Mitch, you'll get used to it," Sue lied soothingly. "We'll soon find you something to do and you'll feel much better."

"Something to eat might do him some good as well," Bruce suggested who was feeling a little peckish himself.

"Is that all you can think of Bruce? Mitch is going through a crisis here and all you can think of is your stomach!" Sue glared at Bruce angrily, daring him to say something. But it was Mistril who spoke.

"Forgive me," she with a formality designed to conceal her distaste for the way the offworlders were behaving. Arguing indeed! That wasn't the way things were done on Skid at all. Though as she glanced nervously over to where Raele and the others were talking she recognised clear signs that it was only strict adherence to the Skidian way that had prevented any sort of conflict happening over there.

"Perhaps you will allow me to provide you with some sustenance. We have supplemented our traditional diet with many items produced here at Aotearoa," she said proudly.

This Bruce had to see and he followed Mistril towards the house, closely followed by Mitch who had decided that he was hungry.

Bruce led Mitch out to the veranda which was one place on Skid he did have fond memories of.

"Get a good view from here eh Mitch?"

"I suppose," Mitch replied apathetically wondering what sort of intellectual level he would have to stoop to have a decent discussion with Bruce. Besides he decided that looking at Mistril without any clothes on would be much more interesting, a thought that perked him up considerably.

The two of them waited expectantly for something to eat, each consumed by his own thoughts. Mitch was thinking about Mistril, Bruce was wondering about Mitch, trying to decide whether he was really as odd as he was beginning to appear.

Perhaps he was just upset by the whole business of coming to Skid, Bruce decided at length, recalling how angry, how angry and homesick he had been.

'Oh well not to worry, he'll come right.' Bruce thought he probably would if he ever got anything to eat around the place.

Bruce thought he could smell something cooking, he could smell something anyway. He was about to go into the kitchen to see what Mistril was up to when she appeared pushing a trolley laden with bowls and plates.

"About time," he muttered ungratefully and then realised what it was he could smell. It was the smell of the dog's old bones around their kennels. A pong almost as bad as when the old dog tucker freezer had spat the dummy while he had been away for a weekend.

Mistril proudly put a plate of meat in the middle of the table and Bruce felt his stomach lurch at the sight of the putrid, slimy flesh.

"Christ, take it away will, we can't eat that!"

Mistril was crestfallen, what's wrong with it she wondered? She was totally put out when Bruce grabbed the plate and heaved it contents and all over the edge of the veranda.

"The first thing we're going to have to do is teach these people how to cook," said Bruce not really feeling much like eating any longer.

Raele sensed that something had changed as soon as he stepped off the patrol craft. It wasn't just the way the Aotearoians had waited at the top of the hill for him grasping their primitive weapons.

Though they hadn't accorded him the sort of respect that he would have normally expected, Raele quickly realised that it wasn't he personally that they were being disrespectful to. It was the old ways that they had come to distrust and abhor.

"What good was the Skidian Way to us when the syn plants were failing?" They asked as he sat talking to them and Raele knew it hadn't been a good idea to give any of them access to his archives. A little learning was proving to be a powerful catalyst for their aspirations for change.

Raele began to explain that it was the Skidian Way that had sustained Skidians during times of crisis in the past, but these Skidians were having none of that.

They were having none of a lot of other things either. When Raele asked what had happened in his absence, he was informed bluntly that they had begun a program of self rule that had no place for an autocratic leader like himself. In future they said, their leaders would be elected and subject to controls exercised by an elected council.

This sounded like heresy to Raele but he kept his temper. There weren't enough Skidians left for him to indiscriminately dispose of a large portion of the population simply because they'd had access to information that was clearly beyond their ability to comprehend.

The discussion became as heated as a discussion between Skidians ever became, perhaps a little more so as the Aotearoians became aware of how valuable the frank and open airing of ideas and grievances could be. Feeling as though his position was being undermined, Raele fought hard to contain himself though secretly he was pleased with the what was happening. After a while it dawned on him that if he could ensure that he would be elected as their leader and then he could carry on as he planned.

If it keeps them happy to think they are in control then let them believe that he decided as he let himself be forced into supporting the concept of collective leadership.

The talk died for a while, Raele wondered whether the Aotearoians suspected his grudging agreement or were surprised that he'd agreed at all. There was something else, he could see it in their eyes, something else was obviously disturbing them.

But what? Were they finding life more difficult than they had believed? Raele glanced around, the organic plant looked as if it were operating normally. There were plenty of Skidians around, their numbers appeared to have swelled in his absence which could only be a good thing.

"Have you had any contact with other communities?" Raele asked casually wondering whether Mischief or somebody like him from one of the other industrial complexes had decided to venture out of his lair and flex what authority he imagined he might have.

Mischief had obviously decided to interpret Raele's instructions in a different manner from that which Raele had intended. That was an ominous development as far as Raele was concerned, but one to be expected. If the Aotearoians could not only think about but actually institute a new form of self government for their community, there was no real reason why Mischief or somebody else like him could seek to expand his little empire.

The initial contact between the two vastly disparate groups had come to nothing. The Aotearoians had welcomed Mischief and his party but had quickly made it clear that they didn't consider that Mischief had the authority to impose his will upon them which was evidently his intention.

"On who's behalf was he acting?" Raele asked, hoping that Mischief hadn't invoked his name.

"On his own. He said that in the absence of any legitimate authority he had assumed the position of chief mati," one of the more outspoken Skidians

told him.

"And you believed him, even though I was a resident of your community?" Raele asked reasonably, suddenly wondering whether Mischief might have had anything to do with his unplanned journey. But he quickly discounted that idea since a service crew had repaired his craft allowing his return to Skid.

"We respectfully suggested that you were the legitimate ruler of Skid, but that we were in the process of forming our own system of government."

Raele was beginning to realise just how difficult the task of governing Skid was going to be as different groups of Skidians responded to the vacuum caused by the disintegration of their society in different ways. He was also pleased that he had brought along an offworlder who was probably used to dealing with such matters.

Mischief had threatened various kinds of action if the Aotearoians didn't comply with his demands ranging from simply cutting supplies of synfood and other material from the community, to the use of force.

The last threat hadn't been treated seriously, for whoever had heard of a Skidian using physical force on another? As for trying to isolate Aotearoa by depriving them of synfood and other material, well, the Aotearoians were confident that they could now survive quite satisfactorily on what the organic plant produced. Besides, Mischief hadn't acted on any of his threats.

Raele clearly recalling the pompous soul grasping a weapon he didn't know how to arm, felt that it was only a matter of time and opportunity before he did make some move against Aotearoa.

"What are you going to do about Mischief?" Venolia, the outspoken Skidian asked.

"What do you wish me to do?" Raele was astounded by the question. The Aotearoians had just finished telling him that they no longer considered him their leader and now they were expecting him to take make a decision over what they clearly saw as a serious threat to their existence.

Despite their brave words Raele realised that nothing had changed for these Skidians. They were still conditioned to believe that some higher authority would protect and provide for them as some higher authority always had.

As they waited for Raele to say that he would look after them, Raele wondered whether he might be better off dealing with Mischief for somebody like him who had already proved that he was able to take the initiative and was possibly ready to help him rebuild a new and more powerful Skid.

But Mischief, Raele decided had an equally privileged background. Neither he nor his people had felt the full effects of Skid's recent tragedy either.

"Protect us from Mischief," Venolia pleaded after a long silence.

"I don't know how I can." Raele replied reasonably, playing with Venolia now. How was he supposed to make decisions regarding their welfare if he no longer possessed the power to do so?

"But you must," Venolia muttered looking downcast, "you must help us to preserve our way of life here." Being under Raele's protection was their only hope of warding off the unwelcome attentions of Mischief and any other Skidian who had the necessary power to enforce his will. What chance did they have against well-resourced Skidians from the industrial complexes?

"I will think on it," Raele replied and decided to go off and talk to Mitch hoping he could tell him what to do.

As he walked over to where the offworlders sitting on the raised platform outside the house he tried to decide whether being the supreme ruler of Skid was really worth the effort.

The Aotearoians didn't seem to know what they wanted, on one hand they didn't want to live with the sort of rules and conventions of the Skidian way. On the other hand they didn't seem to want to live without the comfort and protection that the old ways provided them. And they were simply one of the many groups of Skidians remaining who had suffered different hardships in the time since the old Skid had disintegrated.

What did the Skidians who still lived as they always had in the

industrial complexes want, did they really want what ambitious Skidians like Mischief were attempting to provide for them? Or were they simply content that some Skidian had taken it upon himself to fill the vacuum created mostly by the death of Inel and the consequent lack of any remaining identifiable and coherent leadership. Were they capable of deciding what they wanted. Raele doubted that they were, doubted that any Skidian in their position really was considering that their lives had only changed in that it was filled with uncertainty now.

That left the sad bands of Skidians that still roamed restlessly around the cities surviving as best they could, venturing only so far into the wilderness as they dared, still not understanding what had happened to their world. Perhaps they were drifting aimlessly back into the cities having seen that the service crews were rebuilding them, though Raele had not seen any evidence of that when they had briefly stopped at Sietnuoc.

What did those Skidians want, those that through no fault of their own had experienced the full brunt of the recent disaster? Merely a return to the good old days when all they had to worry about was how to fill in their days? Raele thought that was probably so and couldn't blame them really, in their position, in the position of the Aotearoians and even of Mischief he might feel the same way.

An unnatural passion gripped Raele, it could be so different he thought, we could build something new and unique here. But how. He was close enough now to see the two male offworlders clearly. While Bruce looked contented enough. Mitch was hardly recognisable as the confident offworlder that he had been when Raele had first seen him.

Mitch's body had sagged and his face had become crumpled and grey looking. When he stood to get a better look at something that Bruce was pointing out to him he seemed to have shrunk as if some great force was pressing down on his shoulders.

"Oh they're full of shit Mitch," Raele heard. "Couldn't organise a pissup in a brewery." Raele didn't know what shit was, a pissup, or a brewery was but he did recognise the contempt in Bruce's voice. Contempt for Skidians?

Raele knew that he was right in some ways, but also that things weren't quite as clear cut as the offworlder would like to believe.

He decided to stay where he was for a moment, it was obvious that the offworlders hadn't seen him, or if they had they didn't care whether he heard whatever they said. Raele thought he might overhear something useful that they might not say to his face.

"How do you mean? "

"Oh he means that they're useless," Sue chimed in, "but what he really means is that he doesn't really understand them very well."

"You don't know what you're talking about!"

"What do you mean I don't know what I'm talking about, I lived here to you know, I know just as much about the place as you do!" Sue retorted angrily.

"Like what?"

"Well, they've got some very impressive technology," Sue ventured after a moment.

"Didn't help them in the long run did it?"

"No but it's still impressive," Sue replied haplessly.

"Do we need to argue among ourselves?" Mitch asked sadly. "I mean we're in this together aren't we?"

"I suppose so, but that doesn't mean we have to agree on everything does it?"

"But at least you could try and be a bit less critical and a bit more helpful at times Bruce," Sue suggested.

"What the hell do you call that out there?" Raele could see the sweep of a hand above his head and knew Bruce must be pointing down towards the organic plant.

"It's a fucken disaster area out there and did you see what they've been

eating? I'm surprised they haven't shitted themselves to death."

What did he mean? Raele wondered. The Aotearoians had been adamant that they could survive Mischief cutting off their food supply.

"They've still got their synfood, they'll be ok without us mister big expert farmer," Sue replied sardonically.

But for how long? Raele wondered suddenly feeling totally isolated from his world and all the people on it. From his fellow Skidians even more than the offworlders. This struck him as being quite ironic until he realised that this was so because unlike his fellow Skidians the offworlders didn't seem to expect anything of him. Maybe Mitch did, but Raele knew that he was used to acting independently just like the other two and once he recovered from the trip to Skid would no doubt act independently again.

So what am I supposed to do? Raele wondered. Whatever the Aotearoians or the likes of Mischief might like to believe he was still in effect if not nominally in control of Skid. Only he possessed the ability to enforce his will on the rest of Skid.

Others might presume they possessed the weapons or the moral right to do as they desired but Raele was the only one that knew he could. He was in possession of the keywords required to unlock the weapons of mass destruction, only he knew how to employ them. His birthright made him the only legitimate heir to Inel the last unopposed chief mati of Skid, his was the right until he tired of it or some Skidian with better credentials came along.

Raele couldn't see that happening in his time. Unfortunately none of this helped Raele to decide what he must do. In the age old traditions of his race Raele decided that his best path was to do nothing. However unlike traditional leaders he wasn't so naive to believe that doing nothing would solve his problems. He simply hoped that time would allow him to find some way of rebuilding Skid in a way that would return it to something approaching it's former self without getting rid of most of the surviving Skidians in the process.

six

When Mitch woke he thought that somehow he had been transported back to his own bed. In a moment the phone would ring or there would be a light tap on the door and the duty secret service agent would bring him the morning's bad news. It was always bad news when they woke him, and these days they always seemed to wake him early.

When no phones intruded and nobody tapped on the door though his room was drenched by the early morning sun he realised belatedly that he wasn't back in his own bed.

With a pang of resentment he had thought that Mistril would join him in the bed as she showed him his room the previous night but just as she closed the door Raele had called out from down the corridor and she was gone. So much for that he thought watching the sheet over his lower body rise and wondering why it wouldn't do that when he wanted it to.

Mitch lay there and listened to the house come awake. Somewhere he heard the baby cry and heard footsteps, Sue's he thought and a soothing voice try to hush the baby.

There were other sounds as people began to rise and move about but Mitch didn't feel any need at all to climb out of bed. What was the point? There didn't seem to be anything for him to do here.

Bruce had suggested that he should think of something and just do it. Like what? He'd asked Bruce and himself.

Bruce hadn't been a lot of help, nor had he been very forthcoming about what Skid was really like apart from a few negative comments and Sue hadn't been much better. Mitch felt that they almost resented his presence as if it intruded on their own lives too much. He thought they would have been pleased of fellow human company. If they were, they didn't show it.

Perhaps he thought, by being here I detract from their uniqueness and position among the Skidians. Mitch was also a little confused by that position. Bruce seemed to get off in denigrating the Skidians, even when they were in earshot, though he was more polite to Raele than any of the others.

On the other hand the Skidians treated them as if they were some kind of lower life form, Raele and Mistril excluded. Maybe Raele was just a little more inscrutable or something. Mitch didn't think that they intended to let their feelings show so obviously, or expect he and his fellow offworlders to recognise their behaviour for what it was.

If Bruce was as observant as he, and Mitch had a sneaking suspicion that he was a lot cleverer than he made out, then Mitch could understand his attitude towards the Skidians and their planet. That made it so much harder for Mitch to understand why Bruce, even Sue to a lesser extent, appeared quite happy to be here.

Mitch shook his head sadly and wondered whether the way people acted and the reasons why they acted at times would ever cease to amaze him. This despite his thirty years in politics when he had seen men and often women go to incredible lengths to get what they wanted, letting absolutely nothing get in their way. Then often the very same nasty, selfish people undertaking incredibly noble and selfless acts, from which they stood to gain nothing.

"I'll never understand what makes people tick," Mitch muttered, wondering how he could understand what made the Skidians tick if he couldn't understand his own people.

"But at least I can try," he said decisively, marvelling at how much better he felt.

He started to throw off the covers, became daunted by the enormity of the task and decided to stay where he was. I wish Mistril was here, it would be fun to start with her he mused, all I've really got to do is find some way of talking to them after all.

Bang!

The sound of a rifle shot startled Mitch. What the hell was going on? Was somebody firing at them or what? As Mitch wondered whether to take cover and roll under the bed or scrunch himself against the wall or something Sue's voice rang out.

"What the hell do you think you're doing Bruce?" She yelled from somewhere close by, "I've just got the baby to sleep and you start making a bloody racket. Why don't you go down the paddock somewhere if you want to do that?"

"Why don't you stop yelling, you stupid woman? That'll wake the baby for sure!" Mitch heard Bruce yell back from somewhere outside.

What was he doing with a gun? Mitch wondered, wondering whether he really wanted to find out.

As if on cue he heard the baby start crying in the room beside his. What was Bruce shooting at?

Mitch pulled on the robe that had been provided for him and wandered through the house until he found his way out onto the veranda. He found that he wasn't the only one who had been drawn to the source of the noise. A group of Skidians huddled anxiously outside the house watching Bruce, who had found some kind of light truck and was in the process of throwing his dogs into the back of it. The gun was nowhere to be seen.

"What's he doing?" Mitch asked Sue who had also come out onto the veranda holding the baby.

"I don't know, he was up at some impossible hour this morning. Didn't you hear him banging and swearing in the kitchen? He found half an ivop in a cupboard, no wonder then place stank!"

"No." Mitch replied, having slept more soundly than he could remember in a long time. At least he didn't have to ask what an ivop was after their meal the night before

"He's a bit of an early riser is our Bruce," Sue muttered unhappily. "I'd forgotten about that."

"Did I hear a gunshot a few moments ago?"

"Yeah, the mood Bruce is in this morning I think he'd like to shoot a few Skidians. He's not pleased about the way they've looked after 'his' farm while we've been away," Sue added enigmatically.

"His farm?"

"Oh didn't we tell you? Bruce did all this, well mostly by himself."

Mitch scratched his head and wondered why somebody would want to develop an earth style ranch on a planet which had perfected the production of synthetic food.

"That's a bit strange isn't it, was he homesick or something?"

"Well he, we were both homesick but the Skidians seemed to be desperate to learn how to farm, or produce organic food as they put it."

"I've obviously misunderstood something here Sue, why would the Skidians want to learn how to grow their own food?"

"What do you think happened on Skid Mitch that killed all those millions of Skidians?"

"I sort of presumed there was some kind of war and the Skidians lost it."

"No that's not what happened at all Mitch, they ran out of food, something to do with their synthetic food plants not functioning, or not producing enough for all the Skidians to eat, something like that."

"Now I know why Bruce has such a low opinion of Skidians anyway," Mitch reflected, "and I can't say I really blame him."

"Neither can I really, but it would be difficult for them to accept that they could eat things like meat and vegetables after living on synfood for generations." Sue paused unconsciously to let little Bruce shift his attention to her other breast. "I mean I had enough problems learning how to plant things and trying not to think about what Bruce did to put meat on the table and we're used to real food."

"I wonder what they do all day? " Sue said watching the Skidians slowly drift off evidently having decided that whatever Bruce was doing wasn't all that interesting. "It doesn't look as if they've done much around here."

Mitch looked around, remembered the untidy looking garden they'd passed the day before and thought about what Sue had just told him.

"Maybe they don't know what to do," he suggested tentatively.

"More than likely. Hey stop that you little shit," Sue said to little Bruce as he started to gnaw on her nipple.

Mitch sighed and wished for a moment he could simply fall asleep and wake when the nightmare was over, or simply lose the will to live and think himself to death. That wouldn't do he decided, life wasn't that simple, even here. Besides he didn't think he was capable of suicide.

"Hey Mitch, wanna come for a look around?" Bruce asked appearing on the veranda with a steaming cup of something in his hand.

"Why not?" Mitch suddenly felt a part of whatever was going on. Decided that he wanted a few other things as, Mistril emerged from the house pushing a trolley before her.

"I am sorry," she began looking at Bruce meaningfully, "but all our organic food has been destroyed, we will have to eat synfood until we can harvest some more," she continued stiffly.

"Why isn't someone out there now? I'll give them a hand," offered Bruce.

"Our community council hasn't made a decision on who should undertake the harvest yet."

Now that sounds like something I could get interested in Mitch thought.

"Did you throw anything out Bruce?"

"Oh I had a bit of a clean up in the kitchen, that's all, threw everything out," he added.

"Oh Bruce how could you?"

"Pretty easily, for one there was nothing much there and secondly most of what there was almost crawling, would have been if there were any flies."

"What do you mean?"

"They'd put nothing in then fridge or freezer, all the meat and stuff was

rotting away in the cupboards. You wouldn't believe some of the shit I found in there, even the dogs turned their noses up at it," he added shaking his head as if he couldn't really believe the mess he had found, "they're worser housekeepers than I am!"

"No wonder there was such a disgusting smell in there," Sue grunted.

"What did you do with it all?"

"Threw it in the back of the ute and chucked it in the river."

"That wasn't very environmentally sensitive of you Bruce, don't you think they have enough problems here without you teaching them how to pollute their rivers?"

"Who cares?" Bruce dismissed Sue's protests. "Besides nobody saw me, they were still asleep."

Bruce grabbed himself a bowl and began to eat. He was clearly unhappy with the taste and grimaced with each swallow.

"What's this community council thing?" Mitch asked out of the blue to the surprise of Sue and Bruce, showing a spark of interest that they didn't think he was capable of.

"I have no idea," Bruce replied after a moment's deliberation. "Sounds like something new to me, as far as I could work out the place was a dictatorship despite their airy fairy pretensions. Maybe things have changed. Don't think Raele will be too happy though," he added through a mouthful of synfood.

"Why not?"

"Well, he is or was the next in line to be the head man about the place.

"That's right I remember him saying something about that." Mitch recalled vaguely, he hadn't taken much notice of anything the previous day.

"Must be a bit of a bastard to come home and find somebody's shifted the goal posts on you like that," Bruce remarked.

"Has anybody worked out what he was doing back home anyway?"

"Who's home?"

"Our home dummy." Sue snapped, where did you think I was talking about?"

Bruce and Sue looked at Mitch who might have known, but all he could say was. "We don't know really, we do think he might have had some sort of accident. There's a patch on the hull of his space ship."

"I wonder how he got that?" Bruce asked nobody in particular as they walked around the space ship a little later.

"I'm told it's possible he ran into the Rockies or something," replied Mitch.

"Makes you wonder if we were lucky to get here in one piece eh?" Said Bruce not that he sounded really worried.

"It does," Mitch replied agreeably.

"Yeah oh well not to worry, let me show you the garden of Eden Mitch," Bruce chuckled at his little joke and wandered over to the fenced off area that looked like a section of jungle set down on the top of a skyscraper.

Bruce kicked the gate open with his foot, not that he needed have worried. He could have easily stepped over the fence which sagged and had completely fallen over in places.

Suddenly the dogs started yapping at something and an ivop came crashing through the luxuriant growth. It stopped as it saw Bruce who wasn't prepared to get out of it's way and changed direction, heading for several Skidians who had trooped down the hill carrying various gardening implements. The Skidians scattered flinging away their tools and the ivop charged on up the hill and disappeared over the top still pursued by the three dogs.

"Bloody idiots," Bruce muttered swiping at a plant that looked like sweetcorn.

Mitch wasn't sure who he meant, the dogs or the Skidians, he wasn't about to ask either.

The dogs loped back looking quite satisfied with themselves Mitch thought but it took the Skidians a while longer to gather themselves and re-approach the garden.

They stood for a moment at the open gate and then trooped inside in single file looking carefully from side to side as if they expected something to leap out and attack them. Once inside they seemed to relax a little and began their morning's work.

Bruce squatted wordlessly and began to roll himself a cigarette as he watched the Skidians.

"What do you think they're up to Mitch, or better still what do you think they think they're up to?" Bruce asked.

"Gardening I suppose," Mitch suggested tentatively. The closest he had ever got to gardening was watching his wife supervise the ground staff at the White House, or the wetbacks they used at their own home. He couldn't see what was wrong, though the garden did look a bit overgrown.

"Lets ask them eh?"

"We are harvesting the organic material," one of the Skidians insisted as the two offworlders watched them slash tiredly at the ferny vegetation with whatever tool they carried and squash it into a bucket.

"Does it taste nice?" Bruce enquired sarcastically reaching down and grasping a few stems that still poked out of the soil.

"I dunno about you, but I really prefer eating this bit," he said tugging at the stems and pulling a large carrot out of the ground. "What do you think Mitch?"

"I prefer that bit to," Mitch replied unable to suppress a chuckle as Bruce brushed off most of the soil that still clung to the carrot and broke a piece off which he popped into his mouth.

"Want some Mitch?"

The stunned Skidians watched Mitch bite on the carrot, clearly recognising that most of their gardening efforts to date had been in vain.

One by one the Skidians threw down their tools in disgust and walked away, obviously unhappy about something until only one of them remained.

"Ok sunshine," Bruce said to the remaining Skidian, "I guess you're now the chief horticulturist on Skid."

Mitch watched as the Skidian first look surprised and then grin happily as if he had won a million bucks in a lottery. Mitch didn't know whether being made chief of anything on Skid by Bruce carried any weight but the Skidian seemed to think so.

You had to admire Bruce, Mitch thought as he watched Bruce and the Skidian walk around the garden. He watched Bruce give the Skidian exact instructions in a firm easy manner. Where he seemed to think there might be any confusion Bruce followed his explanation by showing the Skidian exactly what he wanted.

"Why were your instructions so explicit?" Mitch asked as they left the garden.

"The Skidians aren't used to using their initiative, don't ask me why. Something to do with never having had to work for a living and the way the system used to work I guess."

"So why didn't the person who told them to garden, tell them how to garden?"

"Well the way things used to work was that the Skidian who said go garden if you like, probably wasn't sure how to garden either and even if he did he wouldn't lower himself to actually do any work himself."

"Sounds like a pretty dumb system to me," Mitch said, "sounds even worse than socialism."

"The system here has a lot in common with things back home I'll grant you that, but you can't really blame people. I mean up until recently none of these people had ever seen an ivop let alone eaten one or stuff out of a garden."

"My government wasn't socialist!" Mitch exclaimed. It had always been a sore point with Mitch that policies aimed at equitable healthcare and setting up decent work training schemes had earned the tag of socialist by the powerful conservative right wing lunatic fringe groups that had blocked his

path at every turn.

"Keep your hair on Mitch, I never said it was did I?"

"You said back home didn't you?" Mitch demanded.

"Yeah, well back where I come from we do have a sort of socialist government, though some of their ideas put them well to the right of Ghengis Khan."

"Where do you come from?" Mitch had just assumed that Bruce was a fellow American citizen with a speech impediment.

"New Zealand."

"Oh, oh well that's all right then," Mitch muttered, a little embarrassed by his outburst, trying to remember where New Zealand was.

"Don't worry Mitch, I'll get over it," Bruce responded keeping a firm grip on his temper in case Mitch said something more that got up his nose.

seven

Raele dismissed the protests of the gardeners who had hot footed it up the hill to complain about the antics of the offworlders. "You no longer acknowledge me as your leader," he pointed out, "so why are you complaining to me?"

He looked out from the window and saw the two offworlders making their way up the hill. From their angry glances at each other Raele felt they were unhappy as well.

"Are you still here?" He asked the Skidians rhetorically who still waited more or less impatiently for him to act. To do something. They looked mortified when Raele steadfastly refused to act and finally left when it was clear he wasn't going to respond to their entreaties.

Raele wondered what Bruce's response would be if the community council actually managed to censure him? He'd simply ignore them and get about his business no doubt. The idea pleased Raele, the community would be safe in Bruce's hands while he was gone. Especially as he had decided to further upset the equilibrium of the community by shutting off its synfood supplies.

Now the Aotearoians would really have to eke out an existence from the organic factory, which if what he'd overheard from the offworlders the previous night was right, would really distress them.

With that happy thought Raele decided to continue his interrupted inspection tour of Skid immediately. Raele had no fixed idea what he should do on this trip except for confronting Mischief and demanding an explanation for his activities.

"Would you like to see some more of Skid?" Raele hadn't meant to ask Mitch along, but it suddenly occurred to him when he met Mitch outside the house that he wanted the company of someone he wouldn't be expected to do things for all the time.

"Sure, why not," Mitch replied and before anybody knew what was happening the two of them were in the patrol ship heading for Mischief's self styled realm.

Mitch found it a bit disconcerting that Raele didn't say much, though he seemed to be loosening up. At least he'd asked this time before taking him for a ride in his space ship. Mitch grinned ruefully, he found it almost hard to believe that he didn't really mind being where he was.

The dilemma's that had beset him just a few days ago had been forced into the background. Even if suddenly transported back to earth, Mitch found to his astonishment that he no longer wanted the office that he had strived so hard for over the years. Who wants the hassle he asked himself? Wilmot and whoever came after him was welcome to the job.

Mitch felt a pang of guilt when he thought about his wife. No doubt she would get over it, most likely the disappointment of no longer being first lady would be a greater loss than his absence.

Mitch realised to his astonishment that he was actually excited with the

prospect of stamping his mark on a whole new world.

He glanced sideways and speculated as to what Raele's reaction might be if the Skidian knew what he was thinking.

Unbeknownst to Mitch, Raele had noticed something, he checked his sensors and wondered why the offworlder was suddenly so buoyant. He registered far higher on that count than was normal for Skidians. The monitors must be damaged Raele decided tapping the display with his forefinger.

"Where are we headed Raele?" Mitch asked after a while.

"To one of the industrial complex's. I left a Skidian there called Mischief in charge and he seems to have decided that I left him charge of the whole of Skid."

"You have those sort of people here to huh?" Mitch chuckled, "and I thought I was the only one with that problem."

Raele expected a primitive planet like the offworlders to have problems with people going off on tangents of their own. He didn't expect problems like that on Skid with it's history of obedience to it's leaders. Obviously things weren't so clear cut when even the most sophisticated society disintegrated.

Raele was starting to become a little confused, on one hand he wanted the remaining Skidians to accept him without question as their leader. On the other he wanted to develop a new Skid where Skidians were more self reliant and more resourceful. Where they were in control of events on their planet rather than pawns of technology. He was beginning to wonder whether the two states were compatible.

Maybe it was time to ask Mitch for help? It annoyed Raele that he had to rely on offworlders to help him shape his new world but he saw no alternative. Either he used their skills to shape a new Skid or it would flounder, would lurch from crisis to crisis, just as the old Skid had to it's cost.

Before Raele had a chance to speak his mind they were challenged by some idiot at the industrial complex.

"Patrol craft xt2135-2, you are now entering restricted airspace, identify yourself and state your mission."

"RO Raele Inel requesting permission to dock."

"Permission denied Patrol craft xt2135-2, you are denied access to the Republic Of Skid and it's facilities."

Raele felt as though his worst nightmare had come true. If the two surviving communities on Skid had essentially turned on him what chance did he have of surviving on Skid for any length of time let alone trying to govern the place?

"On who's authority was this Republic established?" Raele demanded.

"By the authority invested in his worship Mischief Reeke."

"Why am I denied access to the complex?" Raele enquired, forcing himself not to sound as disconcerted as he felt. He could force entry to the complex and the landing dock, he wondered if Mischief and his lieutenants knew just how powerful a weapon a fully armed patrol craft was.

"You have been identified as an agent of the old regime and enemy of the republic....." There was more but Raele missed most of the proclamation because Mitch had started to laugh.

"Boy you have got problems Raele, enemy of the state and all that sort of thing, what are you going to do about it?"

Raele sensed that Mitch was laughing at his expense. Raele knew he could make an example of the self styled Republic of Skid but it would be an expensive example, not in terms of the destruction of the industrial complex but in terms of the number of Skidians that would also lose their lives.

What was the point in ruling the planet if it had no inhabitants? If that happened he might as well go and live on Celcious B or even the offworlder's planet.

"What would you do Mitch?" For the first time making a direct request for help.

"Do you acknowledge xt2135-2?" The flight control centre insisted before Mitch could reply."

"Say yes," Mitch suggested, "that will give us a bit of time to work out what to do next." Mitch had always considered himself an inadequate diplomat. By choice he would have liked to get his way by waving a big stick to get his way. But this wasn't the way things were done in the closing years of the twentieth century, even when you had at your beck and call the most powerful weapons of war ever devised. He wondered what kind of weapons Raelle had on the ship. Mitch hadn't seen any evidence of the sort of firepower Raelle would need to destroy the large underground industrial complex he had described, but he might be able to give them a good scare.

"Pull back far enough so that we don't register on whatever surveillance equipment they have."

Raelle did as he was bidden and then waited for Mitch's next move.

"What is our aim here Raelle, do we want to destroy the man or just talk to him?"

"Just talk to him," Raelle replied.

"He doesn't sound keen on talking. Can we threaten him a little, will that make him talk to us?"

"I could threaten him, but Mischief might not believe me."

"Why not? Mitch asked.

"Mischief has never seen many patrol craft like these, he probably thinks they are like the freighters that used to call at the complex. Slow and unarmed."

Mitch remembered the state of the art Air Force jets this ship had evaded with ease and later shot down and wondered just how powerful it might be.

"And it isn't of course."

"No, I could destroy the complex, but I don't really want to."

"Well let's be thankful for something then." Mitch breathed a little easier. He didn't really want the unnecessary deaths of untold Skidians on his conscience.

"What about just landing anyway, could they stop you?"

"No. But I would have to make a big hole in the ground to get in."

"Well that's what we'll do then," Mitch muttered with a sigh of relief.

"Make a big hole in the ground close to the complex and then tell this mischief maker that the next hole will be over his head if he doesn't decide to talk to you...here." Mitch added with a flash of inspiration.

Raelle was thankful he had taken Mitch's council, otherwise he would most likely have ended up destroying the complex and everyone in it which would have been a complete waste.

Mitch's masterstroke in Raelle's opinion was to order Mischief to the ship, so they wouldn't even have to land. In normal times Raelle, or any chief mati would have confronted any opponent on the rival's home ground to show his disdain and contempt, confident in his ability to deal with any threat to his person.

When he told Mitch that he could just beam Mischief aboard anyway he was surprised at Mitch's reaction.

"That's not the whole point of the exercise Raelle, blowing a big hole in the ground will show Mischief that you mean business."

Raelle couldn't actually see the point in that but he decided to humour Mitch by approaching the industrial complex once again and demanding to speak to Mischief and promised to Mitch's instructions.

"May I remind you of 2135-2 that your incursion into Republican airspace will not be tolerated."

"I wish to speak to Mischief!" Raelle demanded arming his most powerful weapons. "Immediately!" Raelle had already forgotten the words that Mitch had coached him to say. He was realising just how powerful he could be and enjoying every moment of it.

Raelle let his finger caress a switch almost lovingly for several moments, he had never had the opportunity to use most of the weapons at his disposal and wondered what sort of damage they could do. He pressed down firmly.

Mitch's mouth gaped as close by a large fountain of earth exploded

upwards, blotting out the sun for several moments before it began to rain down again.

Raele swung the craft around and both he and Mitch stared in astonishment at the gigantic hole that had appeared below them.

"Phew," Mitch ran a hand through his sparse hair and decided to be thankful for small mercies that Raele hadn't found the need to use a weapon like that on earth.

"Do you think Mischief will talk to me now?" Raele asked, not entirely sure he had done the right thing. Perhaps a lower setting would have been enough.

"He'd be a fool not to," Mitch said almost to himself, "let's ask him and see, tell him the next shot will be right over his head."

"Are you receiving xt2135-2?" The flight controller asked hesitantly.

"Receiving," Raele replied laconically, enjoying himself immensely.

"Can you give us any information regarding the explosion at your approximate position."

"An explosion has formed a large crater beneath us," Raele told the nervous controller. "I have no doubt that a larger crater will appear closer to the industrial complex unless Mischief joins us immediately for a conference."

Mitch was beginning to wonder if Raele understood anything he said at all. Twice now, when Mitch had suggested a softly softly diplomatic approach Raele had gone in all guns blazing. Mitch recommended a moderate show of force and Raele had made a hole in the ground big enough to lose an aircraft carrier in. Mitch wanted to encourage a meeting between the two men, wanted Mischief to make the first move and Raele had simply demanded his presence aboard the space ship. If Mischief had any balls he'd stay put and call Raele's bluff.

Mitch didn't think it likely Mischief had any balls.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" A voice puffed over the communications channel, "I demand an explanation!"

"We have had an accident onboard," Mitch lied before Raele could make matters any worse.

"Who is this?" Mischief demanded. "Where is Raele Inel our glorious leader?"

Mitch chuckled to himself at Mischief rapid about turn.

"I am Raele's political advisor and spokesman," Mitch improvised on the spur of the moment. "May I suggest a meeting between myself and your own advisors to discuss matters of mutual interest before there is another accident?"

"I will meet with you myself or Raele for that matter," Mischief replied quickly fearing for his own safety. Which was the right thing to do because Mitch could see Raele's finger inching towards the button that would release another devastating salvo.

"No." Mitch said shaking his head. An hours' wait for Mischief would seem like a lifetime and make him hopefully all that more cooperative. Perhaps longer would be even better.

"No?" I will meet you anywhere, any place." Mischief screamed frantically. Most un-Skidlike of him Raele thought with contempt.

Mitch paused to wonder what affect Mischief increasing panic would be having on his own followers. Seeing their leader in a blue funk probably wasn't the greatest endorsement of his abilities.

"Very well, we will expect you on board in one hour."

"xt 2135-2 you are cleared to dock."

"Ignore him Raele," Mitch suggested. "Let's go and return in a few hours time."

"Why?" Raele didn't understand why Mitch wouldn't meet with Mischief at the appointed time after going to so much trouble to make him come to the ship.

"My bet is that he'll be so worked up that he will agree to anything, we'll let him stew for a while."

Let him cook? Raele thought, vaguely understanding what Mitch intended.

"And what is a political advisor?"

"Somebody that helps you deal with your enemies Raele," Mitch smiled.

"Somebody that tries to make sure that you can do what you want without too much objection from your opposition, people like Mischief for example. Mitch stared thoughtfully at Raele for a moment. "What do you want Raele?"

That was simple enough for Raele; "I wish to rule Skid," he replied. "I want to rule a Skid where people know the value of life and are prepared to work to achieve a better one."

"You want people to earn a living, rather than sit around waiting for their food to pop out of a tap?"

"This is right," Raele agreed warming to Mitch. With this man he would make Skid more powerful than ever before.

eight

Bruce lay comfortably in the shade of the cuttings he'd planted all those months ago and marvelled at how rapidly they had grown. More remarkably no ivop seemed to have broken into the paddock and nibbled at the new growth. At least the gate into the paddock hadn't been left open like everywhere else on the farm.

The ivops hadn't had to brave diving through electric fences with four or five thousand volts coursing through them to roam at will, they simply walked through the gates that had been left open around the place.

Bruce had spent the morning closing gates and restoring the electricity to the fences by tracing the source of the power fault, which turned out to be as simple as rejoining the lead out wire that somebody had driven through or cut.

As he lay under the trees he could see ivops finding out the hard way that their roaming days were over for now.

It was quite comical really. One would walk up to a gate, find it's path closed and then carefully sniff the fence on either side of the gate to make sure the hole hadn't moved or something. That's when they'd get it. Five thousand volts coursing through their body's that made them leap back in alarm, sent them racing across the paddock, madly kicking their heels up, shaking their nose heavy heads and bellowing in alarm. Then the next one would try until in some places there were four or five of them tearing across the paddock wondering what had hit them.

"Fucken idiots."

Cop looked up from where he lay and blinked at Bruce.

"Who are you talking too?"

"Not you anyway!" Bruce retorted, "so shutup!" Bruce might have said something else, but he caught something out of the corner of his eye.

"What are they up to?" Bruce mused as a crowd of Skidians started trooping down the race.

Bruce hadn't seen hide nor hair of any of them since Mitch and Raele had disappeared in the space ship for parts unknown. Raele hadn't said where he was going and Bruce didn't really care if he stayed away, though he'd like to be left alone in the space ship for a few minutes to see if he could make it take him home. Not that Bruce really felt like going home yet. His father had said 'take your time son,' and that's what Bruce intended to do.

He wondered idly whether they knew he had been taken by an alien. Not likely, he thought. Unless Trev had said something and even then the American authorities would probably want to keep a lid on the whole episode because they had really been a bit lax in letting their president be kidnapped. Maybe someone just wanted to get rid of Mitch. They probably wouldn't want it known that two other people more or less went along of their own free will at the same time.

Bruce watched the Skidians stop at a gate not far from him and view it

with the same sort of suspicion that the ivops were on the other side of the fence.

They're about as stupid as the ivops Bruce thought.

"This is right," The voice he imagined Cop spoke with, echoed back.

"What would you know dickhead?"

"More than you'd think!"

"I'm sure."

"Oh shut your neck Cop." Bruce said sharply and Cop got up lazily and moved a bit further out of Bruce's reach.

The Skidians seemed to be engaged in some sort of discussion, Bruce could just hear them yabbering away pointing to each other, towards the ivops across the fence from them, and then again at each other.

Finally one of them opened the gate and they all trooped into the paddock, leaving the gate to swing open behind them.

Typical! Bruce grunted, watching as the Skidians suddenly broke into a run.

En masse they ran across the paddock towards the ivops who were gathered in a tight group in a corner and pounced on one of their number.

"Cripes I've got to have a better look at this!"

The ivop struggled, however the Skidians must have been practising because they quickly had it on it's back with it's legs vainly pawing the air.

Regardless of the struggling animal, Skidians held onto it's legs or pushed down on it's body. By the time Bruce had run up to them several of the Skidians stood on a board placed across the animal's throat trying to suffocate it.

Bruce shook his head in amusement. 'Now I've seen everything!'

The attempt to suffocate the animal seemed to be working for it's struggles became weaker and weaker until another Skidian took out a knife and sawed at the animal's throat.

Suddenly the ivop bellowed loudly as if it had been foxing in the hope that the Skidians would go away, gave one last convulsive heave and managed to throw them all off.

Before they could react the ivop had rolled onto it's feet and charged away across the paddock, catching up with it's mates who were filing out through the gate that had been left open.

"Get them Cop," Bruce said.

"I suppose so," Cop replied unhelpfully. He must have said something though because the other two dogs streaked across the paddock soared gracefully over a couple of fences and had the ivops back in the paddock before the Skidians had worked out what was going on.

"What are you trying to do?" Bruce asked.

The Skidians looked sheepishly at each other, shrugged their shoulders and then all seemed to hang their heads in shame, or despair. Or something, Bruce couldn't decide what.

"Mischievous has cut off our supply of synfood," one of the muttered unhappily.

"That's tough," Bruce said unsympathetically. "I guess you're really going to have to live off this place then."

The Skidians didn't look to happy about the idea. It had been at times a distasteful diversion attempting to live off the organic plant, made so much easier by the availability of synfood if things didn't go too well. Now faced with the same bleak prospects that had recently faced many other Skidians this wasn't a very happy bunch. They wouldn't go hungry, but life would never be so simple and uncomplicated again.

"We will manage," the Skidian who still held the knife said defiantly. Bruce looked at the Skidians and noted the fanatical gleam in his eye. Given an AK 47 and a balaclava he could have been any sort of terrorist back home.

"I'm sure you will," Bruce muttered half to himself. "But you haven't made a very good start by neglecting this place have you?"

"What do you mean?" Demanded the fanatic and Bruce felt the full force of

the groups hostility directed at him, he wished he'd thought to bring his rifle from the ute.

"This place is a fucken disaster area!" Bruce grunted angrily, "why didn't you just run the ivops into the yards and kill one there?"

"Because there is a hole in the wall."

"Well why don't you fix the bloody hole, now!" Bruce yelled at them and had the satisfaction of watching the head of even the fanatic drop.

"Well what are you waiting for?" Bruce demanded.

"We don't know how," was the eventual downcast response from some Skidian towards the rear of the group.

The Skidians turned to see who had uttered such blasphemy.

"Well it's true," the Skidian said, fidgeting uncomfortably. It wasn't Skidian to admit incompetence of any sort, even when the evidence of it was so glaring. "And don't look at me like that, aren't we supposed to be honest about our failings in our search for perfection and a new Skidian way?"

But not in front of an offworlder Bruce thought. He didn't know how he should proceed next, carefully anyway. But what sort of society were they hoping to build? It would be a pretty poor place if they merely wished to live off the land for ever and a day.

"I will help you if you like," Bruce suggested beginning to feel a bit peckish himself.

Bruce sensed a collective sigh of relief, as if that's what the Skidians had been hoping for all along. Somebody to come along and look after them. But they weren't going to get away with it that easily.

"Someone has to fix the hole in the yards."

The Skidians looked at each other, what was the offworlder talking about now? One of the service crews should have repaired the break caused by one of them losing control of one of the strange ground vehicles and driving through the complex below the house. Recently the service crews had been conspicuous by their absence and failed to undertake their routine maintenance checks.

Mischief had probably had something to do with that, no service crew had been sighted since his last visit and all kinds of things that had broken or worn out since were now sitting idle. Soon nothing would work and the Aotearoians worst fear would be realised.

To remind them of their failing's which wasn't necessary at all. Here was the arrogant offworlder who by all accounts could survive without synfood, without service crews to fix things that went wrong or broke.

He had already made an impact by indicating that they had been gathering the organic material from the small plant below the house incorrectly. Instead of the unpalatable material that had been their lot till now, Lake had suddenly appeared with far more diverse products than anyone had thought possible and announced that there had been a serious flaw in their understanding of the smaller organic plant. Nobody had taken the smaller plant seriously because it was smaller and obviously less important than the bigger plant on the other side of the rise from their living quarters.

As a result, Lake would in the future only take orders from the offworlder.

Not only was the offworlder reminding them all that they weren't competent to survive without the advantage of falling back on what remained of the old Skidian system as they'd confidently expressed not only among themselves but to Raele. But the offworlder had insinuated himself into the defacto role of leadership just when they were shedding the old ways and developing their own leadership system.

What are they doing? Bruce wondered. The Skidians stood about, shuffling their feet and looking at each other, but pointedly not looking at Bruce.

"Can you show us how?" The last Skidian who had spoken finally suggested as Bruce shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"What's your name?" Bruce asked.

"Ues."

"Well come on then Eus, let's see what we can do."

Despite their aversion to the offworlder and all that he represented, the way he made them feel inferior, despite their steadfast belief that he was a mere primitive, the Skidians at Aotearoa weren't as unwilling to learn from him as their peers had been. None of the Aotearoians gave much thought to how barely suppressed fears of fending for themselves and the horror tales of those of their number that had survived from hand to mouth wandering in the wilderness until they stumbled on Aotearoa, spurred them into action.

The spectre of Mischief and what he might have planned for their community also hung over them, though it had faded into insignificance when compared to their survival. Besides they collectively sensed that the offworlder alone was probably more than a match for Mischief and his machinations.

A short time later Bruce found the tractor where it had been abandoned in a small gully behind the stockyards and after retracing the tyre marks found what had crashed through the back of the yards and carried away the lead wire for the electric fences.

Bruce climbed aboard, turned the key and found a gear and drove back to the yards.

Back at the yards Bruce watched with amusement as some of the Skidians vainly tried to rejoin the splintered rails together.

"Why don't you go and scratch around for some new planks?" Bruce asked.

It was obvious that none of the Skidians had thought of that, even though there was a pile of planks stacked neatly outside the yard.

Bruce watched the Skidians work and saw that while they didn't know what to do, once they had been shown, once they knew what they were about, this group of Skidians showed a keenness that hadn't been evident the last time he had been on Skid. It was as if they realised that their lives really did depend on working, unlike the other Skidians he had met that treated life on the farm as some kind of distasteful joke.

Once the gaping hole was repaired Bruce mustered a few ivops from the closest paddock into the yard, singled out a likely looking animal and before any of the Skidians knew what was going on, shot it.

After the shot a complete silence settled over the yard, Can and Punch hightailed it for their kennels while Bruce took out his knife and stooped over the carcass.

The Skidians wondered what was going on. Suddenly an ivop was on the ground and bright arterial blood was spurting from its neck. In a matter of seconds the offworlder had succeeded in not only singling out an ivop to kill but had killed it singlehandedly and already had it half skinned before they realised that they should be paying attention. In seconds Bruce had done more to make the Skidians realise their inadequacies than anything he might have said.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Tweest was the knife man and he moved over to assist the offworlder to remove the tough unpalatable outer skin of the ivop, to show that they weren't totally useless.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me, what the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"I am going to help you remove the skin from the ivop," Tweest explained.

"With that?" Bruce took the knife, an exact replica of his own and tested the edge on his thumb. "Huh, you'd be better off using a saw. Use this," he said taking a stele from its pouch.

"Whatever for?" Tweest asked.

"Bugged if I know really."

Bruce showed Tweest where to cut once he had shown him how to put an edge on his knife but it was soon clear to Tweest that the offworlder was doing it all wrong. By now they should all be tearing at the skin to expose the meat. Then offworlder stopped what he was doing and manoeuvred the tractor closer.

Tweest concentrated on what he was doing, but kept half an eye on the offworlder who was jumping on and off the ground vehicle. Suddenly the carcass twitched and Tweest jumped away. Surely it wasn't still alive? Then Tweest

heard the offworlder laughing at him, not only the offworlder but his fellow Skidians which mortified Tweest even more. Then he saw what the offworlder had done.

The carcass was suspended in the air and flaps of skin were hanging down ready to be pulled and tugged off.

"Makes it easier eh, shit for brains?" Bruce asked taking the Skidian's knife while he gawped at the half skinned ivop and put a bit of an edge on it.

Tweest stood on the opposite side of the ivop from the offworlder and followed his every move. It was much easier this way Tweest saw, even his knife cut better.

Soon the skin was lying on the ground underneath the carcass and the offworlder was disembowelling the carcass.

That was something they had never thought about Tweest thought as the others moved forward ready to tear strips of meat off the carcass and stuff it into their mouths.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Bruce barked as some of the Skidians reached towards the carcass grasping strips of flesh and fat and trying to rip them away.

"This is our meal. . . .

"Like fuck it is," Bruce retorted, "not yet it isn't." Bruce was a little surprised to hear a low growl from the Skidians like a dog that was having it's bone pinched.

"I'm not that bloody stupid," Cop retorted, "Punch and Can maybe but not me!" Cop growled and the Skidians retreated a safe distance.

"Hey you," Bruce pointed at two of the Skidians, "drag this away and bury it," he said, pointing to the guts laying on the ground beside the ivop.

After they had dragged it a few metres away the Skidians fell upon the offal as if they hadn't eaten in months. Bruce watched disgustedly as the Skidians in no time at all had blood up to their armpits, blood and gore dripping off their faces. Some of them were even trying to strip the flesh from the skin in their desperation.

"What are they doing that for?" Bruce turned to Tweest who was looking as though he really wanted to join the orgy.

"They don't know when they might have a chance to eat again."

"That lot would be far better off watching what we're doing," Bruce said shaking his head sadly. "They're as mad as meat axes," he muttered under his breath.

nine

"Do the people back at the ranch think like Mischief and his cronies?" Mitch asked as they sped away from the industrial complex.

"They want something called collective leadership there, they want to vote for their leader," Raele replied, shaking his head not understanding how they had developed such bizarre notions.

"A power crazy megalomaniac on one hand and a bunch of commies on the other, not a happy state of affairs. I wonder what the rest are like?"

Raele didn't understand what Mitch meant and didn't really think he wanted to know. Nor did he want to know what fledgling power structures were sprouting elsewhere around the planet. Not just yet.

"Voting for a leader isn't all that bad a thing," Mitch ventured, "but this business of dictatorships and collective leadership has got to be stamped out quickly." He added letting his own well developed prejudices surface.

At least they agreed on something Raele thought, wondering if it was such a good idea to lean too heavily on Mitch. Already he felt as if events were moving out of his control, as if he were on the verge of tumbling headfirst into an abyss, with no chance of saving himself.

First; the Aotearoians had rebelled against him after pledging their support for his leadership. Then Mischief had developed grandiose delusions of

power. The only bright spot was that Mischief had been quickly brought to heel, but what damage had been done in the process?

Already a significant number of Skidians had experienced life without a chief mati and were getting used to the idea of making some of their own decisions, could they ever be brought back into the fold?

And what of the other Skidians he hadn't even sought out yet? Raele tried to grasp the size of the job ahead of him and failed. He suddenly felt as if it was all too much for him, the task seemed to stretch away into the future and he couldn't imagine where it might end.

"What are they doing down there?" Mitch asked, breaking into Raele's train of uncertainty.

"Where?" Raele asked following the direction of Mitch's pointing finger.

Raele banked the patrol craft and looked downward on a primeval scene. A group of desperate Skidians, emaciated, clad in the filthy tattered remains of their robes were milling around the body of an ivop.

Raele watched as several of the group raised large stones into the air and brought them down on the head of the ivop. Raele thought he could see bright red blood spurting into the air as the ivop suddenly lurched to it's feet, leaving several of the Skidians in it's wake and stumbled off.

Immediately the Skidians were onto it again, knocking it to the ground again and this time it didn't stir again.

"Christ," Mitch muttered as the Skidians tore at the carcass, tearing away strips of skin from wherever they could and stuffing bloody flesh and offal into their mouths.

Mitch was stunned by the sight of the Skidians tearing at the bloody flesh with their bare hands almost totally oblivious of his presence. A few heads swung their way as they gingerly stepped off the craft but most of them were too engrossed in their impromptu orgy to give the visitors a second glance.

In his time Mitch had experienced some pretty devastating sights, mainly second hand via reports on the television or special briefings, which he thought had affected him. To the point where he had mobilised the vast resources of his country to help where he could. But here standing on a planet far from home the full impact of the misery suffered by people after a disaster of any kind struck home.

He had seen people in rags before, seen people waiting patiently for food that wouldn't arrive in time to save their emaciated bodies. He'd seen people vainly scrabbling through the wreckage of their homes after a tidal wave or earthquake. He'd watched reporters and various public figures imploring the wealthy to assist the disaster stricken, using their promotional abilities to prick at consciences, stirring the nations guilt which was assuaged by band aids that lasted until the next catastrophe. Mitch had squirmed in frustration as he tried to deal with obdurate leaders who wouldn't accept aid with strings attached, while their people starved and squirmed even more when he was pilloried by his electorate for failing to act.

But he'd never felt as impotent as he felt now or felt a greater urge to do something practical to help .

"We must do something"

"What do you mean?" Raele appeared surprised by the question. It hadn't occurred to him that he could do anything, except maybe point them in the general direction of Aotearoa.

"We must do something to help these people."

"Like what? Raele asked, not thinking about the patrol craft that could easily transport this small group of Skidians to Aotearoa, a patrol craft that carried ample supplies of synfood. Instead he made sure his dazierawogga was ready for instant action in case the situation turned nasty.

"What about food? There must be food aboard and clothes," Mitch added, "and couldn't we transport these Skidians to Aotearoa?"

"Yes, but why should we do that?"

"Raele you want to lead these people, why don't you show some

leadership?"

Raele's mind wasn't focused on the scene as Mitch's was, though he couldn't help but wonder how a Skidian could stoop let himself or herself go as these ones had.

"But what about our meeting with Mischief?"

"Oh fuck Mischief, we can deal with that ratbag later. First lets do something for these poor sods." Mitch didn't wait for Raele's reaction and walked up to the group.

They were an even more pitiable group at closer range. Bony arms and legs, covered in open sores stuck out of their dirty torn robes. They all wore dull, desperate expressions, now splattered with blood and gore as they feebly tore at the dead animal's carcass. Most of them didn't even have access to where the flesh was bared Mitch saw, the weaker ones being pushed out of the way. They didn't appear to have decent weapons either, nor knives, though as he approached one of them raised a rock ready to throw in his general direction.

"Over there is your leader," Mitch pointed to Raele, thinking as he did so that the simple act of saving these poor souls from their desperate existence would ensure they saw Raele as their saviour. "He has come with food and clothing and the promise of a new life."

None of the Skidians really looked interested in what Mitch had to say. Slowly it seemed to occur to a couple of the weaker ones that there might be better pickings elsewhere.

Weakly they made their way toward the space ship and then broke into a painful parody of a run that made Mitch wince just to watch them as a robot appeared at the patrol craft's door pushing a trolley laden with synfood.

Mitch was almost caught in the crush as the rest of the Skidians suddenly realised what was happening and rushed for the trolley. They jostled each other out of the way in their haste as the stronger among them shoved the weak out of the way. Nevertheless there was enough for all.

Within minutes most of them were throwing up whatever they had eaten, but this didn't seem to deter anyone and they continued to gorge until finally they were sated.

Mitch was impressed with the way Raele reacted and with the utility of the Skidian patrol ships. Raele might not be able to think of much himself but once he got the general idea he was a hard man to stop.

While the rest of the Skidians were emptying the food trolley into themselves and out again Raele had set up a mini camp complete with showers, had laid out fresh clothing and was moving among his subjects and accepting their thanks with humility and grace.

Mitch became a little indignant. Wasn't saving them his idea? After a moment he decided - maybe this is better and he considered just how far he might be able to go before Raele realised he was having his strings pulled like a puppet. He sat himself on the ground beside the patrol ship, half listening to the tales of incredible hardship and realised just how thin the veneer of civilisation was for perhaps all so called civilised people.

The remnants of Skid that he had been exposed to seemed to indicate a well ordered and highly sophisticated society supported by a level of technology that made his head swim. As soon as the Skidians experienced a break down in order and were failed by their technology, this group at least, had rapidly degenerated into something primitive and quite frightening. Resorting to cannibalism, living off corpses and worse when their world crashed in around them. They had barely survived where most of their fellows had perished. Who were the lucky ones?

Now, full of food, freshly clothed and washed, secure in the presence of a leader who's right to rule they recognised, these Skidians were transformed once again to their former selves. Or almost. The trauma of their experiences would stick with them for a good long while, if they ever went.

I wonder what they will want now? To return to their cocooned former existences or would they strive for more control over their own lives? Mitch

thought they would more than likely opt for the former approach. Having experienced a life of deprivation they would go for the option that ensured a life of security and full bellies and to hell with anything else. Mitch couldn't find it in himself to blame them and thought it would be rather interesting to see how they mixed with the Aotearoians.

ten

Bruce could understand why the Skidians were getting restless, he was feeling more than a bit peckish himself.

Several times in the last half hour first Ues then Tweest had sidled up to him asking when they might be able to eat.

"When it's ready," Bruce had replied each time, standing guard over the growing pile of meat beside the grill. Under his direction the Skidians had set up a table made of planks, set out some plates and eating gear and under the guidance of Sue and Iaut, the gardener had filled bowls with fresh vegetables. The garden wouldn't be big enough anymore, Bruce reckoned and made a mental note to do something about that as he prodded a few chunks of meat and then took a long drink from his jug of beer.

Bruce would have much rather entrusted the job of cooking the meat to one of the Skidians but none of them seemed keen to learn, apparently assuming that he was taking up the role of food provider, waiting on them hand and foot as it had always been for them. Perhaps they were impatient because they didn't see any reason that the meat needed to be cooked. They'd soon learn he thought. Besides he didn't think any of them, fresh from discovering that their food supply had been chopped could keep their mitts off the meat before it was ready.

"Bruce? It was Ues's turn to ask the tentative question.

"Yes?" Bruce replied rounding on him mildly.

"Is it time yet?"

"Yes, grab your eating gear." Bruce wondered how hungry they were because collectively they had made short work of the offal. It made Bruce churn inside just to think about what raw ivop guts might taste like. He rather thought they would devour the food before them in much the same way as anybody else would who was uncertain where their next meal would come from.

Bruce stood back and watched the Skidians fall on the pile of meat like pigs snuffling and squealing into their troughs at feeding time. Bruce hoped there was enough to go around and left them to it.

Walking inside Bruce saw a large shadow pass overhead and looked up to see Raele landing his space ship. He hoped it was Raele anyhow after the space ship disgorged eight or nine emaciated figures who made directly for the table laden with food.

"Where did you find them?" Bruce asked Mitch as stood watching the two disparate groups collide.

"Just a bunch of half starved Skidians we found wandering about," he grunted as a howl of disappointment rose from the new bunch of Skidians who had clearly been expecting better fare now that they had regained semi-civilised environment.

After their initial disappointment they jostled their way to the where the food was, pushing the Aotearoians out of the way in a most un-Skid like fashion, ignoring the angry frowns of the locals in their haste not to be left out.

"A pretty desperate bunch by the look of them."

"Oh yes," Mitch replied and described the scene he and Raele had come upon.

"I think they're going to be a bit disappointed, because all they could talk about was how they were looking forward to returning to normal," Mitch added. "I don't think they were expecting this at all," he said meaning Aotearoa. "I don't think any of them realise that there is no returning to normal." Mitch continued in a thoughtful vein.

"Yeah," Bruce grunted as if to say he didn't give a stuff either way. He didn't, he didn't really know what he was doing anymore. Suddenly he wasn't excited about being back on Skid and wanted to bugger off home with Sue and the baby. He had better things to do than act as a nursemaid to a bunch of ungrateful Skidians. Didn't know that he wanted a wife and kid either, but he sensed he was stuck with them.

Mitch sensed that Bruce wasn't in the mood to enter into a philosophic conversation, wasn't interested in the least in the plans germinating in his mind. He thought correctly that Bruce probably wasn't in the least bit interested in the political development of Skid.

"Did you know that most of the women here are pregnant?" Mitch tried another tack.

"Raele told me he had stopped some sort of contraceptive being added to the food ages ago. I think he has visions of a baby farm of some kind," Bruce chuckled. "He's on the right track there I reckon. There's not much use worrying about anything if there's not going to be anybody left after a few years is there?"

That was something I hadn't considered, Mitch realised, surprised by the discovery that Bruce contemplated things more than he had given him credit for.

"Apparently some of them down there are doctors of some kind," Bruce began, meaning they had been selected by Inel on the basis they could look after simple problems like child birth. "Can you believe that? I reckon you'd have to be pretty desperate to be worked on by one of them."

"I can see you have a very high opinion of the Skidians Bruce."

"Oh not really, nah that's not fair. They're just different that's all, what do you think we'd be like if we had lived the way they used to?"

Mitch shuddered to think. Then it struck him that so many of the people he personally knew had lived in insulated cocoons totally unaware that there was a whole world around them that existed on another level. Many other levels, Mitch recognised guiltily how insular and isolationist he really had been, sure that his was the one and only way.

"Want something to eat?" Bruce didn't know that he really wanted to eat himself.

"I guess so," Mitch murmured, watching Raele shake off some of the new arrivals who were obviously unhappy with their new home. Mitch shook his head wondering how he was going to make a decent leader out of Raele. His first rule of politics was to keep the people happy, or make them feel good. Raele wasn't doing that, he looked as though he was trying to ignore something smelly that he'd walked in, without much success.

Raele wrinkled his nose, grimaced and tried to push the supplicants away without success where he should have stopped to talk, even if he only made the right noises.

Bruce heard the baby cry somewhere in the house and it occurred to him that he should get up and do something. Exactly what Bruce didn't know. Walk around with it, stick a dummy in it's mouth, tell Sue to deal with it. If it had been a lamb, a pup or a calf he'd know what to do. Ignore the bloody thing until it was time for it's feed. But a baby what the hell should he do with a crying baby?

"Can you look at the baby Bruce?" Sue called from the door, "your dinners' just about ready."

"Bruce had just about decided that ignorance was probably the best policy. Still he thought, I'd better do something. He rose wearily and headed in the general direction of the crying baby.

His son, immediately stopped squawking when it sensed Bruce's presence

standing over him and stared upwards at his father with what could have been an inquiring look on his face.

Ugly little shit, Bruce decided. As he reached down the baby stretched his own arms up and grabbed his father round his neck. Bruce wasn't quite sure how to grab the little mite and wasn't all that happy about the way he was being pinched by the tiny little hands at his neck.

The baby felt so tiny and fragile in his arms, and very wet Bruce quickly discovered.

He looked around the room and found a pile of material that could be nappies. They'll do anyway he decided setting about changing the baby's nappy much to it's disgust.

It began to squeal again and pump it's little legs. "I'm obviously doing something wrong," Bruce muttered, eventually gathering up the baby and the nappies and taking him through to the kitchen for his mother to deal with.

"Thank's Bruce," Sue said in a voice dripping with irony.

"No worries." Bruce said depositing the baby on the floor where he couldn't get into too much trouble.

"Bruce! What did you do that for?"

"He'll be ok, won't he?" Bruce asked helplessly.

"Oh I s'pose so."

Gratefully Bruce walked out onto the deck and sat at the table where quite a little crowd had gathered.

Raele sat stiffly with his back to the rest of the Aotearoians who had gathered below the deck and were talking among themselves. Mistril and Iaut looked full of themselves, as if by sitting at the table in the presence of Raele and the offworlders they had suddenly achieved some kind of dubious status. Mitch looked on with his mouth curling in amusement. Bruce thought he could have done without it and retreated to the kitchen. Better a squalling baby than that lot he thought.

But the kitchen was empty and Bruce suddenly felt totally isolated and left out, a supernumerary. Now what? It wasn't as if he was really needed around the place and if he wasn't what the hell was he going to do? The Skidians would make out somehow and necessity was a great motivator, they wouldn't go hungry.

Neither would he, Bruce didn't let this new melancholy prevent him from eating or having a few more beers.

"What are you doing in here?" Sue asked from the doorway as Bruce stared moodily into a glass of beer. He couldn't articulate his thoughts and was tempted to tell Sue to buzz off when she hugged him around the neck and told him it'd be alright.

"I guess so," he replied, not believing for one minute that it would be.

eleven

Mischief looked like any other tinpot dictator, albeit a lot less confident than some Mitch had seen. He appeared somewhat cowed as he stood alone on the deck of the space ship staring at the man he had sought to supplant and another who obviously wasn't of his world.

My presence alone would be enough to make him uneasy Mitch sensed. His being an outsider, Mischief could not know what he represented and probably didn't appreciate an audience for what would come next. No matter how you said it, failure was still failure and he had failed dismally.

"So we need help from outside," Mischief sneered with what he thought amounted to contempt. He failed and Mitch couldn't help but think that he made a pathetic spectacle standing there with nothing but a fancy title, insignia on his breast and a weapon that Raele quietly informed him wasn't operable anyway, dangling ostentatiously from his neck to make him feel he was something.

Not for the first time Mitch wondered how such and ignorant looking

character could run roughshod over his fellows and set himself up as their leader.

Neither Raele nor Mitch dignified Mischief's sneer with an acknowledgement and Mischief seemed to decline in stature as the moments passed by.

"By what right do you seek to set yourself above other Skidians?" Raele asked at length.

"I, er." Mischief mouth worked but his brain obviously wasn't connected properly. "Because we felt we needed some kind of leadership and nobody else wanted the job, especially as you yourself had entrusted me with certain tasks," he managed at last and Mitch discovered a truism of Skid. They all waited for somebody else to do something.

"And the results of the tasks that I set you?" Raele demanded.

"I do not have the information with me," the empty shell that had so recently lorded itself over his fellows muttered unhappily.

"We can get the information readily enough by accessing the complexes databank," Raele reminded him gently, knowing full well that Mischief hadn't done as he was ordered.

"Possibly."

"You wouldn't lie to me, would you Mischief?"

"Of course not," Mischief lied, staring at his feet.

"What do your people desire, the people you allegedly represent and care for? For you are responsible for your people whether you are aware of that or not."

"I don't really know what they want, they don't know what they want." Mischief had found out quickly that being a leader wasn't all it was cracked up to be. It wasn't just about telling people what to do and the pleasant sensation of exercising power, which was what he had thought. It was all about having a vision for the future, a sense of direction that Mischief knew he didn't have.

Although he was a senior technician at the complex, that wasn't a role that had prepared him for leadership in any fashion. He didn't really know how anything worked, all he knew about was how to monitor the synfood plants and the vast self replicating machinery that ejected various material and machines as part of a program he couldn't fathom. Since Raele had left him in charge and he had tried to make some sense of what he now controlled. Mischief had come to the conclusion the more he learnt the more he realised it was beyond him.

Making himself responsible for the complex had underlined his sense of helplessness, as if he were in charge of a patrol ship but not in control of where in the universe it travelled.

Then there was the insistent clamouring from the other inhabitants of the complex who decided that because he was in charge he had to know what was happening. When would life return to normal? When could they take leave to visit their families, their home prefectures? Few of them seemed to understand that their families were no more and their home prefectures nothing but dirty piles of ash and rubble. Safe in the complex, well provided for as they had always been, the impact of the disaster that had befallen Skid had yet to sink in.

These matters and more gnawed at Mischief as he relied on his fellow Skidians traditional respect for leaders to prevent them from pushing him too far. Despite the delight at having power over his fellows and the trappings of leadership he was almost glad that Raele had returned to confront him. If he survived the meeting he intended to put himself fully at Raele's disposal, as leader of the complex or not. Surely Raele would need somebody he could trust there to do his bidding? Mischief hoped so, ignoring the matter of his recent disloyalty and his loss of face when Raele had confronted him.

"Have you not sought to increase the size of your self proclaimed republic?"

It took Mischief a few moments to realise what Raele was alluding too.

When he did he flushed with embarrassment.

Acting more or less in accordance with Raele's instructions he had sought out other Skidian communities. His experience with the first such community living out in the wilderness had decided him against any further such endeavours.

Quite apart from their ungratefulness at being invited to join his republic, a term he had gleaned from delving into the planet's archives with the limited access that Raele had allowed him, they had confronted him in such an unheard of militant fashion that after delivering a few empty threats of his own he had decided it was safer to leave them to their own devices for the time being and retreat in a dignified fashion.

What his next move would have been if he had realised the fear and uncertainty he had put into the community of Aotearoa was something that he would never be know.

"Not really."

"That's not what my intelligence sources tell me," Mitch said joining the fray and further confusing Mischief. Who was he?

"Then your intelligence sources are misinformed," Mischief spat contemptuously, as if to say 'you are not a Skidian so what do you know?'

"If you say so," Mitch drawled, "but we know better."

"Who is this, this....? Mischief obviously hadn't gotten a handle on who or what Mitch was yet.

"Mitch is an advisor I picked up on my travels," Raele replied casually.

"You should have left him behind." Generations of conditioning about racial supremacy were impossible to conceal.

"I find him quite useful."

'Thank's Raele,' Mitch thought.

"We did have a job in mind for you Mischief, but I don't think you're up to it myself," Mitch said and had the satisfaction of seeing Mischief almost shrink, downwards and away from him.

"I don't think so either," Raele said flipping out his dazierwogga and aiming at Mischief.

Mischief clumsily fumbled for his own weapon, frantically scrabbling at the front of his robe where it had caught. Finally his trembling hand gripped the weapon, pointing it's wavering muzzle in the general direction of Mitch and Raele. It crossed his mind that he hoped he looked as if he couldn't decide on who to shoot first, the lesser of two failures. The truth was that he couldn't hold the muzzle on any target. Mischief closed his eyes and waited for the end, wondering what it would feel like and squeezed the trigger

He was amazed that he felt nothing, surely there must be some sort of sound? Mischief had never used the weapon before, not even to test it, but he had always been confident that it would operate if he needed to use it.

"Your dazierwiogga isn't armed Mischief," Raele told him as Mischief imagined he had taken the two men confronting him, with him into the after life.

Mischief opened his eyes wondering what he would find and found he was still alive. He felt his chest begin to heave painfully and something beat like a drum in there, moisture began to collect around his eyes. For a few moments all he could do was suck air into his lungs and wipe the moisture which now streamed down his face, unsure whether to be relieved at finding himself still alive or apprehensive as to his future. What horrors did Raele and his advisor might have in store for him?

While Mischief was discovering that he was still alive, Mitch didn't think he looked a very happy fellow. He was glad that he hadn't been responsible for that. Mitch had been responsible for a few deaths in his time, but they were of the impersonal kind.

Soldiers fighting dirty little wars in the areas of perceived interest to his nation and the like which had never troubled him. But here, this was real, this was personal and even though he wouldn't have pulled the trigger he reckoned that he would have felt responsible for Mischief's death.

But he and Raelle had other plans for Mischief and Raelle had decided to scare him into obedience.

"No matter how strong and powerful you think you are Mischief, I am stronger and much more powerful," Raelle told the trembling Skidian who had slumped to his knees in a parody of supplication. Mitch wondered whether his next move would be to kiss Raelle's feet or something.

"Remember this when you return to your republic, you exist at my pleasure and so does your republic.

Mischief was too stunned to reply, not only was he still alive but he believed he was hearing Raelle say he was being sent back to the industrial complex as it's leader?

"Our world has changed," Raelle continued, "we need to work hard to return Skid to it's former glory and there are almost too few of us to do this, we cannot afford to discard anybody from this process at this crucial period in our history. Do you understand me Mischief?"

Mischief didn't really, but in the time honoured traditions of his race he nodded his head.

"What role could you play in the reconstruction of Skid Mischief?" Mitch asked.

"Ah," Mischief hadn't given that concept any thought.

"To maintain the industrial complex perhaps," Mitch suggested, "and to actively offer support and assistance to the other communities on Skid, to actively seek out these communities?"

"Yes," Mischief replied ambiguously. Neither he nor Mitch, nor Raelle were uncertain as to what he meant.

"The Skidians at Aotearoa will need medical assistance for example, those still wandering around the wilderness need to be brought to a place of safety."

"Yes I understand." Mischief had seen some of these wild bands of Skidians and steered a wide path around them, they seemed to have reverted to a savage and primitive state. They appeared much more dangerous than the misguided souls that had refused his assistance at the place called Aotearoa.

"And you must ask the members of your own republic what they want, what they want from a new Skid."

They didn't want much, Mischief decided knowing the task was beyond him, he was already doomed to failure. In reality Raelle didn't expect much and didn't know how these expectations could be achieved either. The ideas were all Mitch's, outlined and reliably regurgitated. Raelle hoped that Mitch knew what he was doing and how he would go about it, just as Raelle hoped that Bruce back at Aotearoa knew what he was doing.

Raelle certainly didn't understand what Mitch meant by suggesting they set up a simple economy, swapping the produce of Aotearoa for technical assistance from the industrial complex. How could he make the people of the complex eat the organic food when they had the production of the largest synfood plants to draw on?

Raelle had quickly forgotten that the failure of the synfood plants for whatever reason was the cause of his planet's present predicament. But he dutifully repeated Mitch's demand that a rudimentary barter economy and the basis for an education system be established which would lead to the enforced intermingling of people from all over the planet.

Mitch had plans for the sort of political meetings and conventions that he was used to back home to sell his idea of democracy and discover what the feelings of the Skidians were for political change. He assumed that the people would want change, that they realised their old feudal hereditary system with little input from the unwashed was dead and buried. He assumed that the Skidians wanted change, would demand change, just as his own country had thrown off colonial rule as soon as they got the chance and developed a system of government that had been copied right around the world.

But those things were for the future, Mischief and the others like him, that Mitch was sure they'd find around the planet, would have enough trouble

coping with his initial tasks let alone dealing with a fundamental reconstruction of the very culture that had sustained them for longer than anybody knew.

The meeting was suddenly over. One moment Mischief was standing there looking as if he was burdened by the collective woes of the planet, obviously not really understanding what was required of him and the next Ruele had flipped a button and he was gone.

Mitch had expected something more or less of the meeting. He wasn't sure what he expected. He had expected Mischief to ask questions to demur on some points and suggest other ideas. But there was none of that, it was as if Mischief had received his orders from on high and was off to implement them. What a wasted effort Mitch thought as Ruele said: "I think that went rather well don't you?" Ruele was pleased with himself, he had conducted the confrontation just as Mitch had suggested.

Mitch groaned inwardly and realised that there was much he didn't understand about the Skidians or their planet. He couldn't understand how they expected that things would just happen if they said it would. He had never experienced Skid when just saying was usually tantamount to having something done because it was achieved by a system that on the most part didn't involve Skidians themselves. There was a whole system that controlled, built, monitored, and maintained almost every aspect of Skidian life as evidenced by the ongoing reconstruction of the practically empty Skidian cities without any input from the Skidians themselves.

He also realised that he probably didn't need to understand all that much to run the place. After all he didn't know all that much about his own world and the way that it had operated, all he had to guide him were set of firmly fixed principles which had been enough to take him to the highest office in his land.

He'd done a fairly good job there hadn't he? Mitch liked to think so anyway. It was only in his darkest moments that he truthfully appraised his life and found that he could have done better.

That too often he fallen back on expediency to boost his falling ratings or repay old debts and had employed the transparent political chicanery of those he despised in order get what he wanted.

twelve

A sudden commotion from the direction of the dog kennels woke Bruce. He lay there in the darkness for several moments before realising that something was wrong. Then one of them yelped as if it had been struck. They certainly weren't happy about something.

Bruce leapt out of bed and ran through the house, out the back door and into the night illuminated by a full moon. He could see a group of Skidians milling around the kennels and heard a thud as if they were attacking the kennels with a lump of wood. The dogs were barking madly, spitting and snarling.

"What the fuck's going on here?" Bruce demanded angrily as he came upon the group unnoticed.

"We want to eat them," one of the Skidians said from the darkness. Evidently they had decided that the dogs would be easier prey than an ivop.

"What? Get away from there or I'll let them eat you!" Bruce yelled angrily. But the Skidians didn't budge an inch, several of them continued beating at the kennels, ignoring him.

In the moonlight Bruce recognised these Skidians as the ones that Ruele had dropped off a few days previously. They'd been nothing but trouble since, grizzling about the food, the lack of accommodation and wanting to go home as soon as possible. Bruce had just ignored them, they weren't his problem, even though they seemed to think it was. For some reason these Skidians seemed to think he was there to look after them. Bruce didn't really know why he was

there at all, but it certainly wasn't to baby sit any Skidians.

"Find something for us to eat," one of them demanded from the out of the darkness.

"Get lost," said Bruce walking up to one of the Skidians bashing away at the kennel. He grabbed the length of syn timber the Skidian was holding and whacked him around the backside.

"Yoww!" Screamed the Skidian, more surprised that he had been hit, than hurt.

"You blouse. I didn't hit you that hard!"

The rest of the Skidians stood motionless, silent except for their heavy breathing and Bruce suddenly remembered that these Skidians probably wouldn't be phased by violence as the more civilised ones were if what Mitch had said was true.

"Go on, piss off." Bruce waved the piece of timber around and then turned to check on his dogs. He let them out one by one and they showed their relief at being saved from the cooking pot by jumping up and trying to lick him on the face.

The Skidians slowly dispersed, Bruce could make their figures out meandering up the hill towards the sleeping quarters that had been assigned them.

Skid was a much more dangerous place now, Bruce had always felt the Skidians had a hostile nature that was held in check by the Skidian way. With the Skidian way breaking down along with everything else there was nothing to stop the Skidians exhibiting their true nature.

The Aotearoans were subdued which was probably natural, they were probably more apprehensive than anything else. These other ones were like wild animals with a veneer of sophistication, Bruce reckoned he'd better watch not only his dogs, but his back as well.

As if to reinforce this theory several rocks struck the ground above him and he could here the jeers of the departing Skidians as they disappeared.

Well they're not that brave Bruce said to himself but this development was disturbing nonetheless. It showed just how fragile the threads that held society were and how quickly they could break when the system broke down as it had in Skid.

Bruce wondered what Raele was doing about reasserting his authority, a good swift kick where it hurt wouldn't go amiss he thought wondering whether he should administer the first dose himself.

He walked over and inspected the dog kennels. Despite the attack they hadn't suffered any structural damage and the Skidians despite their well publicised technological superiority hadn't realised that simply pressing a depression on the door would open them. The dogs would be ok in there, but even safer if he left them off.

Bruce made his way back to the house and found Sue breast feeding the infant.

"What was all the noise about?"

"Oh just some of those new Skidians trying to eat the dogs."

"The poor things," Sue commented. Bruce didn't know whether she meant the dogs or the Skidians. "Why would they want to do that?"

"I dunno really, I guess they don't realise that the dogs aren't for eating, do you reckon I should make that clear, and a few other things as well?"

"What other things Bruce?" Sue detected the almost irrational streak in Bruce that she remembered from before. He was likely to go off on all sorts of emotional tangents at the drop of a hat or lose his temper over the slightest provocation.

"Well I'm the boss around here," Bruce gently reminded her, "and if I say go do something, I mean go do it. Besides I'm not going to have these wankers throwing rocks or sniggering at me because they think I won't do anything about it."

"Since when are you the boss ?"

"Since this is my place, I built it up after all."

"That doesn't make you the boss Bruce."

"Ok, I'm going to be the boss because I want to be, how's that?"

"Oh come on Bruce, you have no right to tell these people what to do, this is their planet afterall." But she knew as she made the comment that it wouldn't stop Bruce and she didn't know that she wanted him to. She felt a little vulnerable herself. In the past she had sensed that Skidian men had viewed her with some distaste and had no sexual interest in her at all. While she resented the former sensation the latter one relieved her and helped her to feel safe. But now as she moved around the place she felt eyes following her, appraising her in a frank sexual manner. It was as if they had all suddenly discovered sex, the number of female Skidians who seemed to be pregnant testified to that.

She looked up and saw Bruce looking down at her with a disturbed look on his face.

"What's the matter?" He asked with concern.

"Oh," she shrugged her shoulders, "I don't really know, I feel a little bit uneasy that's all."

"Maybe we should leave?"

"Leave, leave where?" Sue laughed at the idiocy of the statement.

"Oh I don't know, somewhere different, it's not as if we have to stay here is it?"

"Oh I suppose not." But Sue didn't really want to leave, apart from the Skidians she felt comfortable at Aotearoa. Maybe the Skidians would leave. I doubt that too, she decided.

Something struck the roof and rolled all the way down, eventually falling to the ground with a thud. Another rock or whatever struck the roof and then another, accompanied by the laughing and jeering of a group of Skidians standing at the edge of the light thrown out by the outside lights.

"What's going on out there Bruce?" Sue asked, flinching, suddenly really frightened as something out struck the side of the house.

"Just the local vandals playing silly buggers. I'll sort them out."

Bruce walked calmly out to the ute which was parked between the house and the unruly mob of Skidians and reached inside for the rifle sitting on the brackets behind the seat.

He looked up at the mob of Skidians and noticed that their numbers had swelled as if somebody had been doing some stirring, had whipped up the crowd with their demagoguery. One of them appeared to be inciting the crowd, Bruce couldn't hear what he was saying but he was definitely pointing towards the house and another shower of rocks and stones were flung out of the darkness in it's general direction.

Taking a closer look Bruce could see another larger group of Skidians who he recognised as the inhabitants of Aotearoa off to one side and wondered what they were doing. Even to his untrained eye, Bruce had never seen an angry mob, a riot unless you counted an spooked mob of cattle, the situation looked dangerous. The mob of Skidians was inching forward and more rocks came hurtling out of the night hitting the house. Why it should be their target he didn't know, he couldn't work out why the Skidians were so upset. Would they really have preferred to stay put out in the wilderness where just to stay alive was a struggle almost beyond them?

In fact the two groups of Skidians seemed to be taking more interest in each other than in the house as they faced off. Bruce couldn't work that one out either. The original mob wasn't moving toward the house any longer but toward the group of Skidians that comprised the original members of Aotearoa.

There was a lot of talking and finger wagging going on and Bruce could clearly see that both groups had armed themselves with lengths of syn timber and rocks, but for the moment they weren't doing much more than intimidating each other. They had to know that they could hurt each other with their primitive weapons. Maybe they were just reluctant to do so.

Bruce was glad that none of them had access to real weapons otherwise one

or more of them might pluck up the courage to use them and there would be a real bloodbath. But over what? Bruce asked himself. It wasn't as if they didn't already have a leader in Raelle, it wasn't as if they were going to go hungry, it wasn't as if they needed to scrap over resources. They probably had just realised that their world had changed irrevocably and were looking for someone to blame, maybe they didn't know that those Skidians were all dead or maybe they were just too thick to understand that things could never be the same again.

"What's going on out there Bruce?"

Bruce glanced upwards and saw Sue on the veranda holding the baby with a couple of Skidians peering nervously over her shoulder.

"Dunno really, but you'd better get back inside in case things get nasty."

"What about you Bruce?"

"Eh?" Bruce hadn't given any thought to his own safety, "Oh I'll be ok."

"Please be careful dear," said Sue as she disappeared into the house.

Bruce heard the door slide shut behind her.

He pointed the rifle upwards and pulled the trigger. Can and Punch immediately whined and made a beeline for the underside of the ute but Cop followed him eagerly up the hill.

The sound of the shot seemed to have little effect on the Skidians and Bruce realised they didn't associate it with death, injury or somebody asserting authority even though most of them had seen the sort of damage he could do to the head of an ivop.

"What's going on here?" Bruce demanded stepping into the space between the two groups of Skidians.

Bruce saw the tense and angry expressions on the faces of the Skidians on both sides and wondered whether he had done the right thing. A knot tightened in his stomach and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up and he felt his heart beat faster as adrenalin trickled into his blood stream.

'Now what boss?' Bruce had forgotten that Cop could speak to him.

"Oh bite your bum," Bruce muttered, if there was one thing he could do without, that was a smart arse dog. He easily evaded a rock that came flying out of the darkness towards him. "Bite his instead why don't you?"

Cop snarled, leapt into the darkness and moments later there was an anguished cry as Cop nipped the backside of a Skidian sending Bruce a mental image as he did so. Bruce thought Cop was overdoing it a bit as he growled and snarled, worrying the Skidian.

The crowd of Skidians parted around the dog and the unfortunate one now flat on his back being licked to death by three dogs.

The sight seemed to break the tension and several of them even started laughing in a nervous sort of way, as if they were relieved that some other Skidian was in trouble and not themselves.

"What seems to be the trouble here?" Bruce asked repeated.

"We are hungry."

"They are not abiding by the rules of this community."

"We want to return to our homes."

"They are disrupting the stability of our community with their demands."

"We want Raelle to be our leader."

"Where is the synfood?"

"Where are the stim games?"

"Where are the service crews?"

"How are we supposed to live out here?"

Bruce was inundated by demands and claims of the Skidians who now crowded around him pushing forward, talking over the top of others and insisting they be heard.

After several minutes Bruce shook his head and raised his hands for silence without any noticeable effect on the clamour that was threatening to overwhelm him.

"For fucks' sake shut up will you!" He yelled to everyone in general,

"you're not going to solve anything by jumping up and down and yelling at each other, are you?"

The talk subsided to an angry murmur while Bruce tried to decide what to do next. It looked as if he had diffused the near riot but he understood that the problems still weren't resolved.

"Ok, that's better," he said as if addressing a crowd of kids trying to decide whether they were going to Mac Donalds or Georgie Pie for lunch, when he'd prefer good old fish'n' chips himself.

"Um, what about you have a talk among yourselves and er, come back later on with your grievances and we'll see if we can sort them out?"

"We have our community council for that!" One of the Aoterioians muttered.

"What's a community council?" One of the new arrivals demanded, we want Raele to hear our demands.

"The community council runs this community, it makes the laws and decides what we will do."

"We don't like those laws and rules, we aren't represented on the council."

"You only got here yesterday," said another exasperated voice.

"So what? We're all Skidians, we all live by the same set of rules.

"Don't you understand that life has changed on Skid?" Bruce spoke up as squatted, rolling himself a smoke wondering why he had even bothered interrupting them in the first place.

"And who are you that you think you can tell us what to do?" An angry voice asked.

Bruce stood up and looked around at the farm that was slowly becoming visible in the growing light of a Skidian dawn. He saw the yards and the fences that he had built, the ivops he had mustered and the house where he had lived all those months.

"Because this is mine," he said introducing a foreign concept none of the Skidians understood, "because I created this place with my own hands," which was stretching the truth a bit, "because I say so," which was the most significant comment he made.

Bruce didn't quite understand why it happened but suddenly alien as he was the Skidians appeared for the moment to have found what they were searching for, somebody that assumed authority as of right which was something none of them had been able to do in the circumstances.

Bruce felt the tension evaporate as if a balloon had been punctured and the Skidians all looked expectantly in his direction waiting to be told what to do.

'Oh you will make such a fine leader boss, we have taught you everything we know,' Cop chuckled beside him.

'And you can shut up too,' Bruce thought back, as he wrestled with the situation that confronted him. He wished it was Mitch and not he that stood there, at least he was used to being a leader, what had seemed so simple moments before now assumed overwhelming proportions in his mind.

"Well?" He demanded of the Skidians, "what are you waiting for?"

After a moment the group began to disperse wondering what had happened, wondering what the new leader they had accepted wanted from them, wondering whether it was such a good idea after all.

thirteen

Bruce sighed and walked back to the house hoping that the Skidians would be too busy now squabbling among themselves to hassle him. If they were to survive they would have to start looking after themselves. Bruce knew he wasn't the person to lead them into the future by aptitude or inclination, he just wanted them to keep out of his hair.

He thought about Raele, but dismissed him also. Raele might have the breeding and all the rest of it, but he wasn't cut out to be a leader either.

Raele possessed all the credentials, but when it came to the crunch he just wasn't equipped for the task. Mitch might be interested but Bruce was sure that if offered the choice between staying on Skid and returning home his choice would be clear cut.

"Bruce!" Bruce turned around to see Ues trotting after him. He bowed in the way that Bruce had seen the Skidians defer to Raele.

"Yes?"

"Would you be so kind as to help us prepare an ivop for eating?"

Might as well, Bruce decided. Down by the yards several figures were already opening and closing gates and others were marching in close formation down to the nearest paddock.

"What about the others?" Bruce asked, meaning the rest of the Skidian community.

"Oh they will talk, they will want to eat and they will talk again and do nothing, just as they always have," Ues added contemptuously.

"And you?"

"Oh some of us understand that we need to do something, we cannot just sit around and wait."

"That's very true. What are they talking about?"

"I think most of them will decide to return to the cities and wait, Sietnuoc isn't that far away."

"What will they do there?"

"We know that the cities have been rebuilt, most of them assume that they are just waiting for us to return."

"What about you?"

Ues looked around him, up at the sky and smiled.

"Out here we can be free, that's what we all once wanted, to get away from the old ways and live as free Skidians, without being bound by the Skidian way. To create a new way for Skidians to live where we can learn to look after ourselves without being forced by traditional expectations to act in a certain way. I never expected to live like this, before my life was simply waiting to die, out here I can do things, I think this is what life is all about," Ues smiled again.

"So you are going to stay?"

"Oh yes, many of us will stay with you to lead us."

Charming I'm sure, Bruce thought. Minutes ago Bruce had been wondering whether he should just pack up and leave, now it looked as if just about everybody else was.

"Are you alright Bruce?" Bruce started guiltily, he hadn't thought to tell Sue he was ok.

"Yes dear," he replied in the same tired manner that he remembered his father talking to his mother when she asked something where the answer was obvious. Yes I have a sore head, yes I am groaning because I have busted my leg.

"I'll be back soon," he added not stopping. There was another problem, what was he going to do about her? Somehow, despite her insistence Bruce didn't think their relationship would survive long, here or back home. Not that he'd really applied himself to the issue yet, not that he didn't realise he had some moral obligations in that direction.

"Don't be too long, breakfast will be ready soon."

"Shit," he muttered under his breath, life was getting far too complicated, Miss High Powered 90's woman was getting all domestic on him.

Bruce shot an ivop and the Skidians swarmed all over it before he could move, clumsily emulating his exhibition of the previous day.

More of them had knives now and had discovered sometime in the intervening hours that sharpening them made them far more effective.

Watching Bruce had to admit that they were fast learners if they wanted to be and they soon made short work of the ivop carcass. If they carried on at this rate they soon wouldn't need him at all. He would become the supernumerary that he always thought he should. And then what? He asked

himself.

He had returned to Skid without question, excited at the prospect and was now disconcerted to find that in a few short days all he wanted was to go home again.

"Fuck it," he said kicking disconsolately at a tuft of grass and hurting his big toe in the process on the rock it hid.

He walked back up to the house and found Raele sitting at the table wearing a moody expression.

"Where's Mitch?" Bruce thought Raele might have dumped him off somewhere or done away with him.

"Over there," Raele pointed to where a group of Skidians had gathered around the barbecue apparently listening to Mitch who had found himself a chair to stand on and was haranguing them about something.

"What's he on about?" Bruce could see the rapt expressions on the faces of the closest Skidians, how they seemed to hang on his every word. Obviously telling them what they wanted to hear.

"Government I think." Mitch had patiently explained to Raele what government was, what democracy was and spread his message among the Skidians they had met on their travels across the planet.

Even now there were groups of Skidians making their way across the wilderness to Aotearoa or the industrial complexes ready and eager to join this new experiment that as far as Raele could ungratefully see, would simply deprive him of his rightful place at the head of the Skidian people.

Mitch had explained that this wasn't necessarily so, that even being the elected president of a governing council was still a position of immense power and prestige. Raele didn't believe him, all that he could see laying before him were the fragments of his shattered dreams.

Bringing Mitch to Skid had been a mistake Raele realised, just as letting the offworlder that sat across from him, live after being brought to the planet had been a terrible mistake of his father's. But Bruce wasn't a bad sort, Raele felt in some ways he had more in common with Bruce right at the moment than he did with his own people, Bruce was as out of place here as he was.

"Well, things change Raele, your people have experienced an unprecedented disaster, everything they thought was solid and dependable has been proven to be a house of straw."

"Straw?"

"Um something that can be blown over, destroyed, means that whatever was before was little more than an illusion which was only perpetuated because people believed in it's permanence."

"Does this sort of thing happen on your planet?"

"Well we haven't experienced disaster on the scale that you have, but then we elect our leaders every few years, if they don't deliver what we want they are thrown out. In our style government the power of hereditary leaders like yourself has been diluted and steadily trimmed until they are heads of state in name only." Bruce knew things weren't quite as simple as that. Still Raele probably wasn't in the mood to learn that earth didn't have a single state like Skid did or had, but was divided up into many states, with different styles of government. Bruce didn't know whether he understood how government worked either, not the least because in many cases it didn't.

Raele didn't feel any better. Even if he was elected it appeared that there was no guarantee that he would stay elected, any weak and vain idiot like Mischief could get himself elected if he said the right thing, promised the right things.

That wasn't right surely? He asked himself indignantly. Was Mitch making the same sort of promises, some he could and others he surely couldn't keep to the Skidians who sat not too far away?

Shouldn't I be listening to him as well? The Skidian way among other things had been an extremely conservative system. That meant that change was slow if non existent, but it also meant continuity, Skidians knew where they

were at all times. Raele was perceptive enough to see that having elected leaders, the sheer impact of being involved in government would create an upheaval almost as great as the recent disaster. There would be change, well that was obvious, but there would be reverses in direction and many Skidians would become confused and distraught at what these changes meant.

The fixed points on which they had always orientated themselves would be no more. Did they now, was this one of the reasons why they were so eager to seek out new ways of doing things? Or were they really so eager? So many of them seemed to simply desire to return to the cities and the old ways. Raele shook his head feeling very confused, he just didn't know what to think or what to do. Perhaps he should just leave Skid and exile himself to Celcious B or somewhere else in the universe just as others had before him to escape assassination by other's in line to assume positions of leadership.

Raele thought about his own brothers out there somewhere. Where were they, what were they doing? Their father had given each of them a patrol craft and told them to go and they had gone without question.

The people of earth who were obsessed by basketball would have been astounded to discover that two of the icons of that sport were in fact Skidians who had taken the opportunity to avoid certain death. Instead they had achieved positions of prestige and universal adulation that even in their wildest dreams would never have thought possible.

fourteen

Mitch was totally confident in was his ability to speak to a crowd of people, whether they be his averred opponents, supporters or the merely neutral and make them believe he was telling them exactly what they wanted to hear. It wasn't true of course and mostly his speeches were written by other people so he really didn't know what he was saying. But he had a powerful commanding and somewhat comforting voice and a good line of rhetoric so that whatever he said seemed to put people at ease; while he was speaking anyway.

Following Raele off the ship after what he thought was quite a successful jaunt around Skid, meeting the people, hearing what they had to say and where necessary directing them to places of security in the cities or the industrial complexes. Raele had tried to direct more Skidians to this place but Mitch couldn't see the point and with growing confidence overrode Raele to the point where he considered Raele to be little more than his personal chauffeur.

Mitch had found the Skidians back at the quaintly named Aotearoa sitting around the grill waiting for their breakfast to cook.

He wandered over to hear what they had to say, but mostly because he was hungry as well and immediately sensing their mood clambered onto a chair and began to address them.

At first he just tried to get their collective interest. He told the expectant hopeful crowd that while things had been tough for them recently, their situation was rapidly improving, life would soon return to normal. He could see from the way they turned their attention to him after initially being reluctant to listen, that they liked the sound of what he was saying. Their individual conversations died and he could see heads nod as he spoke and expressions of hope appear on their downcast faces. He was telling them what they wanted to hear and he warmed to his task accordingly.

"Even I an outsider can see that Skid was once great and can soon be great again with the right kind of leadership, again we will be the envy of the universe beholden to nobody else." Mitch easily assumed indigenous status as he had of those states that he needed to carry on his way to the presidency of the United States.

"To achieve this goal, we must work together and harness all the resources of Skid, reopen to habitation all the great cities and get the factories working." Mitch carried on in a similar vein far half an hour or so,

using words and terms that were as foreign to the Skidians as he was himself. Not that it really mattered, even if they didn't understand much of what he said, the Skidians liked a good speech.

Mitch took no notice of the obvious dissenters standing around the edge of the gathering, sagely shaking their heads as he repeated his main points for the umpteenth time, the rest of them were eating out of the palm of his hand. That was enough.

"We must work together to make Skid great again, get the factories and cities operating so that we can all live like decent hu...., er Skidians!" He finished on a high note, in one foul swoop, telling the Skidians exactly what they wanted to hear and in the process ensuring that the Skid of the future would be the same vulnerable, conservative stunted benevolent dictatorship it had always been, simply existing to ensure the survival of the species not it's continued development.

Offered the chance of a brave new world or a return to the bad old days that they so fondly recalled there was only one way any decent Skidian was going to vote.

Mitch wasn't sure whether he had struck the right chord with his audience, he was feeling the right vibes, but where he normally would have expected a rousing round of applause as he finished speaking he was merely greeted with a somewhat stunned silence.

Then the Skidians decided that breakfast was ready and began to fight over the rough cuts of meat on the grill.

Stepping rather tiredly off the chair, Mitch shook his head. He couldn't believe that nobody had even bothered to ask any questions let alone heckle him as he was used to.

He spied Raele standing off to one side and wondered whether his presence had a subduing effect on the crowd. Mitch didn't think so somehow, Raele already looked like yesterday's man.

Perhaps they could set up a monarchy to give Raele some sort of place in the realm of things, Mitch had a fancy to rub shoulders with the nobility, he'd always fancied that he and King Charlie of England were good enough friends. Though Charlies habit of looking a bit stiff when he laid a hand on his shoulders in a friendly fashion and suggested they spend more time in each other's company made Mitch feel a bit uncomfortable. Odd fellows those Brits.

Anyhow Raele certainly had the right credentials, the Skidians still deferred to him even though they weren't taken too much with his fancy theories about greater self reliance and actually having to perform some sort of commie sounding service to society in return for being a member of that society. That sort of thing was ok for people on the fringe of society, like the those that wanted to live out here, but the cities were where it would all be at.

What was the point of having large fully automated industrial complexes that supplied every conceivable need in a comfortable city if nobody used them?

Besides the country was a nice place to go for a break, but live there? Not likely.

"Everything ok Raele?" Mitch walked over and asked.

"You speak eloquently," Raele replied, " just like my father and our other leaders. But what about those that require substance and not just fancy words?"

"Don't worry Raele, I think I can handle it."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

Mitch watched Raele walk among his people and seek out those he recognised as the ones that hadn't been happy with his speech. A significant minority still seemed to be on Raele's side. But that wasn't a worry, Mitch was sure from what he'd seen elsewhere that most Skidians would leap at the chance to get back to normal, if a few Skidians wanted to stay out here in the boonies he wasn't going to stop them. Might be a nice place for a palace, for a king to reign.

"Oh the future looks great," Mitch muttered, congratulating himself for being so clever and looking forward to the future as he hadn't for a long while.

"Right you bastards, get your shit together!" Bruce yelled and Mitch watched his vision of a brave new world wobble at the foundations.

To a Skidian they stopped what they were doing and gave Bruce the benefit of their limited attention.

"Right, it's work time, anybody that doesn't want to work Sietnuoc is that way." Bruce pointed his finger out over the plain. "The rest of you if you want to eat, you gotta do some work."

Mitch watched the Skidians look at one another, as if they didn't understand and caught the beginning of a smile on the face of Raele who did realise what Bruce meant and his own spirits plummeted accordingly.

"How did he do that?" Bruce had managed to get the Skidians full attention and then get them to do what he wanted after a fashion, in a way that Mitch knew he couldn't emulate. Obviously the Skidians respected, maybe feared Bruce, whereas he could only appeal to their greed and desires.

"He's got a way with him hasn't he?" Mitch found Sue beside him, with the baby strapped on her back in American Indian fashion.

"How does he do it?"

"Ever seen him work his dogs? If they don't do what he says once he yells at them, if they don't do it twice he gives them a kick in the ribs or threatens too."

"That's repugnant, he sounds like something out of the middle ages, like he's a guard at a forced labour camp."

"Oh there's a bit more to it than that," Sue explained.

"Like what?"

"You want to eat don't you?"

"What's that got to do with anything?" Mitch demanded watching Bruce move among the Skidians obviously explaining what he wanted done as small groups moved off in different directions, perhaps unwillingly, but they moved off nevertheless.

"Must be off." Sue laughed brightly and attached herself to one of the groups that was making it's way down to the overgrown garden.

What the hell are they up to? Mitch asked himself, reminded that he was still hungry by the mention of food.

"Well what are you going to do with yourself Mitch mate?"

"What do you mean?" Mitch was a little startled by Bruce's demeanour. In fact in the moments afterward he found himself starting to be offended by Bruce's sarcasm.

"What am I going to do indeed! What business is it of yours may I ask?" Mitch retorted.

"New rule at Aotearoa Mitch, you have to work for your supper, you especially have to lead a good example."

"What do you mean by that?" Mitch asked, mystified.

"Well you want to lead these blokes and blokesses to the promised land don't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh get off the grass Mitch, I've seen the likes of you in action before. Promise the earth and deliver fuck all once you've got what you want."

"I still don't know what you're talking about," Mitch retorted feeling himself grow hot under the collar as blood rushed to his face. Had he stepped over some invisible boundary that he wasn't aware of? Had he been so obvious in his play for control? Mitch thought he was more subtle than that, he hadn't actually confronted Raele or made a direct play for anything, he'd simply-made the Skidians aware of their options, hadn't he?

"You know Mitch, you're a typical politician, I was just telling Raele that you can't trust the bastards an inch."

"I resent that remark young man, I'll have you know that I am proud of my

stance on moral issues and the way we cleaned up graft and corruption in my administration."

"Look here you old pratt, I'm not talking about reintroducing school prayers, saluting the flag and all that shit, I'm talking about making promises you know you can't possibly keep and shitting on those that have no power to fight back from a great height."

Bruce was aware that he could have been far more diplomatic in his dealings with Mitch. They would have to put up with each other for the foreseeable future, but something about the man rubbed him up the wrong way. He'd been on Skid for just a few days and thought he knew exactly what the Skidians needed and wanted.

He could well have a few of them, Bruce acknowledged and his skills in government would be most useful in the times ahead. Nevertheless it grated on him that Mitch seemed to be taking the opportunity of the Skidians general insecurity and the disintegration of the established power structures on the planet to mount a take over bid.

"Well maybe that is what I'm doing, what are you going to do about it?" Mitch wasn't used to being challenged by somebody he considered subordinate if not inferior. Nor did he know quite how to handle Bruce, who obviously considered himself neither of these.

"Nothing much, in the end it comes down to what the Skidians want, I'm just going to help them work out how to decide and what their options are."

"That's exactly what I'm doing," Mitch responded angrily at the implied accusation. "Anyhow I don't see how you can stop me from doing what I think's right."

"Yeah well your own common sense should tell you how, besides as far as I'm concerned around here I'm the law for the moment and if you don't like it, as I said to the Skidians, Sietnuoc is that way." Bruce flung his arm up so quickly that Mitch thought he was going to hit him and ducked instinctively.

Mitch spluttered with righteous indignation but he knew he was beaten for the moment.

"Can I have something to eat?" He asked meekly, while inside he seethed wishing there was some way he could get rid of Bruce or beat him at his own game.

"Yeah sure Mitch, then you can think about how you're going to teach these idiots about government," Bruce suggested.

Mitch watched Bruce saunter away and noticed one of the dogs staring at him in a quizzical fashion. It's head cocked sideways, one ear standing up in the air like a question mark, it looked as if it knew exactly what was going on, that he had been manipulated cleverly by Bruce.

'You sure have, you old goat,' a voice that had an uncanny resemblance to Bruce's spoke into his mind.

Mitch gave the dog a disdainful stare and then was mortified when the dog trotted over, cocked his leg and squirted a stream of urine at his legs before he could do anything and then trotted off.

Bruce might not have pissed on him but Mitch felt that he'd been firmly put in his place. This only increased the burning resentment he felt, the need to get even until it struck him that Bruce must be fairly sure of himself to put him to work showing the Skidians how to govern themselves. Then he just became merely resentful about the fact that somebody else had the pull to put him in his place, something that hadn't happened for as long as Mitch could remember.

fifteen

Ediud scrutinised his handy work, with delight from his base on Celcious B. It didn't matter that untold millions had died for his ambition, all that mattered was that he was going to revenge himself on the Skidians that had spurned his superior talents, even if they were long since dead.

It had irked him that Raele, his youngest brother, had been chosen by their father to be his successor and from the first days of his exile he had planned his revenge on the system that encouraged institutionalised mediocrity. The best potential leaders of Skid were either quietly disinfected or exiled because they were too clever by half. For not only would they show up their inferior peers for the incompetents they were, they would institute changes to the Skidian way which was more important than life itself.

Ediud's ambitions had expanded since he had been exiled, why content himself with Skid and Celcious? There was a whole universe to conquer.

Celcious B was firmly under his control with minimal resistance. Since synfood had stopped arriving from Skid it had been much easier since some Celcions had simply starved to death and the remaining Celcions looked fearfully for somebody to save them from that fate. He. Eduid of course, so he liked to think.

What had really saved the majority of Celcions was a tradition of living off what the planet could provide, a tradition that was weakened but not destroyed when Skid began supplying synfood to their forbears.

There were still many sturdy young men who were used to the rigours and privations of living for long periods in the wilderness enduring the rites associated with the coming of age and taking their places as full members of Celcion society.

During this time they lived off the animals that roamed the wilderness and dwelt in temporary homes made of their hides. They practised drills from another age, when Celcion marauders were feared throughout the universe. Not that the men realised they were military drills of any kind until Eduid turned up one day and saw them walking stiffly about the plains in columns singing lusty songs about marching off to foreign lands in the springtime. None of the Celcions knew what the words meant or what the short staves they carried represented, but Eduid did and his heart leapt at the unlikely sight.

Here was the solid core of the legion he would raise to conquer the known planets, already partially trained. With them at his back he had swept away what little opposition there had been on Celcious in preparation for an assault on Skid. Once in control of the might of Skid he would move swiftly until his name was known and feared throughout the universe.

Eduid might have been the best of the four brothers. Raele was something of an unknown quantity, his two other brothers had simply left the planet and headed for parts unknown when given the chance, they clearly knew what the options were and calmly acquiesced to the will of a father who didn't want to see his sons sacrificed for the sake of the Skidian way.

Eduid on the other hand posed more of a problem for Inel, he was obviously capable but his desire for power, his ruthlessness and determination to change the system that had served Skid so well since time immemorial were evident at an early age and couldn't be countenanced by a responsible mati. Eduid would have to go, and it was only love, something that the traditions of his race stifled him from expressing, that made Inel send his son into exile rather than disinfecting him as he knew he should.

Inel wouldn't live to regret his choice, he couldn't know that he would inflict a megalomaniac obsessed with power on the universe that was ultimately his undoing.

Watching proudly as his legion paraded before him carrying large banners with his face emblazoned across them Eduid knew it was time to move. The legion had trained hard and were now as prepared as their warrior forbears had been on their earlier unsuccessful assaults on Skid, a finely tuned military machine.

Eduid believed his legion was far better prepared than any former Celcion legion had ever been for they had practised their skills on large untidy formations of Celcions that had begun turning up at the food drops. The mobs were beaten with sturdy staves until they dispersed and then the legion rampaged through Celcious in an orgy of violence and destruction after which nobody dared oppose him.

Eduid's only concern was that his legions lacked real weapons, he would only find those when he had access to Skid's vast arsenals which he hoped would fall on the first assault as he swooped down on Skid at the controls of his patrol craft. The staves and clubs and some pieces of metal that had been beaten into crude, brutal looking weapons that could hack at flesh, were all they had. If only he could locate the arsenals and his brother quickly, the first to control, the second to kill and remove any legitimate leader defenders could use as a rallying point.

Not that Eduid was really concerned, the Skidians didn't have a military history and there were few of them to resist him now. He would strike soon, the resumption of freighter traffic between the two planets meant that Skid was slowly returning to normal, however few Skidians remained. The vast autonomous infrastructure of the planet was functioning once again. Now all that remained was for his legion to board a freighter returning to Skid after unloading it's cargo of synfood and the invasion he had long planned for would become a reality.

Sitting in his patrol craft Eduid could monitor events on Skid, he could pinpoint his brothers' location and that of all other Skidians, he could fly from one end of the universe to the other, he could do a lot of things except kill with it.

This was Eduid's major disappointment since leaving Skid and a major drawback in his ambitions. It would have been so much simpler if his patrol craft had been fully armed, he would be able to conquer the universe by himself and not have to rely on mercenaries like the Celcions, most of whom seemed to exhibit the same dumb passivity of the animals they ate. Somebody had evidently understood him too well and ensured that he didn't possess any weapons of mass destruction as he left Skid for what was supposed to be the last time.

The settling of the dust kicked up by the legions feet and the sudden silence of their accompanying drums signalled the end of the parade. The legion came to a halt and then slowly dispersed, the Celcions who had been forced to watch the parade, to farewell the legion on the eve of it's departure also quickly drifted away.

There was no telling what the mood of the legion might be, they might want one more practice against them or make more demands for females or food. It was much better to get out of their way and back to the close winding streets of the town that had developed around one of the syn freighter landing sites where the legion rarely ventured.

sixteen

There wasn't much to do and Bruce was bored shitless, the Skidians at Aotearoa were faithfully slaving away on the farm, though there were so many of them that there wasn't much for them to do either. Bruce was well aware that he had previously believed the Skidians were taking to working on the farm seriously because their lives depended on it and had been sadly mistaken. But not on this occasion, this group of Skidians were different from the likes of Cyprus and the others who had seemed to believe that the crisis facing them would never come to pass.

These Skidians had experienced a disaster of catastrophic proportions and even if they didn't like living and working at Aotearoa they were well aware there were other even less attractive ways to live.

Soon Bruce would let them know that he thought it would be a good idea if a few of them started to drift back to the cities which was where most of them wanted to be like moths drawn to a light, merely because it was there. Besides there were far too many people on this small farm to give them all something worthwhile to occupy themselves. Soon enough they would be champing at the bit to go anyway, or the whole business of their future political scene would consume them once again.

Relaxed as their present lifestyle was, the Skidians suddenly seemed to have lost interest in Mitch's visions of a brave new Skid. They still discussed what sort of system they would like and Mitch was doing his best as far as Bruce could see to lay out various options for them, but his own demands that they actually had to exchange their labour for the right to stay at Aotearoa and eat seemed to have dulled their enthusiasm.

It couldn't have been because they were tired by their efforts, because truthfully there was little to be done, Bruce was sure that he could have fed them all without too much effort on his part. It was as if they were satisfied for present that somebody else was looking after their interests, which wasn't what he had intended at all.

Even Raele, who Bruce looked upon as the rightful leader of the community deferred to him in most areas and if Bruce was loathe to make a decision or interfere it was Eus, Tweest or Iuat who acted like self appointed lieutenants on his behalf.

It amused Bruce how these three so studiously copied him, it also came as a sobering surprise to realise that they considered him a worthy role model. The three of them had forsaken the Skidian tradition of smoking agbar through the nose, affected clothing like his own and made hilarious attempts to work his dogs which the dogs equally studiously ignored. It wasn't so much that they were one man dogs, they simply didn't understand what the Skidians required of them. Cop reckoned that their attempts at whistling were about as sensical as that of mating fantails in the springtime.

Sue wasn't much help either, she seemed distant, though as respectfully subordinate as his other self appointed lieutenants. Just when Bruce felt he should have the support of the person that should be closest to him he felt she was drawing away.

Still the situation did have it's compensations for it gave him a chance for little Bruce to get to know him, even if Bruce himself wasn't entirely enamoured of the idea.

Still there was some satisfaction in learning how to change the sprogs nappies, feeding him from the bottle of milk that his mother left for him in the fridge and learning what his various cries meant. They were about as easy to pick as his dog's barks.

The baby was crying again, this was it's 'I'm crying because I don't know what else to do,' cry. Bruce flicked his cigarette out over the veranda deciding it was time to go and pick the sprog up and maybe give it a feed. Or better still take it down to the garden where his mother was working and let her give it a feed.

"There, there, little one," a voice crooned from the bedroom. Bruce stopped at the door.

Who the hell's that? He pushed the door open and found Mistril talking to the baby cradled in her arms, who was gurgling away quite happily.

Bruce knew some of the Skidian woman had been quite interested in the baby since they had discovered changes in their own bodies that meant that they were soon to have babies of their own, but Mistril hadn't been one of those. Well not to Bruce's knowledge anyway. Bruce found Mistril's position a little hard to fathom.

She was shunned by the rest of the Skidian women and of all the men only Mitch and Raele showed any kind of interest in her. She seemed something of a pariah.

"Hello Mistril, how's it going?"

"Very well thankyou," Mistril replied meekly, " I heard the child crying so I thought I'd look in on him."

"Oh that's ok, I didn't think there was anyone else about." It was mid morning and all the Skidians were outside doing something, including Mitch and Raele. What all of them were actually doing Bruce wasn't sure but they seemed to be clever enough to look as if they were busy even if they weren't. Well they've had untold generations to learn that Bruce thought cynically.

Bruce sat on the bed beside Mistril and looked over at his son. He's

certainly an ugly little sod Bruce decided not for the first time. Almost involuntarily he looked at Mistril's face and was astonished to see large fat tears dribbling down her cheeks.

Bruce was profoundly shocked by the sight.

"What's the matter?" He asked, surely she wasn't crying because of him? What had he said, what had he done?

"Nothing," Mistril replied dabbing at the tears with one of her long slim fingers.

Bruce picked up one of the baby's clean nappies from the pile beside the bed and wiped the tears away.

"Oh come on, it can't be that bad," he said.

Mistril shrugged in that peculiarly Skidian way that irritated Bruce in that it meant so much but communicated almost nothing.

"I don't belong here," she said quietly putting the baby back into it's cot where it gurgled happily.

"What do you mean? I don't belong here, at least you are a Skidian!"

"I mean, that.." Mistril's voice drifted away, perhaps the offworlder wouldn't understand that she didn't fit into a community where individuals were slowly realising that they were going to have to find mates and produce offspring. Because of her past she wasn't considered a suitable mate.

Initially she had dreamed of becoming Raele's consort, or later the consort of the other offworld male, but all her hopes and dreams had been dashed as they found other mates. She had watched with growing desperation as all the other available female Skidians found partners and the remaining males shunned her.

Sensing her distress Bruce put an arm around her shoulders in order to comfort her. Mistril turned her head and buried her face at the junction of his neck and shoulder and wrapped her own arms around him.

Bruce could understand the feeling of not belonging, because he had felt that way himself on and off through his life. He felt pretty much the same way at present, even if he and Sue still slept in the same bed it didn't change the fact that he felt as if they were growing apart.

After a few moments Bruce guiltily realised that his reaction toward Mistril wasn't as platonic as he intended. Despite his best intentions he was becoming aroused and it seemed the natural thing to do as they both sank slowly backwards their mouths eagerly searching the other out.

A warning bell at the back of Bruce's mind rang and told him that he should stop what he was doing, but something else seemed to snap inside him at the same time and he before he was really aware of what was happening Mistril was gasping and arching her back as he entered her for the first time.

Almost immediately Bruce began to feel as if he was a spectator at some kind of show, it was as if he was there in body but his mind was elsewhere. He felt as if he was monitoring a mechanical piston pumping in and out, reading a set of gauges and dials rather than responding to the heaving body under him that panted into his ear.

Oddly Bruce found that rather than detracting from his performance this detachment was heightening his own pleasure and he felt as if he could go on for ever. He wondered what would happen if Sue happened to walk in, in the heat of the moment her reaction didn't seem particularly important any more. They hadn't actually formalised their relationship in any fashion, they hadn't said much to each other at all lately.

Bruce felt the pressure of an imminent orgasm build and started to move a little faster. As he let his thoughts drift aimlessly, the pressure receded and when he stopped moving for a moment to pick a strand of Mistril's hair out of his teeth she opened her eyes and grunted at him as if too say; 'what are you stopping for.'

And then it was all over and they were both gasping with pleasure pressed together as if the mingling secretions of their loins had stuck them fast.

Bruce didn't know how long he lay there, smiling down at her face which moments before had been contorted with pleasure as she bit her lip and bared

her teeth. Now it wore a dreamy smile that made Bruce feel even better because he had obviously moved something deep within her.

He couldn't remember Sue looking even as half as satisfied as Mistril did and unlike Sue, Mistril was in no hurry to push him away so she could get off to sleep.

Sue had never said no to him, but Bruce had sometimes been left with the impression that Sue didn't especially like sex. Oh she let him do what he wanted, responded in the appropriate manner, said the right things as if she was reading a script, but often left Bruce with the impression that sex was an obligation that she felt she had to fulfil. Suddenly discovering a partner that obviously did like sex put Bruce in a bit of a quandary.

He did have moral obligations toward Sue, have responsibility for little Bruce. Or did he?

Bruce found that he didn't really care for the moment as he felt his cock stiffening again.

Mistril must have felt something also because she began to move against him and soon Bruce was thinking this was a remarkably pleasant way to spend an afternoon.

Sue watched Iaut reach into his trousers and pull something out, intrigued she moved a little closer to see what he was doing and then immediately looked away.

Bruce had a habit of scratching himself around the groin whenever he felt like it and for pissing whenever he felt the need. Whether he was with somebody, by himself out on the farm he just flopped his penis out and let rip. He usually remembered to turn away if he was with somebody but had the habit of carrying on a conversation, looking over his shoulder if he was.

Iaut and some of the others, Tweest and Ues particularly had taken to aping many of Bruce's habits and mannerisms. Mostly the effect was comic, while they didn't look anything like Bruce they often acted exactly as he did. The three of them treated the rest of the Skidians with the same sort of barely concealed contempt that Bruce did and strangely seemed to command a similar sort of cowed respect from their fellow Skidians.

The Skidians that had been most outspoken when they returned to Aotearoa now seemed somewhat subdued as if they sensed that their time had come and gone. But Sue wasn't sure that was true, Mitch was certainly trying to help them develop some sort of system by which they could govern themselves and decide how their society was going to develop. Bruce certainly wasn't standing in the way of that, though maybe his presence as a strong character stopped any sort of political development in it's tracks unless he was actively involved. It was odd that all the Skidians could talk about formerly was how they wanted to ditch the old way and start afresh and now they seemed to have slipped back into the old ways now that Bruce had stamped his authority on the settlement.

Sue found the whole situation totally confusing and knew that she would never understand what was going on. Still she was quite content for the moment, satisfied that she was making a real contribution to the future of Skid by helping to develop the garden and with Bruce's help extend the scope of the project. It was the future that was beginning to worry her. Were they here for ever?

She had thought she would be content to live out the rest of her days on Skid. Their return to the planet had seemed to be the right thing at the time, now she wasn't quite so sure. What had they actually come back for? It wasn't as if they had to. Raele hadn't come back for them particularly, in fact his whole trip seemed to be nothing more than an accident and their meeting some sort of cosmic coincidence.

Her distress and the uncertainty of the months leading up to meeting Raele had been resolved by the uncanny appearance of Bruce, she was sure that given time they would have worked things out. Somehow.

The return to Skid had made that side of things more difficult, she knew

that she wasn't being fair to Bruce at the moment, shutting him out and barely communicating with him. She was just trying to give herself the space to work things out. She had the impression that in some ways Bruce was like a rock, he would be there when she needed him here or back on earth if they ever got back. Deep down Sue knew she wasn't sure whether she could actually commit herself totally to Bruce now. But what else was there to commit herself to? Sue also knew that the novelty of being back on Skid and what she was doing there would quickly wear off, was already wearing thin. But what else was there? Suddenly she felt quite hopeless and wanted to sit down and cry.

But not in front of the Skidians she told herself, well not in front of Iaut as the others had trooped off a few minutes ago clearly having made the collective decision their days work was done.

She glanced around and saw Iaut was still playing with himself, no doubt trying to piss and probably feeling quite uncomfortable that he evidently couldn't. The Skidians were usually so reticent about their bodily functions that it came as somewhat of a surprise that Iaut decided to flop out his dick in front of her. Bruce had a lot to answer for.

Maybe that's why he was having so much trouble.

Finally she heard a satisfied grunt and heard a stream of urine hit the soil with a soggy sound splashing sound.

Sue knew there was nothing to keep her in the garden but something held her back. From the sound of things Iaut had finished his business so she turned around meaning to ask him whether he thought there was anything they should do while they were there.

The question died on her lips at the sight of Iaut's penis sticking out at her and she suddenly felt an irrational desire to kneel before him and take it in her mouth.

But what would Bruce say, or more importantly do if he was to find out? She turned away and pushed through the screen of sweetcorn plants that shielded them from the house.

Sue wasn't that interested in sex that she wanted to find out what a Skidian was like in the sack. Sue knew Bruce had strayed at least once, primarily because she had instigated a casual alliance with a Skidian woman the last time they were here.

Whether he had recently was of little real interest to her, she knew that she couldn't meet his needs sex wise and was prepared to tolerate a little extra curricular activity on his part to keep him in the fold, just as long as he was discrete about things.

How this situation would work if they ever went permanently back to earth was a matter that she would address at the appropriate time. What was probably putting more stress on their relationship at present was her own behaviour anyway, it was about time she did something to make up for the hard time she had given him.

But how? Not only did she hardly speak to him, when she did she seemed to be able to do nothing but nag.

"Look after the baby, spend some time with your son." Which was her excuse for leaving Bruce in charge of the baby today.

Maybe they should go fishing, or go somewhere where there were no Skidians at all for a few days. Despite only being on Skid for a few weeks or a month at most, Sue felt stressed out. Time for a holiday.

seventeen

Trying to help the Skidians develop some kind of democratic government was a task close to Mitch's heart. He had always stood for and encouraged by any means he could, arms embargoes, trade embargoes, diplomatic pressure, almost anything else short of going to war, to encourage nations toward democracy, democracy the American way. On Skid he was encouraged by the easy acceptance of his ideas, the lively debate.

Unfortunately he was also discovering that while the Skidians liked to talk about things they weren't used to actually taking charge themselves. Action was further hampered by Mitch's startling discovery that while Skidians were quite capable of reading it appeared that most of them couldn't write anything, they couldn't even seem to string anything coherent together with the aid of a computer. It was as if writing was the purview of a special class of person. Notably Mitch hadn't discovered anything remotely similar to a religion, not that he was worried by the lack of opportunity to go to church.

The inability of the Skidians to disseminate their ideas was a bit disconcerting, it wasn't as if they were inarticulate or unintelligent, but Mitch wasn't going to let that slow him down.

Discovering that Bruce was knocking off Mistril was more disturbing to Mitch. Not because of the immorality of the situation, Mitch wasn't that much of a hypocrite. Because he was under the impression that, while not consummating his lust, Mistril was almost his property.

Mitch had considered blowing the whistle on Bruce. However, not only was he a little afraid of what Bruce might do to him if he spilled the beans, there didn't seem to be any point. There were plenty of other Skidian woman about and they seemed quite sexually active and available.

Indeed Bruce had mentioned that they seemed to root like rabbits. It took Mitch a few minutes to understand what Bruce was on about, he hadn't actually noticed. But when he did open his eyes, notice the odd couple embracing under trees or rolling around on the ground where they must have thought they were safe from prying eyes, he saw them everywhere. Showering each other with sloppy wet kisses, grinding their loins together and moaning theatrically. Mitch began to realise what a break down in a societies moral standards meant.

He was also sure that Bruce was largely to blame, not only because his lieutenants seemed to be the biggest philanderers, copying the behaviour of their hero but also because Bruce had suggested they go forth and multiply as quickly as possible.

"There's only a few thousand people on the whole planet." Bruce had said when Mitch had asked him why.

"If they don't get used to fucking and producing sprogs at a great rate of knots they'll eventually die out or become so inbred that death would be a preferable fate." Mitch hadn't really understood and characteristically Bruce had deigned not to expand when Mitch suggested he didn't understand.

"How about using your brain for a change Mitch," Bruce had suggested, "I always thought you had to have a few brains to be the President of the United States of America, he had sneered sardonically, "now I realise that isn't the case." With that Bruce had stalked away and Mitch hadn't had the courage to confront him, even talk to him since.

Oh how the mighty have fallen, Mitch thought despairingly, not long since considered the most powerful man alive.

Now Mitch's heart leapt for it seemed that Bruce was leaving, if not for good then hopefully long enough for him to put his master plan into action. The Skidians at Aotearoa had pretty well agreed in principle to his idea of instituting a community council that would debate and later present a format to the rest of the people on how they would govern themselves in the future.

Skidians from all the settlements would first vote for an interim president who would run the planet and then each settlement would select members of their own who would meet to form a global parliament who would develop some sort of constitution.

Along with Raele, Mitch had toured the planet and spread the message and on which he had been gratified to be told that wherever they went that he should stand for the position of president.

That meant that there were three candidates for president, himself, Raele and the reformed character of Mischief.

Less gratifying was the struggle to find Skidians that were prepared to stand for election for the parliament. A combination of cajoling, offering the odd subtle threat, and selecting volunteers meant that a full quota of

hopefuls had finally been persuaded to stand.

Only at Aotearoa were there no selectorial problems, all of Bruce's lieutenants presented themselves for election and were certainly a shoo in one way or the other.

Mitch knew he was going to have problems there whatever happened, they were almost as pushy and assertive as their boss and like him played their cards very close to their chests.

Perhaps with Bruce departing Aotearoa they would become a little more subdued in their manner. It didn't occur to Mitch that the reverse might be true, that they might consider they had been left in charge, that it was their duty to carry on as Bruce would have expected, not the least impregnating as many vessels as possible as the strong had always done in an atavistic urge to spread their superior genes through a population.

Standing on the veranda Mitch watched Bruce load up the wagon he called the ute in preparation to his departure.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Raele watching Bruce with an expression of envy on his face as if he would like to join them, or simply disappear on a jaunt of his own. Mitch wondered whether he could suggest that to Raele, suggest that he take Bruce with him, preferably somewhere off the planet for good. Maybe, but not yet.

Disconcertingly Mitch watched Iaut, Tweest and Ues standing hesitantly about obviously waiting for some direction from Bruce. They looked for all the world like dogs pining for their master, but more hangdog than Mitch had ever seen Bruce's dogs look.

Bruce's dogs which assumed such an arrogant stance that it was almost as if around Aotearoa they considered themselves superior to every other being bar Bruce. Mitch felt a hot flush of humiliation as he vividly recalled one of the dogs urinating on his leg and wished there was some way of getting back at Bruce and his dogs.

"Don't worry boys," Bruce's words drifted up to him as Bruce closely followed by the three Skidians made their way back to the house. "You have a pretty good idea of what needs to be done around the place, nothings going to go wrong."

"When are you going to be back?"

"Dunno."

"Are you coming back ever?"

"Yes of course, now look I'll only be away for a few days," he said reassuringly. "If anything goes wrong, or you don't know what to do, just do something."

Mitch watched Bruce scratch his head as if he knew he wasn't making himself clear.

"Oh fuck it, don't worry, just do the things we talked about earlier and make sure that arsehole Mitch doesn't get uppity."

"Yes boss," the three said solemnly, perhaps cheered that their boss had at last given them the sort of direction they required.

Mitch knew he was going to have trouble with those three, but then again Aotearoa wasn't the entire world. What trouble could they cause if they were a minority group in the parliament?

"See ya later Raele, you too fuckhead," Bruce called mischievously to Mitch as he made his way down to the ute for the last time carrying the baby.

"Get up," he called and the three dogs leapt onto the ute and immediately started barking. "Oh get fucked." Bruce yelled, which silenced the dogs for all of thirty seconds.

"By Mitch, see ya Raele," Sue called out as she passed out from under the veranda. Mitch couldn't help wondering what Sue saw in Bruce. On one hand she seemed to be her own woman, the next minute she appeared totally dependant on Bruce, who didn't seem to notice either way. What did she see in him? Mitch shook his head sadly. Poor woman.

"Well?" Mitch raised his eyebrows and looked at Raele once the ute had disappeared from view in a cloud of dust, feeling an overwhelming sense of

relief at Bruce's departure.

If he worked quickly either he or Raelle with himself as his advisor would be president of this weird planet, the procedure was in place, all they had to do was set up a date for the vote... sometime in the next couple of days would be ideal.

Likewise the settlements, Aotearoa, the industrial complexes and the burgeoning community of all the waifs and strays that he and Raelle had gathered together in one of the cities would select the representatives they wanted to send to the parliament.

Once that was complete Mitch was sure that most of the inhabitants of Aotearoa would be actively encouraged to leave the settlement for the bright lights of the closest city and quickly it would lose its status as a viable entity.

Only one cloud marred the horizon, two actually, what would Bruce do or say and would the Skidians leave? They had been given ample opportunity but none had done so far.

Skidians did leave, Mitch corrected himself, especially since twenty or thirty vehicles similar to Bruce's 'ute' had unexpectedly turned up at Aotearoa.

Mitch had a good laugh at the expense of the Skidians as Bruce began to teach some of them to drive.

The results had been varied, some took to driving like a duck to water and were soon ranging far and wide. Others were far more cautious, obviously afraid of the vehicles and often not in full control of them. Busted fences and dented guards were testament to that. More than once Mitch had bent over and laughed hysterically as some unfortunate Skidian reversed full speed into a tree or another ute or tried vainly to avoid a collision, their eyes wide and staring through the windscreen as they careered out of control, ineffectually attempting to control the wild beasts.

Needless to say Mitch hadn't given much thought to what mobility, mobility that opened up a whole new world to them, might mean to the average Skidian.

eighteen

"When are we going to stop?" Sue asked plaintively. It seemed to her that they had been driving across the grassy plain for ever. She wanted to give the baby a feed and the pressure on her bladder was becoming unbearable, almost as unbearable as driving to nowhere.

Bruce wasn't talking too much and there wasn't a radio to listen to, no tapes either, just the same unending plain that stretched away before them for ever and the intermittent barking of the dogs, who seemed to like making a noise just for the sake of it. Though even they had been quiet for sometime.

"Anytime you like."

"What about now?"

"If you like," Bruce said slowing the ute, at which the dogs began barking again which caused Bruce to frown angrily and bash his hand on the side of the ute.

"Shut up you bastards!"

'Get fucked,' echoed in Sue's mind.

"I'll get you, you cocky bastard, you wait if I don't."

"You and who's army?" It sounded like two kids squabbling. Sue looked across and saw the grin on Bruce's face.

"Oh shit yeah! You know, I've always hated dogs that were too clever by half. What do you reckon I should do with them?"

"Get them to look after little Bruce?" Sue suggested half seriously. She hadn't realised what a burden a young child could be until recently and couldn't wait for him to grow up, or for her to sufficiently trust a Skidian to look after him.

"Sounds like a good scheme to me."

"I wasn't serious."

"I was," Bruce said getting out of the ute and stretching.

Sue watched Bruce gaze toward the horizon wondering what he saw there. She wouldn't have been surprised that now more than ever he longed for home. He didn't belong here, could never be really happy. All he needed was the means to make his escape

"I didn't remember the trip to Sietnuoc taking this long before." Sue ventured nervously.

"Nah, maybe it's moved or something." Bruce hadn't bothered to tell Sue they weren't headed for the city yet.

"Maybe," Sue replied dubiously climbing out of the ute, looking for a handy bush to hide behind. There wasn't one so she squatted self consciously beside the ute, made all the more self conscious by the three dogs who gathered round to see what she was up to and then suspiciously sniffing at the damp patch on the grass.

Bruce sat on the bonnet and rolled himself a smoke, wondering when Sue would mention the long, slim piece of timber that he intended using as a fishing rod.

But she hadn't by the time she had fed the baby and they were off again.

The sun was low in the sky and the shadows were lengthening on the ground when they crested a low rise and suddenly found themselves staring at the sea as if they had come to the end of the world.

The setting sun had turned the clouds crimson above the pale necklace of a sandy beach that ran around the edge of the water. Here and there were patches of cream as deep clear blue waves lazily rolled onto the beach and broke up.

"Oh," Sue said almost breathlessly after a few moments, "it's beautiful."

"Yeah." Bruce had to admit that it was quite a sight as he rolled forward down to the beach. He stopped at the edge of the sand, climbed out and ran down the beach and dived into the surf before he had a chance to consider what hidden dangers might lurk there.

After swimming out almost a hundred metres from the shore Bruce turned and saw Sue standing on the beach holding the baby. He could sense her concern, but he didn't care, he knew she would be fretting wondering what he was up to. No doubt imagining that he was about to be gobbled up by a shark or something. Bruce half hoped that he would be. But the sensible part of him told him not to be silly.

He slowly swam to the breaker line and managed to catch a wave that almost deposited him halfway up the beach.

"Yahoo!" He yelled more exhilarated than he had felt in a long time and immediately wanted to do it again.

But Sue was waiting, waiting for him to take her by the hand and find her something to eat and sleep under.

"How long are we going to stay here?"

"Oh a few days or so."

"Where are we going to sleep?" Sue asked looking around with a dubious look on her face.

"Under the stars."

"You mean outside? I don't think I can do that." She added.

"Why not?"

Sue shrugged her shoulders and immediately assumed the downcast look that meant she wasn't pleased with the situation. Roughing it by the beach patently wasn't her idea of fun.

"It won't be so bad, you'll see," said Bruce enthusiastically, looking forward to a few days lounging around the beach.

"Look I've even got you a tent." Bruce pulled a small package off the back of the ute, pulled it away from the ute and tugged on a string. They both heard the sound of escaping air and watched in awe as a tent like structure began to unfold.

"It won't be very big," Sue declared. Then quickly had to change her mind as the structure grew and grew until it was the size of a small house.

"Well I think it's big enough," Bruce remarked as it finally stopped growing and he reached for the zipper that ran around the door.

"How did you manage this?" Sue asked incredulously.

"I found one of those book things the other day that we used when we were last here."

"Very nice Bruce," Sue said following him inside the remarkable piece of Skidian engineering. The 'tent' was fully self contained, complete with power, water and synfood reticulation systems.

Bruce felt a little disheartened discovering that, he had intended to feed himself with the thawing meat on the back of the ute and whatever he could conjure up out of the sea or off the beach. He had already scanned a pile of rocks at the end of the beach with his binoculars and was sure they were covered in shellfish, not to mention the fish he was sure were out there in the water waiting to be caught.

But it wasn't that bad after all and the two of them enjoyed a pleasant week or so by the beach, swimming fishing and making leisurely trips along the coast setting up the tent whenever they felt like stopping, lingering for a day or two in one spot and then moving on to another.

"What do you think Mitch is up to?" Bruce asked at one stage.

"Oh I wouldn't worry too much," Sue suggested, "they can't live as they are, they need laws and some sort of government, especially as the old way has broken down."

"But?"

"But, like in any society real power and control isn't totally in the hands of government, you won't have to worry too much."

Bruce wasn't sure what Sue meant, he didn't hunger for power, all he wanted to do was get on with his own thing whatever that was.

"I don't want anything to do with it."

"Are you sure? That's not what the Skidians think, or Mitch."

"Yeah Mitch, I think he misses being in control, we'll have to watch that one. I s'pose we'll have to toddle back soon and see what the wankers up to."

"Can we go back past the city?"

Bruce couldn't see why Sue would want to, but he couldn't see why not either. Though he was eager to get back to Aotearoa now another day or two wouldn't hurt. It would do Tweest, Ues and Iaut good to be left in charge for a little longer, nothing much could go wrong and if anything had it would easily be put right.

nineteen

It was strange feeling to find parts of Sietnuoc, if not exactly teeming with life as it once had, full of Skidians going self importantly about their business.

The hustle and bustle was a little misleading for a few streets away from the parliament buildings and the space port were mostly empty and after a while Bruce thought he recognised the same faces hurrying around. It was as if they were walking in circles to give the impression of renewed life and vitality and strength of numbers. What was a little disconcerting was that to an individual the Skidians all wore a worried frown that Bruce recognised as meaning that something was wrong.

None of the Skidians deigned to say a word to him which was unusual when he stopped and asked what the problem was.

"There's something wrong here, the place gives me the creeps," Sue remarked casually. But Bruce detected a hint of fear and or uncertainty in her voice. "It's so eerie, what's going on?"

"How would I know?" Bruce demanded as he navigated from memory along the wide streets to the parliament.

It felt strange to be heading back in that direction apart from their most recent landing on Skid, the last time Bruce had come this way, Inel had been his passenger and soon after he had been repatriated back to earth without his knowledge, without any recollection of Skid.

Bruce felt his own uncertainty in the way his stomach tightened and the way sweat suddenly drenched his shirt despite the coolness of the evening. He wiped away the moisture that had suddenly gathered at his brow and dribbled down into and stung his eyes.

For the first time on Skid Bruce suddenly felt he was heading into danger, heading toward a situation that might be beyond his capacity to control. He stopped the ute and reached behind him for the rifle in it's rack and rested it on the seat beside him.

"Is that really necessary?" Sue asked, her eyes big and round.

Sue had never seen Bruce look so troubled, not even when she had first seen him on the space ship heading to Skid. If nothing else, the mere fact that Bruce wasn't his normal imperturbable self was enough to alarm her. Not that he was always unruffled, she had seen him many times when he was excited or depressed, frustrated and angry, but never so cautious or clearly anxious.

"I don't really know," Bruce said truthfully, rolling himself a smoke before slowly carrying on toward the parliament. "But there's something odd going on here, I'm sure of it."

"Why don't we just turn around and leave then?"

"Well we've got to find out what's going on, haven't we?"

"Not really," Sue replied. As far as he was concerned her own skin was far more important to her than finding out why the Skidians all looked so worried, why they wouldn't acknowledge either of them. Then there was the baby to think about.

"Do you want to stay here then, while I go and see what's going on?"

"I don't want that either!" The last thing Sue wanted was to be left alone.

"Look you could sit up there in one of those buildings and nobody would even know you were there." Bruce insisted, pointing out the window. "Look," Bruce said turning to face Sue, "we've got to live here for who knows how long, I must find out what's going on. I bet Mitch has decided to set up some kind of dictatorship and has organised some goons to make sure everyone toes the line or something."

"What will you be able to do about that?"

"Oh Mitch and a few Skidians don't worry me," Bruce replied, but he didn't sound totally convinced. "Lets pull in here." Bruce drove in to what looked for all the world like an underground carpark, except that the Skidians didn't have cars.

"I reckon we should be able to see the parliament from upstairs," Bruce added. In the half light of the basement a few dim figures scuttled furtively out of the way as the ute came to a halt. Bruce flicked on the lights which revealed the figures of several Skidians huddled against the rear wall of the basement.

Tentatively the Skidians lowered their hands from their faces which they'd covered when Bruce had switched the lights on and visibly relaxed when Bruce got out and approached them.

"What's happening?" He asked, "what are you afraid of?" Bruce demanded, disturbed by the fact that the Skidians cowering by the wall were well and truly frightened, something that he'd never seen before.

Despite the trials of the past few months and obvious uncertainty about the future all of the Skidians he had met had retained something of the arrogant bearing that he had always been a integral part of the Skidian character. But it seemed to have been squeezed out of these Skidians, something that hadn't happened even to those desperate Skidians that had been living from hand to mouth in appalling conditions out in the wilderness when the infrastructure of Skid had collapsed.

The Skidians refused to say anything and scuttled away when it was

obvious Bruce wasn't a threat to them.

"What's wrong with them?" Sue called from the car.

"I dunno," Bruce said thoughtfully, shrugging his shoulders and then stiffening as somebody close by screamed.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up and Bruce felt his heart begin to pump as the scream was repeated, the bloodcurdling scream of a person beyond simply feeling pain. The scream died away and was replaced by a long sobbing whimper. His senses heightened Bruce could hear angry shouts and the sound of footsteps on the cobbles outside.

Bloody hell!

"Bruce?" Sue asked as Bruce slid into the ute, switched the lights off and drove it into the darkest corner he could find.

"Bruce what is it?"

"I don't know, lock the doors and stay here until I get back." Bruce grabbed the rifle and a clip of bullets from behind the seat which he stuffed into his pocket. Can and Punch shied away from him on the back of the ute but Bruce grabbed them and shoved them inside with Sue and the baby. Cop could look after himself.

"Bruce?"

"Don't worry, lock the door, I'll be back in the minute. Just make sure these two idiots don't bark." Punch and Can were having trouble containing themselves, uncertain whether to be outraged at being left behind or astounded at their good fortune to be sitting in the boss's seat.

Cocking the rifle and making sure it had a full magazine Bruce ran across the basement to the entrance and cautiously peered outside just as another agonized scream reached his ears.

Initially Bruce thought that one bunch of Skidians was laying into another bunch of Skidians with sticks and clubs, who didn't seem to be doing a whole lot to defend themselves except for running around in circles like headless chickens. It would have been quite a comical scene, except for the screaming of somebody that rolled on the ground writhing in agony.

Bruce wondered who the attackers were and then realised that they might not be Skidians at all. They looked a lot like Skidians, but were thicker set and darker. They wore plumed head dresses, loose shirts and short skirts like ancient Roman or Greek soldiers and instead of swords, only seemed to carry clubs or short wooden staves which they didn't seem to be using with any great effect despite the writhing body on the ground.

Bruce took careful aim at one of the assailants and then changed his mind and fired a shot off into the air.

At the sound of the shot booming across the street everyone froze. Bruce calmly worked the bolt and the sound of the empty cartridge bouncing on the cobbles was loud in the sudden frozen silence. He loosened off another shot into the sky and the whole scene changed as attacked and attackers fled, even the body writhing on the ground leapt to his feet and scurried at such a great rate of knots that he couldn't be seriously hurt.

twenty

Several hundred metres away, Mitch heard the two shots echoing across the city and wondered if they signalled his death knell.

"What was that?" Asked the man on the other side of the table who had seen Mitch flinch.

"Trouble," Mitch replied shortly, "big trouble."

"I don't understand."

"That was Bruce, the man I was telling you about. I had hoped he would be conspicuous by his absence until we had secured the situation here but it seems that isn't to be."

"One man, one man. Pah what can he do?" Euid exclaimed arrogantly, "My legion will take care of him."

Mitch who had seen the legion at work doubted that. Raele had decimated the legion with the weapon that he kept secured in his wrist with the help of Bruce's lieutenants until Mitch had jumped on him and wrested away the weapon which now dangled on a rope about Euid's neck.

It was down to Mitch and Mitch alone that Raele and Bruce's lieutenants now languished in what passed for a prison cell in this very building. But Mitch wasn't going to remind Euid about that.

Euid was obviously deranged, not only did he have delusions of grandeur but he was incredibly dangerous as well. Mitch had watched aghast as he had quickly disposed of any Skidian that made the slightest move of dissent and in the couple of days he had been on the planet had savagely subdued the Skidians. Mitch had no intention of becoming his next victim.

"I will muster my legion immediately and track down this 'man'," he said contemptuously.

The mighty legion, a rabble of untrained men from a place called Celcius B who carried sticks and clubs, who seemed more interested in preserving the neatness of their archaic tunics and fancy head dresses than anything else. Mitch wondered what Euid had promised them. Untold wealth, women? Sadly for them there was little enough of either, on Skid there was no obvious wealth and any Skidian that could do seemed to have gone to ground in the great city where Euid had demanded they gather.

That wasn't a silly move Mitch had to admit, gathering the entire population in one place so he could keep an eye on them. Except now they outnumbered the legion by at least a hundred to one.

The legion might be enjoying a reign of terror at the moment but that would last only as long as it took the Skidians to realise they could be overwhelmed by sheer force of numbers.

Not that it would be necessary with the arrival of Bruce. Mitch strongly suspected even hoped that things would quickly return to normal.

It had been a stupid move on his part to voluntarily throw his lot in with Euid, but it was too late to change that now. It hadn't taken Mitch long to realise that Euid was mad, not only did he claim responsibility for killing hundreds of millions of Skidians, his own people, but he wanted to repeat the process on every known planet throughout the galaxy until he controlled it all.

"Even your own world Mitch," he had said gleefully. But why he would want to preside over a mostly empty universe was beyond Mitch.

At first Mitch hadn't been able to believe his luck as the incredibly ludicrous sight of the legion had greeted him marching raggedly up the driveway that ran up the centre of the farm.

Raele had just been confirmed as the president in the hastily arranged election. Iaut, Ues and Tweest had been returned unopposed to the equally hastily arranged community council elections at Aotearoa and their first move had been to banish him from the settlement.

Just as he had been preparing to leave for the city a man who looked remarkably like Raele had shown up in front of this rag tag band of men.

Mitch learnt a little later that Euid was Raele's elder brother and as soon as Raele was disarmed found there was no love lost between the brothers. There was something of a verbal confrontation between the two Skidians and then the band of men, Euid's legion attacked the members of the settlement who had gathered to see what was going on.

At first it seemed that Raele alone would stem the tide as the charging yelling men suddenly vanished in puffs of smoke and bright light. While most of the Aotearoians stood rooted to the spot, Tweest, Ues and Iaut also joined the fray, beating ineffectually at their attackers.

Mitch decided in an instant that any attacker of the settlement must be a potential friend of his and grabbing a club that had been thrown forward as it's owner disintegrated and whacked Raele over the head, which ended the short confrontation.

Euid had noted Mitch's action and the fact that his appearance marked

him as different from everyone else.

"Ah, one of the offworlder's," he remarked, "and what was your role on that planet may I ask?"

"I was the leader of a large and powerful nation," Mitch replied, a little surprised that even if this man didn't know where he was, knew where he came from.

"Come with me." Eduid had replied reaching out and taking the dazierawogga from Mitch's hand before Mitch knew what was happening. "Come with me and I will give you power that you never thought existed back on that puny primitive planet of yours."

Mitch had come across many charlatans in his time most of whom, he had been able to avoid or dismiss. This time it was different, before he had a chance to consider the possible course his action would lead to, he had acted in the heat of the moment and set himself on a path that he would otherwise not have chosen.

For on closer inspection Eduid was clearly not in full control of his marbles, was prone to flying into terrifying rages and blaming various subordinates for the slightest hiccup in his conquest.

He had already reduced the number of his legion by three when they had failed to follow out his orders to go and beat a few Skidians up quick enough and there weren't that many of them to begin with.

Eduid tapped the dazierwogga around his neck as if to make sure it was still there and called out to one of his men to sound the recall.

Still crouching in the basement watching the odd looking men slowly gather themselves together to try and work out what the loud booming noise was no doubt, Bruce heard a loud horn sound. The horn must have heralded a recall for the men quickly jogged away.

Once the men had disappeared from sight, Bruce relaxed and walked back to the car.

"How many did you kill?" Sue asked through the partly wound down window.

"What do you take me for? None of course!"

"What are we going to do now? Get away from here as quickly as possible?" Sue knew that was probably too much to hope for. Hopefully Bruce would find her some place safe to stay put while he wandered off and sorted things out. The front seat of the ute was a bit small for her, baby Bruce and the two dogs. Especially when they began barking as Bruce approached the ute, when even whacking them over the head with a plastic bottle full of milk failed to calm them down.

The horn sounded again outside and Bruce decided that they would probably start looking for him soon if only to find out what he was up to. If Mitch or anybody else from Aotearoa was around they would know what the sound of the shots was and that he was probably close by.

"What was happening out there?" Sue asked.

"Oh there were some weird looking Skidians trying to beat up some ordinary looking Skidians, that's all." Bruce remarked casually not wanting to let on that he had no idea of who the other Skidians were. For all he knew they might be from some other planet entirely.

Bruce quickly decided that if he was going to move it had to be now before any search party started out to track him down. What he would do if it was already too late Bruce didn't know. Having to shoot somebody to defend himself and his family was a bit of a step up from phlegmatically bowling up to an ivop and blowing it's head off.

"Search all the buildings," a loud arrogant voice called from close by. It was already too late.

"Shit," Bruce muttered under his breath, now what?

"You, check in there." Standing still by the car Bruce saw a face peer into the basement, scan the area and then withdraw.

"Nothing there General."

"How do you know you fool, did you actually go inside?"

Bruce heard a whack like a piece of plastic pipe hitting the rump of a

cattle beast and knew that some sorry soul was getting a thrashing.

"Now go in and check properly you idiot."

"Bruce?" Sue insisted through the partly open window.

"Shhhh." Bruce whispered urgently as he slipped around the bonnet of the ute and crouched between the ute and the wall facing outward. He took careful aim at the entrance and waited for the inevitable surprised yell of discovery still uncertain how he would respond.

Bruce took a bead on the figure as soon as it appeared and barely suppressed a chuckle. Even in the poor light it made a ludicrous sight. The feathered headdress was all awry, no doubt suffering from a recent beating and the person under it tapped carefully about with his long stick as if he were a blind man. Which he must have been because he obviously didn't see Bruce or the ute at the back of the basement.

"All clear," a voice rang out and Bruce breathed a sigh of relief.

But now what was he going to do? Bruce scratched his head, decided he better have a look see outside and padded across the basement.

At the entrance once more Bruce lay against the wall and carefully glanced outside.

"You can come out now," a voice called out as calmly as if they were playing hide and seek and he had been spotted.

"Oh shit!" Somebody had been too clever by half. Bruce found himself staring into the laughing face of a man who looked remarkably like Raele with about twenty soldiers or pirates or whatever they were standing behind him.

"I am really disappointed," the Raele look alike said, "Mitch said you would be trouble, but I can see he was mistaken."

Mitch, the devious bastard Bruce thought, wait till I get my hands on him!

"I can't be bothered." Bruce replied ducking back behind the wall, watching the man's shadow to see which way he moved.

"If you don't come out I'll blow this building apart with you in it," the Raele look alike giggled and fired the small gun that Bruce hadn't noticed in his hand.

"Shit!" Bruce leapt back out of the way as a large crater appeared in the ground just outside the entrance. The man fired again and lumps of masonry fell from the roof, partially blocking the entrance and providing some cover. Bruce slipped to the floor and crawled over to one of the large blocks and carefully looked out.

Nobody seemed to notice him for the moment, but the like the stupid bloody git he was Punch came charging out of the basement, leapt over the rubble, closely followed by Can and at a distance Cop.

"What the fucks going on here?" Why had Sue let the other two dogs out, the silly bitch!

'I tried to stop him,' Cop puffed as Punch ran straight through the startled group of men barking loudly like a mechanical toy. 'Woof, woof, woof,' with each loping clumsy stride.

"Pheeeep, Pheeeep. You bloody useless bastard get back here! But neither Punch nor Can were having any of that. Forgetting where he was for the moment Bruce stood up and shook his fist angrily at the rapidly departing dogs.

"Useless fucken mongrels!" But he was secretly glad that they had got themselves out of the way. Now if he sorted this lot out one way or another he thought turning his attention back to the men in front of him, maybe Sue and the sprog can sneak away as well.

Suddenly remembering what was happening Bruce dropped down behind his hunk of concrete and took another look at the men. Most of them seemed to be gaping at each other and holding their ears, wondering what the hell had hit them. Even the bloke with the laser thingy had his mouth hanging wide open in astonishment.

"Bruce?" Sue called from the direction of the ute.

"Get back in the ute," Bruce hissed, without looking around, "get back in the ute and keep quiet."

"I'm sick of you telling me to keep quiet, what's going on?"

Bruce swung around and saw to his dismay that Sue was standing not twenty feet from the entrance, thankfully not holding the baby that was now squealing to itself somewhere behind them.

"Get down, you stupid, stupid woman," Bruce yelled to little effect.

"Don't yell at me Bruce! Just tell me what's going on!"

"Oh for chrissake, stand there and get your nut shot off for all I care." Bloody woman!

Bruce swung his gaze back outside and saw that the men out there were slowly pulling themselves together.

"What is going on here?" Sue insisted from above him.

Bruce didn't bother talking, he just dragged Sue to the ground and put a hand over her mouth. Sue tried to rip Bruce's hand away and kick him at the same time as Bruce hissed angrily into her ear: "Stay very still and very quiet, there's some goon out there that wants to kill us." Bruce removed his hand, ready to clamp it back down if she tried to scream or do anything stupid.

"It's only Raele," Sue whispered.

"It's not fucken Raele at all. Use your eyes woman!"

"There's no need to be nasty," Sue responded, her feelings hurt as she reverted to being just a poor simple defenceless woman because she didn't know what was going on.

The Raele look alike with the laser weapon looked to have regained his composure and was bringing up the weapon to fire again.

Bruce knew he'd have to do something soon, Punch was on his way back by the sound of him for one, not to mention that the next shot could easily get him, them. By standing around wanting to get involved Sue had made them both easy targets.

The situation was getting quickly out of hand and Bruce knew he had to do something and fast, otherwise he'd end up squashed under the building or a little pile of ash.

Not wanting to kill the man Bruce decided to try and blow the laser out of his hand like they did in cowboy movies. He took careful aim and fired. The booming sound of the shot filled the basement, to be immediately drowned out by the sound of screaming.

Sue had her hands over her ears and was screaming hysterically in his ear so Bruce didn't see the result of his shot straight away.

When he did take a look the look alike Raele was moaning and writhing in the dust and his little band of thugs were all on the knees with their foreheads touching the ground.

Bruce stood up, cocked his rifle and carefully made his way over to the figure and looked down.

Bruce didn't feel a thing, he thought it would be different to shoot another living being but he felt no different than if he'd shot an ivop, even though the man appeared to be mortally wounded.

His aim had been true, the laser was lying several feet away, a lump of twisted glowing metal and plastic. But the bullet must have deflected off something for the man was trying unsuccessfully to staunch the blood pouring out of a large wound in his side and hold some of his guts in at the same time.

"Help me," he croaked piteously.

Bruce didn't think there was much that he could do for him and shook his head sadly.

twenty one

"What did you do that for?" Sue shrieked in his ear, "there was no need to kill him was there?" Then she turned away and vomited before stumbling off into the basement "I didn't mean too," Bruce tried to explain to Sue's

retreating back. He nudged the body with his foot, wondering whether it was still alive. Evidently it was because it moved again and groaned. He knelt down and took a closer look at the wound.

Nup, he decided, nothing I can do here. He was just about to put his rifle against the man's temple and blow his brains out when Mitch came puffing up.

"What's going on here? He demanded self importantly. What have you done Bruce?!"

"What does it look like?"

"Why did you have to do that?" Mitch demanded, managing to hide his relief at the sight of Eduid obviously close to death. Couldn't have happened to a nicer person. Mitch just hoped that some kind of Skidian doctor didn't happen along to patch him up.

"Because I felt like it, shit for brains," Bruce retorted, thinking that Mitch was almost as naive as Sue. What the hell did they expect him to do...stick around until he was zapped into ash, stand up and say shoot me? "What's his name anyhow?"

"Eduid, he's Raele's elder brother, or was."

"What's he doing here?"

"Unfinished business I think, he was apparently responsible for the famine or whatever happened here before."

Typical, Bruce thought. Mitch hadn't bothered himself much with the catastrophe that had struck Skid, all he was concerned with was him and now. Not the couple of hundred million Skidians that had died.

Bruce looked at Eduid. "Well he got what he deserved then didn't he."

"But you just shot him, in cold blood, that's not very civilised of you."

"Oh get a grip on yourself Mitch, the bugger was trying to kill me."

I wished he had, Mitch thought uncharitably.

Unnoticed the dogs had arrived and Can was sniffing at the widening pool of blood that was already congealing.

"Bugger off." Mitch started, immediately thinking that Bruce was speaking to him. When Bruce made to kick one of his abominable dogs he relaxed a little.

"What do you think we should do with the legion?" Mitch asked, indicating the Celcion legionnaires who remained frozen in place.

"Bugged if I know Mitch, you're the one with leadership aspirations, you decide," Bruce sneered.

Deciding that the half baked legion could be just what he needed Mitch preened his ruffled feathers and strode over to the nearest Celcion.

"I am you new commander," he began self importantly, standing with his legs slightly apart and his hands firmly planted on his hips. All he needed was a big cigar and he would fit the bill of the thistoric general he thought he was emulating. "I ask only one thing of you and that is too obey."

The Celcions slowly raised their heads and looked at each other with puzzled frowns.

"You're a bloody chook Mitch," Bruce laughed. But it was a short laugh as he suddenly spied a small fleet of robots bearing down on them like a mob of daleks.

The dogs whined and sat as close as they possibly could to Bruce. For a moment Bruce thought about taking a few potshots at them, then realised what they were probably up to.

He stepped out of the way, just about tripping over the dogs and watched half in awe, half in amusement as the robots went to work.

The barely dead Eduid was sucked up by one of the larger robots and all the blood and gore cleaned away. In seconds it was if he had never been, except for the blood and watery stuff that seeped out of the robot's front hatch.

The rest of them got straight into repairing the damage caused by Eduid's laser and almost as quickly had cleared away the rubble and were filling in the holes. In the blinking of an eye all traces of Eduid and the damage he had

caused had disappeared and the robots were squeaking and creaking on their way.

Bruce didn't quite believe it. He shook his head and wandered off to find Sue with Mitch's loud voice trying to exhort the legion into action with whatever empty promises that he had no intention of keeping ringing in his ears.

"Don't touch me," Sue warned him when he leant on the door of the ute and looked inside at her.

"I'm not bloody touching you!"

"There's no need to yell and swear Bruce, you didn't have to kill him."

"I didn't mean to kill him at all," Bruce insisted, uselessly he knew.

"Didn't mean to kill him, then why point your gun at him?"

Bruce didn't even know why he was bothering with the conversation.

"Ok I'm sorry, I should have let him simply kill the both of us, better still I should have turned the gun on myself and saved him the trouble. Is that what you mean Sue?"

"No of course it isn't," Sue said, clearly exasperated. "At least you could have tried talking to him."

"Oh I give up," Bruce snapped and pulled the door open. He savagely gunned the engine and dropped the clutch. The wheels squealed on the concrete and they headed for the entrance before Bruce remembered the men out there. Well Mitch won't be missed he thought, but slowed anyway.

"Did you have to do that?" Sue demanded clutching their baby in one hand and clinging to the door handle with the other.

"Either shut up or get out," Bruce replied, slamming on the brakes. There was the kid to think about after all.

"On second thoughts, I'll get out and you can fuck off wherever you want!" Bruce grabbed the rifle and got out.

"But!...you can't leave me here."

"Why not?" Bruce asked mildly enough, his boiling anger slowly subsiding.

"Because you can't that's why." Sue obviously couldn't think of a decent reason. All she knew was that she didn't want Bruce to leave, but she didn't know how to make him stay now that she had somehow upset him. "Please don't go."

"Oh get fucked."

"What's going on here?" Mitch strutted over and demanded. "I won't have you two scrapping in public, whatever will the Skidians think of us?"

"Get lost Mitch," Sue snapped viciously, "this is all your fault!"

"How is it all my fault?" Mitch demanded angrily. Not only was the legion refusing to obey him, but one of his own people was attacking him before their very eyes. How was he supposed to get their respect when he couldn't even control one woman?

"Your fault, I don't know, it just is. Ever since you started to talk about elections and presidents and things the place hasn't been the same. You don't even know what you're doing!"

Mitch swallowed guiltily, Sue was almost right and worse she wasn't the first observer to note he didn't seem to have a plan or know what he was doing.

"Bugger off Mitch, or I'll shoot you as well," Bruce suggested with a laugh. Mitch wasn't sure whether Bruce was serious or not but he wasn't prepared to find out.

Mitch took a hopeful look at the legion who were all watching the scene with mounting interest. He couldn't see any signs of support there and turned to walk off almost blinded by tears of rage and shame. A life of service to the people and he was now so poorly regarded that he commanded no respect at all amongst those that should be his strongest supporters.

"I'm sorry Bruce," Sue muttered contritely, "I'm sorry for everything."

Bruce shrugged his shoulders noncommittally and wondered what Sue was on about now.

"Can we go now please?"

Where? What? Bruce realised that he'd never understand how a woman's mind worked in a million years. Well this one's anyway and he wasn't in the mood to be forgiving. He looked down at Sue and thought that he'd better just cave in and get back in the ute. Oh fuck it, he decided and feigning as much ill temper as he could muster stomped off with the dogs in tow not too close behind. It wouldn't do her any harm to do without him for five minutes. I thought modern women were supposed to be independent anyway? He chuckled to himself.

"You're not going to leave me here with them are you?" Sue demanded, indicating the legion. But the legion had no intention of being left behind. They quickly formed a ragged column and followed Bruce leaving Sue to stare in wonderment at the sight.

After a moment her spirits rose a little and she decided that if Bruce wouldn't come to her, then she must go to him. Sue didn't have much choice she decided, there was nowhere else or nobody else but Bruce.

twenty two

The oddly assorted cavalcade wound it's way through the streets as Bruce strolled toward the parliament. He wasn't sure why he was headed in that direction and soon realised that he'd either taken the long way or it was further than he thought. He didn't give a shit anyhow.

The dogs trotted at his heel, but when Cop sensed that the boss wouldn't mind, they began to lope ahead of him, investigating anything that took their fancy. Stopping here and there, having a shit or a piss and then charging after the retreating figure of Bruce when he got a bit ahead.

Behind Bruce the legion marched grimly, all their attention focused on Bruce, who unbeknownst to him had taken the place of their departed and unloved leader. They would follow him to the end of the world, as long as he led them home.

Who in their right minds would want to stay on this crazy inhospitable planet? They would be much better off back on Celcius where they belonged waiting as they always had for the supplies of synfood. Collectively they had decided that allegiance to this strange Skidian was their best hope and when the time was right they would suggest that he send them home. Until then they would do what ever he bade them.

The other strange Skidian they decided among themselves sounded far too much like Euid, they weren't going to make the same mistake twice and follow somebody that was going to lead them into danger and get most of them killed for nothing.

Bringing up the rear Sue wondered impatiently when Bruce was going to stop being childish and whether she could breast feed little Bruce while she drove along at walking pace.

Eventually the cavalcade attracted interest from the Skidians that were about. Word had quickly spread about the demise of Euid and even more rapidly about the procession winding aimlessly along the streets of the city.

Before long Skidians slipped out of their hiding places and out from their various vantage points and overcoming their fear of the Celcion legion tagged onto the tail of the procession.

By the time Bruce had found his way to the parliament he realised with astonishment what was happening and scurried inside looking for a place to hide.

Equally astonished by his behaviour almost every living being on the planet milled aimlessly around outside wondering what was going to happen

next.

Inside the parliament his footsteps and the panting breath of the dogs echoed in the vast empty spaces as he wandered around not really knowing what he was looking for.

"Bruce, where are you?"

Sue, of all those waiting outside had ventured in and called out. Bruce could here the baby squalling irritably, no doubt in her arms and decided that he didn't really want to confront them yet.

Spying a wide staircase he made his way upwards until he reached the upper level and looked down over the large empty chamber, easily big enough for all those that waited outside to seat themselves in. He walked over to an open window.

Immediately his face was noticed by the Skidians and the expectant crowd hushed waiting expectantly for him to say something.

Feeling a little like the pope, Bruce gave the crowd a casual wave and disappeared from view.

What did they want from him? It wasn't really all that difficult for him to understand, he just didn't want to acknowledge their demands? No it wasn't a demand, it was more of a desperate silent appeal.

"Where the hell's Raele?" Bruce muttered to himself hoping that he hadn't been killed by his brother. That was the man the Skidians should be looking to, though they seemed to have no faith in the poor bastard and Bruce didn't really blame them much for that.

Still, he was their man, Bruce had no intention of taking upon himself the frustrating and thankless task of telling the Skidians how to live their lives.

Hearing footsteps on the stairs Bruce quickly moved on and finding another stairway that seemed to lead down to a lower level of the building quickly disappeared.

Finding himself in the bowels of the building Bruce wandered along the corridors until he found a door guarded by a nervous looking legionnaire.

Bruce glared at the man for several moments, well aware of his increasing discomfort. He clearly didn't know what was going on and Bruce was going to help him. His eyes flicked nervously from Bruce to the dogs and back again, he shifted his feet and just about jumped out of his skin when Bruce suddenly yelled: "Boo!"

The legionnaire was so stunned he dropped his lump of wood and after a moment took to his heels.

"Who's there?" An anxious voice asked.

"Me." Bruce replied recognising Raele's voice. Give me a moment and I'll let you out.

Bruce searched for a lock and wondered whether he should chase off after the legionnaire to get him to open up the door.

There wasn't a lock that Bruce could shoot at, which was probably a good idea seeing as though his last effort at movie style heroics had largely backfired.

"How do you open this bloody thing?" Bruce pushed on the door with the palm of his hand. Surprisingly the door swung open to reveal Raele, Tweest, Iaut and Ues standing in a semi circle beyond the door waiting for him.

"Thankyou for releasing us Bruce," Raele said, speaking for the four of them as was expected of him. According to Skidian tradition he also had to accord his saviour in such circumstances whatever he wanted. In this case he felt he knew what Bruce would want so he wasn't disposed to make that offer to the offworlder. Yet.

Raele was fully aware that his elder brother Euid fully intended to disinfect him, remove him as a threat to his leadership of Skid permanently, indeed he had wondered what was preventing him from doing so since he had been held in custody for several days.

Now that Bruce had saved him from that fate, he owed him more than life itself. Raele's problem was that remaining alive brought with it it's own

problems.

He was leader, whether he liked it or not of a new and frightening world. He would have been quite content to lead Skid as it had been, he was equipped and prepared for that, he wasn't for the world it was now.

But what was he too do. He had taken on board the ideas of the three young Skidians that had all but taken on the persona of Bruce the offworlder in that they were pushy and opinionated and somewhat awesome in their apparent competence. They still looked to him to lead in the traditional manner but he was sure that he was incapable of providing them with the leadership they required.

By the way they looked at Bruce he almost felt that they would rather follow him despite their protestations to the contrary. Did they like himself perceive that like himself Bruce neither felt himself able or wanted to be a leader.

His father had often said that the best leaders were those that led because they thought they had to, because it was expected of them. Those that sought to lead, the Eduid's, Mischief's and Mitch's of the world were not eminently suitable in most cases. Well that insight appeared to be correct if recent events were any guide.

The pity of it was that the best potential leaders rarely got to lead because of their reticence or those less able and far less scrupulous made it impossible for them as Eduid sought to do.

And where was Eduid?

"Umm dead," Bruce replied.

"Phew," Raele breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't need to ask how, he had heard the reports of Bruce's weapon to know well enough who had killed his brother.

"And Mitch."

"I don't think he will trouble you further, I'll make sure he doesn't," Bruce added thoughtfully. "It's about time you lot stopped farting about and got on with living." Bruce had decided that the Skidians didn't really need a leader or a formal system of government or anything else. All they had to do was get on with living with each other maybe with a set of basic rules to help them.

Bruce scratched his nose thoughtfully and chuckled too himself, I'll have the last laugh here, if I can remember what the ten commandments are. He laughed out loud, the Skidians could spend centuries happily trying to work out what they meant.

"What is so funny Bruce?" Raele asked, disturbed by Bruce's apparent disregard of the gravity of the moment.

"Oh nothing much, come on," he said, "lets go and face your people so they know you're still around."

Raele shrugged his shoulders ambiguously and allowed himself to be lead away.

Upstairs Bruce glanced out of one of the windows and saw that the Skidians and the Legion were still out there waiting expectantly. At the back of the crowd he could see Mitch hovering, no doubt still harbouring various delusions. But Mitch despite standing on a chair he had found was exhorting a crowd who no longer had any time for him. He preached to their backs as they waited patiently for Bruce to appear in the window above them.

"Who are they?" Bruce asked gesturing to the legionnaire, sitting at the front of the crowd.

"My brother recruited a mercenary force on Celcious."

The word Celcious caught Bruce's attention, they hardly looked like the formidable warriors that had once long ago laid waste to Skid.

"What will you do with them?"

"Send them back to Celcious B where they belong I expect." As far as Raele was concerned they were the least of his problems.

Bruce waited for Raele to lean out the window and speak to his people. Not that he would have to say much, his very presence would reassure them.

"Well go on Raele do something," Bruce said gently pushing a resisting Raele toward the window.

Raele knew what Bruce was trying to do and pushed him away.

"You," he said pointing at Iaut, the most independent and opinionated of Bruce's three lieutenants. "Speak to them."

If Iaut was surprised he didn't show it Bruce thought. Apart from a deep intake of breath Iaut didn't show any emotion as he stepped up to the window and looked out.

The Skidians outside must have known what was happening for they cheered in the peculiarly chilling Skidian way as Iaut simply stood in the window.

Bruce shook his head and glanced across at Raele who stared impassively at the wall. No matter how long he lived here he would never really understand the Skidians.

After a while Iaut moved away and without a word headed down the main flight of stairs in a strangely dignified manner that had suddenly come upon him. Ues and Tweest followed him at a respectful distance and once they were out of sight Bruce heard a grunt of relief from Raele.

Bruce looked across at Raele again and was a little taken aback that he looked a different person entirely, as if all the woes of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. Which they probably had Bruce reflected, the mantle of leadership had passed on. Hopefully they wouldn't look to him for guidance anymore.

"What are you going to do now?"

"In the tradition of the Skidian way I am either to be disinfected or provided with a patrol craft and exiled."

"When will you find out what happens?"

"Oh I already know," Raele smiled, "I am to be exiled, Iaut would have ordered my death immediately otherwise."

Bruce looked out the window and was a little surprised to find that most of the Skidians had disappeared from outside. Mitch still stood disconsolately but his only audience was the Celcion legion who looked equally unhappy as they considered their fate. They knew enough of the Skidian Way to realise that things had changed even if Mitch didn't.

"What about us?" Bruce asked hopefully.

"I imagine you will want to go home and I don't think it would be fair to leave Mitch here." Raele gestured out the window at Mitch who's voice drifted up to them. While his voice drifted up, most of what he said was incomprehensible to Bruce. Mitch had clearly lost his marbles, Bruce wondered whether it was fair to inflict him back on the country he had recently presided over. On the other hand from what Mitch had said probably nobody would notice the difference.

In a flash of insight Bruce wasn't entirely sure that going home was exactly what he wanted. In fact Bruce really didn't know what he wanted, or whether what he wanted was important, he had responsibilities to Sue and his parents who would soon be wondering where he was and when he was coming home. Who ever said life was simple?

"Here you are!" Sue exclaimed, rushing up obviously relieved to see them both.

"Has something important happened?"

"No not really." Bruce knew he was going to have to be a little more sensitive to Sue's demonstrativeness and need for continual reassurance.

"I heard that Iaut is the new chief Mati of Skid."

"Well if you knew, why did you bother asking me then?" Bruce demanded angrily.

"Because I knew it would wind you up," Sue replied gaily pinching his cheek. "Iaut already stopped to tell me when they were walking down to his new office, don't you think it's exciting?"

"What's exciting?"

"We can go home now and sell our story to the tv people and become instant millionaires."

"What?!"

"Isn't it great?"

"No it isn't, I have no intention of selling any story to anybody
thankyou very much, you want to be treated like an idiot for the rest of your
life? Besides that, what about Mitch?"

"Oh." Sue obviously hadn't thought about that one much. "I guess he can
go back to being president can't he?"

"Look out the window, Mitch has lost his marbles."

Sue glanced out and shook her head. "I don't see anything wrong."

Bruce looked out himself just to make sure. Mitch was still there talking
to himself foam gathering at his lips, even as his only audience was being led
away. "No wonder your country's such a mess if that's considered normal."

"Don't be like that Bruce, you can be so negative at times."

"At least I'm realistic," Bruce retorted, wondering if he really was.
"We've got to think about this, we can't just drop Mitch off in his present
condition, who knows what kind of mischief he might get up to."

Sue didn't really care, her mind was full of visions of talkback shows,
radio interviews and the book she would write and the money she would make,
the attention she and Bruce would receive wherever they went. Life on the farm
could wait until they had their fifteen minutes of fame. It didn't enter her
mind that it could be very different, that authorities back on earth were
already on the trail of a mystery and coming to terms with the fact that they
were no longer the only known life forms in the universe as well as trying to
work out what that meant. There was solid evidence that earth had been
visited by some form of intelligent life, though this knowledge was strictly
restricted to five thousand or so people who were mostly taking an enforced
break at a heavily guarded, isolated dot in the Pacific Ocean and those
grappling with problems that threatened to shake the very foundations of
society in a large white house.

Was there really life out there or were they simply the victims of an
elaborate and successful hoax? And what about the fantastic stories of a
drunken restaurateur and a senile old woman that had been hastily dismissed
for lack of evidence?

twenty three

With almost indecent haste Raele pushed Bruce, Sue and the dogs onto his
patrol ship which had appeared in the suddenly bustling space port.

As Raele hurried them to the ship Bruce saw the Celcion legionnaires
being shoved aboard another ship and cast his eyes over the space ships that
had suddenly appeared. Skidian pilots and their crews strolled around the
ships talking to each other, no doubt puzzling at their sudden recall to a
planet they thought had died.

The procession of the legionnaires or the offworlders was hardly noticed
by the hardened travellers who had no doubt seen many strange sights on their
trips to the far reaches of the known universe.

It struck Bruce that there were probably more Skidians roaming around the
space port than on all the rest of Skid and it also began to intrigue him why
they had taken until the last few hours to return. Was there more to what was
going on Skid than met the eye?

On Board the ship Raele relaxed, as Bruce and Sue had made their
farewells he had been wound up like a spring, as if he believed that Iaut
would still order him killed. Bruce hadn't been impressed with the overweening
arrogant creature that Iaut had become in the few short hours since he had
become Chief Mati.

Bruce couldn't get over the change that had been wrought on Iaut, not to
mention Tweest and Ues. Under the thin veneer of subservience and liberalism,
there must have lurked the good old Skidian trait of arch conservatism. They
were evidently very keen to see the last of Bruce and Sue and any subversive

ideas that might have resulted in their stay.

Wasn't Iaut one of the biggest subversives out? Iaut had said something to that affect in the haughty manner he now assumed. His half apology showing Bruce that there were still chinks in his armour.

But even so, Bruce marvelled at how quickly the leopards spots could change. He wondered if a few alternative lifestyle types would continue living at Aotearoa and found he didn't really care, he wouldn't be back here again.

Perhaps a few hardy souls would be encouraged in their endeavours as long as it suited the new regime.

"What about Mitch?" Sue asked from the corner she had settled in to feed the baby.

Raele scowled, he had hoped to avoid the necessity of returning Mitch to his home world. He was, to put it mildly mentally unstable. Raele had hoped that if he left without him that Iaut would deal with him in the appropriate way. Restoring him to his former self and position was going to be a more complex task than he cared to attempt, for whatever he did, Mitch would be for always, someone who had become completely irrational.

Mitch could be returned back in time to any point of his former existence but even the might of Skid couldn't return his cerebral equilibrium to him.

"Maybe we could leave him on Candour, he wouldn't be out of place there," Raele ventured nervously, knowing that the longer they waited the more likely it would be that Mitch would be marched out to the ship. Fear of Iaut changing his mind hadn't been his sole motivation in wanting to make a hasty exit. He had brought Mitch to Skid and that made him responsible for the offworlder, a singularly unpleasant responsibility.

"We can't just leave him here or drop him off on some other planet," Sue retorted, outraged at the prospect, sure in her own mind that everything would be just fine when they got home. All they had to do was get Raele to do some of that time travel stuff and bugger the consequences.

"Why not?" Bruce asked, he didn't want to have anything to do with trying to put humpty back together again either. As far as he was concerned the world would be a better place without Mitch.

"We can't just leave him here, ouch!" Sue snapped, wincing as the baby gnawed on her nipple.

Bruce tried to imagine the effect of the return of a demented leader blabbing about spaceships and a planet called Skid, might have not only on his country and it's new leadership, but the rest of the world. After a moment or so he decided that he didn't even want to try and think about it. Once Mitch got back and the circumstances behind his disappearance were revealed there was no telling what might happen. The world would be swept by alien phobia with people being convinced that an invasion from outer space was just round the corner.

Then people who thought they could gain something out of the situation from bent politicians, to business men, to bible bashers of all creeds cashing in on the fact that armageddon was just round the corner, would jump on the band wagon and do little more than create even greater turmoil. Whipping up people's collective fear for all it was worth until the whole planet was aflame.

It would be best if they just forgot about Mitch, he'd be ok, Bruce was sure of that. Every community was better off with some poor idiot to prick their consciences and remind them that there were worse things in life. Besides the good old USA had probably learnt to live with him and his reappearance would only serve to cause problems, even if he had all his marbles.

That Mitch probably wouldn't survive their departure long didn't cross his mind.

Bruce could see by the set of her features that Sue was adamant, maybe they should get Mitch, maybe he was just being overly pessimistic about the dangers involved in returning Mitch home. Afterall even in his present state he could hardly do worse than some of his predecessors or counterparts in

other parts of the world. Could he?

Bruce looked out the doorway and saw that they weren't going to have any choice in the matter anyhow. Babbling happily, though insensibly away at the top of his voice Mitch was being dragged towards the space ship by two unhappy looking Skidians.

"You want to inflict that on America?" Bruce asked.

"I don't really care do I? 'm not going to be there, well not for long anyway."

"What do you mean?" He'd been so busy worrying about the implications of dropping Mitch back into the midst of an undoubted crisis, that he hadn't stopped to consider what was going to become of the two of them, or what point in time they would arrive. He simply imagined that he would go home and live happily ever after.

Did Sue mean to come with him? Bruce felt that the treadmill he was on was suddenly tearing along out of control. Maybe he should give more thought to his own future than worrying about Mitch's.

And what about Raele, what was he planning to do?

As the door closed and Raele fiddled with the controls Bruce rolled himself a smoke.

Mitch positioned himself in a corner and proceeded to talk to the wall.

"I don't know what we're going to do with him," Bruce sighed, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't even know what I'm going to do with me," he added slumping down beside Sue.

"You're going to have to give up smoking," Sue said, "at least around me and the baby."

Bruce took out his smoke and watched the growing tip, what the hell am I letting myself in for he wondered, suddenly finding he didn't really care.

"You're the boss," he said tiredly. Almost looking forward to the prospect of being bossed around a little bit.

"So what do you suggest we do with Mitch?"

"Can we return him to the time we met you in the restaurant Raele or just before that perhaps?"

Raele didn't know what a restaurant was but he nodded his head anyway, pleased that returning a crazed former leader to his own planet wasn't going to be his responsibility.

"So that maybe you just took him on a little trip somewhere?"

"Yes," Raele nodded his head, "I can do that."

"And what about us?"

"What about us?"

"Well we want to remember everything that happened don't we, so we don't think we're going nuts again," Bruce suggested hopefully.

"I can do that," Raele said, knowing that he shouldn't. Still as far as he was concerned the old rules didn't matter to him, he owed nobody nothing now.

"And afterwards?"

"I don't understand," Raele replied.

"Which part of the universe are you headed for?"

Raele rubbed his hairless chin ruminatively as he had seen Bruce do so many times and sighed.

"I do not know."

"Oh you can come and stay at home for a while if you like," Bruce suggested pleasantly not expecting Raele to take him up on his offer.

"Bruce?"

"Yes dear?" Bruce drawled lazily lost in his own thoughts.

"Will your parents mind if we get married in America before we move?"

"Why do we need to get married?"

"Don't you want to?"

"Maybe next year," Bruce suggested trying to refrain from grinning. His old's would feel left out if they weren't at the wedding.

"Oh be serious for a moment will you?"

"Yes my parents would mind."

"Oh well it was just a suggestion."

"By the way Raele, how do we transport Mitch and ourselves back to different points in time?"

"I just set this clock back here," Raele replied pointing to a disc on control panel. "All I have to do is access the database records of my last flight, check the log and select a time."

It sounded like a piece of piss to Bruce, though he knew that Heath Robinson's rules applied with everything Skidian.

"When do we do that?"

"As soon as we are at full velocity," Raele told him, "like now." The patrol craft seemed to rock slightly and seemed to Bruce to hang in the air as if somebody was changing gear and then in an instant was travelling through space at a speed never imagined possible by mankind.

Raele checked his computer screen and punched a few keys. "Next stop the eating house," he said with a grin, hoping he was right.

twenty four

Bruce wondered what had happened when he woke from a little doze and heard hail on the roof. Raele's fucked up again he thought as he opened his eyes. He glanced around and found he was still aboard the space ship.

He looked up and saw that Raele had a worried look on his face as he stared out the window.

Bruce followed his gaze and was horrified to see that they were coming into land at some kind of airport with flashes of light streaking out from the ground to meet them.

In the same instant he realised what the hail and the lights were, they were being shot at! Something trailing a long flame approached them at an unbelievable speed, then another and another.

Bruce felt whatever they were strike the hull, not that they seemed to have any affect.

"What the fuck?"

"I have made an error Bruce, we have come back too early."

"Oh shit, does that matter?"

"Umm, well if we don't try again Mitch will meet himself and that might not be a good idea."

"Just as long as I don't meet me," Bruce said half seriously. "Were they waiting for us?"

"Oh no, that won't happen," Raele insisted, but not strongly enough to convince Bruce totally. What could they do about it anyway? Raele's assurances weren't worth anything. "And no I don't think so," he added as an afterthought.

"What about that shit?" Bruce asked, pointing to the lethal fireworks display directed at them.

"It might stop if we land, it did the last time."

"Ok," Bruce glanced around looking for Sue. He knew they shouldn't really drop Mitch off out of sync. But what the hell? Creating problems for America, setting off the most convoluted conspiracy theory of all time appealed to his warped sense of humour. "You've been here before then?"

"Oh yes, I have landed here before." Raele guided the space craft down a long runway toward the source of the gun, rocket and artillery fire and came to a stop before the closed doors of a hanger.

Bruce thought they had come to a stop but the hanger doors slowly folded inwards until the ship was safely inside. Well more or less safely, Bruce saw, as parts of the hanger seemed to fall around them.

"Is the ship damaged?"

Raele pressed a button. "Fully functional," he replied as the hail suddenly subsided.

Bruce wondered what to do next. Should they simply open the door and push Mitch out or what? He rolled himself an agbar cigarette.

While he was wondering what they should do, with Raele standing patiently standing alongside with a smoke up his nose faces began to appear in the front window. Faces peered inside, shading their eyes and grimacing more often than not, which made Bruce feel vaguely discomfited, as if he were a goldfish or something.

"Can they see us?"

"No."

"Thank christ for that," Bruce replied almost laughing at the antics of the people who were trying to look in.

Weirdly out of shape faces pressed up against the window, people flattened their noses against the outside, licked the outside of the screen, spat and sneered. Further back other figures wandered around obviously taking a good look at the space ship until somebody came along and obviously ordered all the now cocky figures in uniform out of the way. The soldiers? Suddenly snapped into action and shortly afterward marched away more or less in an orderly fashion.

Different faces peered in now, older lined and clearly worried faces, their shoulders and chests bearing braid and coloured ribbons and others in more nondescript uniforms.

"Where is Mitch by the way?"

"He is resting," Raele waved vaguely behind him.

"Don't you think we should let him out?"

Bruce watched Cop stretch himself and yawn baring his teeth, drawing his lips and exposing his teeth.

"Soon be home boy," Bruce told him.

'I should bloody well think so too!'

Bruce walked over to the accommodation area and pressed his palm against the wall. In the first room Sue was sound asleep with the baby gurgling happily beside her on the bed. Best leave them alone Bruce thought.

In the next room Bruce found Mitch curled up on the bed in a foetal position with a thumb in his mouth.

Poor dumb bastard, Bruce thought pitying Mitch for a moment wondering idly when he pushed him out the door, who would be inflicting what on who.

He softly shook Mitch awake, accompanied by Cop who gave him one of his human like enquiring looks. "Come on Mitch, time for walkies."

Mitch seemed to take an inordinate amount of time to wake. For a moment Bruce thought he might be dead, but finally Mitch was looking at him with strangely unfocused eyes.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I am honoured to be invited to address you this evening. I wish to propose a framework that we can employ in a non partisan manner to overcome our pres...." His voice trailed away and Mitch began to cry. "Why won't anybody listen to me? We could do great things together, please let me try," he sobbed imploringly.

"Dunno Mitch, maybe you'd like to try someone different for a change?"

Mitch brightened at Bruce's suggestion and allowed himself to be led from the room. "See ya later, you old fart," Bruce said pushing him towards the door that Raele opened on Bruce's signal.

Bruce stepped back out of the way after giving Mitch a shove in the right direction so that nobody could see inside.

"Look the doors opening," he heard a startled voice cry fearfully, "get ready to receive our guests." There was a flurry of activity outside and further gasps of surprise as their guest was recognised.

"It's the president!"

"Are you sure, it might just be a look alike or something?"

"Might be the aliens trying to reassure us maybe?"

"Who knows, it sure looks like President Mitchell?"

'Woof woof woof woof.' Awakened from his slumbers, Punch saw that the door was opening and thinking it was all on for young and old, charged out the

door. Woof woof woof. Bruce could just imagine him slobbering all over the men outside.

"It's a dog!"

"Man's best friend, boy these aliens are fiendishly clever aren't they."

"Good day sir, my name is General Marks."

"My name is Mitch," Mitch replied.

"Are they talking to you Mitch?" General Marks enquired a little taken aback.

"Oh no, I don't think so."

Bruce cursed silently, that bloody dog's chosen the worst possible time to run off he thought. He could hear the idiot bastard animal barking his head off through the still open door and somebody calling. "Here boy, here boy."

"You touch that dog and you'll fry," Bruce yelled, so much for anonymity, "get back in here you dumb bastard!"

Bruce didn't really want to go outside and grab the mutt, and meet the locals but it looked as if he might have to. Just as he was going to step out into view Punch, looking exceptionally pleased with himself came charging back through the door.

"You bloody idiot!" Bruce aimed a kick in Punch's general direction, missing by a wide margin. Punch, like the great goofy twit that he was sat down just out of reach, panting away grinning at Bruce.

"Hello up there?" A worried voice called through the door, "can we come in?"

"No you can't." Bruce replied, "close the fucken door Raele."

Bruce stood ready to kick the nuts of the owner of the hand and knee that tried to force their way through the door but they quickly withdrew when it appeared the door was going to close no matter what.

"Let's get of here."

Raele fiddled with his controls and without any perception other than watching the astonished, perhaps fearful figures clustered around Mitch slowly recede into the background, the ship moved away. Outside the hanger, the ship turned slowly and then sped away above the runway and streaked into the sky.

"Home time," Bruce remarked. Notwithstanding that he wasn't home yet.

"Where's Mitch?" Sue wiping sleep from her eyes asked.

"Oh you can hear about it on the news tonight, or whenever."

"How could you, what have you done?"

"I left him where I found him," Raele said coming to Bruce's assistance.

"Yeah we didn't want to wake you up," Bruce added lamely.

"You rotten sod, you could at least have let me say goodbye."

"To that dickhead, why for?" Bruce couldn't believe his ears, in recent times Sue's opinion of Mitch was even lower than his own.

"You have no idea sometimes Bruce, we might never see him again."

"I hope that's true," Bruce muttered just loud enough for Sue to hear.

Sue ignored him and turned to Raele: "What about us?"

"Whenever you like."

twenty five

Whenever you like turned out to be pretty well immediately. Bruce shook Raele's hand and wished him well.

"Don't forget the dogs will you Raele, I'll need them when I get home and look after yourself eh?" Bruce stuck out his hand and Raele shook it warmly for much longer than was necessary as was Skidian custom. "And drop by sometime," Bruce added assuming Raele would know where to find them.

"Yes do that," Sue echoed the sentiment and stood on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek.

Raele turned bright crimson which came as a complete surprise to Bruce. He'd never seen a Skidian blush, let alone show much real emotion. Perhaps Raele wasn't such a bad bloke, the best of the bad lot.

In an instant Bruce found himself opening the front door for Sue as they entered Trev's restaurant. Given that he'd just said goodbye to Raele it came as something of a surprise to see him sitting comfortably at the bar beside Trev.

"You!" Bruce echoed Sue's surprised voice and from another time. Bruce just about asked where Mitch was but caught himself just in time. Time? How the hell did Raele come to be sitting there by himself? Raele was a time traveller, he could do anything Bruce guessed, or had the past few weeks been some sort of dream and Raele from another time.

But how could that be? Bruce remembered everything now, the time before and after, which didn't explain Raele's presence at all. Where was Mitch, in the shithouse?

"Small world eh," Trev said, "Raele said he knew the both of you from somewhere."

"Small world? I suppose so." Not sounding overly enthusiastic seemed to wipe the grin slowly off Raele's face. "Nice to see you again Raele." Bruce said extending his hand feeling a bit silly shaking the Skidians hand after just a few moments. "Long time no see."

"Yes Bruce, hello Sue."

Sue nodded and found interestingly enough that she was pushing little Bruce in the pushchair his grandmother had bought him.

Bruce walked around the bar and grabbed himself a beer and a softdrink for Sue and lit up a smoke trying to remember what he was doing there and if it really mattered. Was his immediate past the same as the one that he thought it was? Or what? Bruce certainly didn't, soon he would be married, perish the thought and then he would be going back home.

"What are you doing here? Sue asked rather acidly, believing Skid was all behind them now.

"Well you did say, say drop in anytime," Raele replied unconscious of the fact that neither Bruce nor Sue had expected to be taken so literally, or so quickly at their word.

Trev was a little taken aback, Raele was quite an odd, very formal bloke, not the sort of person he'd have picked to be some kind of friend of Sue's or Bruce's. But then there was something a little odd about them to, as if they had a secret that they couldn't or wouldn't share. Not to mention that they made as an unlikely couple you could imagine.

"Are you working at the moment?" Trev asked.

"Eh, what do you mean?" And then Bruce remembered that he was supposed to be paying for his keep by working behind the bar. "Oh yeah, sorry mate. Bit on my mind at the moment." Bruce decided he'd better serve the customers at the bar and then do a quick sortie of the tables, whipping away empty glasses and emptying out the ashtrays.

"Sit down with us," Trev suggested to Sue. He still harboured ambitions of getting into her pants despite Bruce's apparent headstart. For an instant he pictured her sprawled on one of the tables in a seductive pose, one of his favourite fantasies and the reason his last waitress had left.

"Thankyou Trev," she said seeming to remember that Trev was interested in her, but also remembering that the last time she had been here they had been coming to get Bruce's belongings because he was going to move in with her.

"Will you be coming to the wedding if we get married here?" Sue asked disconcertingly.

Trev almost choked on his drink. "I guess so, if I'm asked that is," he replied, trying hard to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

The sound from the television in the corner screening a baseball game or something suddenly increased.

"We break into this sportscast to bring you a news flash," a voice said and almost every head in the place swung towards the screen. It had to important stuff indeed if the television station broke away from a baseball game.

News flash graphics filled the screen followed by snapshots of recent and

past big news stories.

The graphics faded with the end of the special news flash jingle that sounded vaguely like a promo for the War Of The Worlds and the face of a well known news presenter filled the screen.

The news presenter stared gravely at his audience and prompter then nervously shuffled the papers on his desk without looking down to see what he was doing.

"Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Astonishing news from Washington this afternoon, in the last few minutes the White House has announced that it has been in contact with representatives of a civilisation from the furthestmost reached of the universe." The news presenter wiped his brow and paused for several moments as if he wasn't sure himself of the news that he was reporting. This wasn't a tabloid news show afterall, he was the nations premier current events reporter, or so he had been told often enough for it almost to be a reality.

"We have just received video tape of what appears to be a UFO landing at an undisclosed Airforce base and what appears to be the first meeting by representatives of the United States Military Forces and beings from an alien culture."

The sight of Raele's space ship coming into view above a runway replaced the newscaster and with it the excited voice of whoever was holding the video camera.

"It must be doing three thousand miles an hour at least!"

"Five thousand seven hundred kilometres an hour," somebody else suggested. "If he doesn't slow down soon he'll plough right through the hangers at the end of the runway."

"The base has been on high alert since the UFO's sighting and it's failure to respond to any communication and the defense systems are targeting the UFO."

"I must say Roger, I don't know why, we don't know whether this craft is hostile or merely on an exploratory mission."

"Enough of that you two, you aren't reporters, just get the pictures!" A third voice yelled.

The picture wavered for a moment and there was a thump as if somebody had been hit over the head, but it was quickly sighted back on the UFO the focus of streams of bright red dots as every available weapon on the base opened up on it.

"The UFO landed shortly after this videotape was taken apparently unaffected by the barrage of fire directed at it," the presenters voice broke in over the tape, "and first contact was made with the alien representatives."

The shot cut to wreckage of a large building with a group of men milling about a large saucer shaped object that was Raele's space ship.

"Shortly after landing a representative of the....."

"What's going on here Bruce?"

"Shhh," somebody called across the room, "Can't you see this is important." Apart from the commentators voice and the odd slurp there was complete silence in the restaurant. Even the traffic noise seemed to have died away outside, from time to time a breathless figure entered looking for a television to watch.

"Bruce?" Sue insisted and everyone swung around and glared at her. "What have you done?"

Bruce merely shrugged his shoulders and did his best to disassociate himself from Sue and the newsflash by making himself as inconspicuous as possible behind the bar.

"It looks like the president himself!" Someone exclaimed as Mitch exited the UFO and one of the reception committee ran forward to catch him and lead him away.

Then Punch ran out the door. "Get back in here you beep idiot beep Punch! Pheep, pheep! I'll have you, you beep beep!" Bruce cringed at the sound of his own voice and listened with some interest as the newscaster tried to explain

that one.

Where have those bloody dogs got to now? Cyril Hardwood swore at the empty kennels wondering how his son's strange dogs had slipped out of them.

He turned away and scanned that part of the farm he could see and hearing a scratching sound turned back to the kennels.

The dogs were there!

"Yes you old dickhead," the old heading dog seemed to say, "where did you think we'd been? Outer space?"

Cyril Harwood shook his head and wondered whether he had gone senile overnight. He hoped that Bruce would get in touch with them and tell them he was coming home soon, he was getting too old for this sort of shit.

"Cyril! Cyril! Come quickly," his wife called shrilly from the house, "Oh Cyril," she screamed hysterically.....

"Don't be silly dear," Cyril said a few moments later, "the dogs are outside all three of the strange bastards and we've just had a card from Bruce, he's miles from there."

"It appears that the alien who has been meeting with government officials bears an uncanny likeness to our own President Mitchell.

It also appears that the UFO also carries likenesses of at least one species of animal life found of earth and other passnegers who have a good grasp of various english language obscenities." Bruce didn't know how the newscaster kept a straight face over that one, the whole situation seemed somewhat surreal, like some poorly written scene in a third rate sci fi movie.

"We now cross to Doctor Amos Nelson at the Centre for Extraterrestrial Research in Colorado, Doctor Nelson, what do you make of this, er," the newscaster made an uncustomary hesitation, "er event?"

"I think this visitation justifies the billions spent on trying to contact intelligent forms of life throughout the universe, it appears that we were right all along," the rather large man with a thick grey bushy beard who appeared on the screen replied smugly.

"Ah what do you make of the ..."

"Envoy?"

"Yes the apparent similarity of the envoy to our own president, the use of the English language and the presence of what appeared to be a dog?"

"I think it is entirely possible that the envoy has assumed the form of President Mitchell in order to set us at ease, I don't know why they chose to land here or whether in fact this is the only place they have landed on the planet. For example an envoy to say China or India, if there is one would probably assume the image of their President or Prime Minister."

"You don't believe this is an elaborate hoax of some kind? Isn't the UFO too neatly what we imagine a UFO to look like? Isn't the appearance of a President Mitchell lookalike just too coincidental? This is election year afterall?"

"Anything's possible," Doctor Nelson conceded, "there have been plenty of hoaxes in the past."

"Then this is just another one," the newscaster interjected.

"Not having seen the envoy in the flesh, not having had a chance to inspect the UFO itself I would say that anything is possible and err on the side of caution." Doctor Nelson conceded. "However what I find particularly fascinating, is that this information has been released by our government which is an unheard of revelation. The fact that something buzzed the space shuttle a few hours ago may have forced their hand. Also we have seen evidence that this craft travels at incredible speeds and has an ability to completely elude all of our airborne early warning systems."

"You say you have information that the space shuttle intercepted this craft or one like it."

"Hardly intercepted," Doctor Nelson laughed, "encountered and retreated might be a more apt explanation."

"I think we have been supplied with footage of this encounter," the

newsman commented tapping his earphone.

"Yes, similar craft at least, somebody on the flight deck, look there, he's waving."

Bruce looked nervously over at Raele who was enjoying the show and hoped that nobody recognised him.

"What do you make of this information Doctor Nelson?"

"Well it's really conjecture at the moment until enough of us have got a look at the alien envoy and his ship, if it ever returns," Doctor Nelson replied, not wanting to commit himself and become a laughing stock among his professional colleagues.

"Thank you Doctor Nelson."

"I'm only too happy to be of assistance."

"We know cross to the White House live with Rudd Wass our senior political analyst."

"Good evening Rudd I guess this must just about be the biggest story since, well ever?"

"Yes Doug, and it's not just the story itself, but the way it is being handled over here. While we haven't had any hard information to speak of, which is perhaps understandable, we have been kept up to date since this story broke. Which to briefly recap is that an alien has landed and is talking with government officials."

"Ah Rudd, I hear that President Mitchell has called for an immediate meeting of the UN General Assembly, why would this be?"

"I think that even though the alien envoy, no lets call him the representative of another world, even though he landed here and was more or less taken into custody, protective or otherwise, by our government, his arrival is a global issue and that President Mitchell and America can't be seen to monopolise him. I guess they must also be aware that at the same time they by default are bound to protect him as well."

"What do you mean by that Rudd?" This was something the newsroom team hadn't considered and Doug was a little perplexed, as were most of his audience.

"Well Doug," Rudd began, stopping to choose his words carefully. "To some people this isn't simply about a visit to earth by the representative of another world, there are already insinuations by some religious groups that this representative heralds the arrival of armageddon, that he is indeed the devil and should be got rid of quickly. Exactly how this arrival should be handled and what might result are very tricky problems...."

It was dawning guiltily on Bruce that he and Raele might have done a very silly thing. Maybe they should go and get him back, but then what would they do with them. He looked across at Sue who fixed him with an angry accusatory glare.

".....there are many many social, religious and other issues that might be potentially affected if the visit is handled without sensitivity."

Rudd Wass evidently didn't understand the wider implications of a dazed Mitch's return to earth which didn't make Bruce feel any better. He could feel Sue's eyes boring into the back of his head and decided that he'd better deal with her before she said or did something that might implicate them in the breaking events. Trev was also giving him and Raele nervous sidelong glances.

"Thanks Rudd, we'll come back to you later. Doug shifted his gaze to another camera. "We will now break for a few moments and will be back to recap on this fast breaking story and bring you more details as they come to hand." Doug faded away and was replaced by a score update on the baseball game the newsflash had interrupted which faded quickly away to an add for dishwashing liquid.

The tension of the last few minutes broken, everyone seemed to take the opportunity to storm the bar in case this next drink was their last. Not that anybody seemed capable of coherent speech, it was like listening to somebody speaking tongues. Bruce couldn't decide whether they were apprehensive, intrigued or simply stunned.

As the add break broke back to the newsflash graphics Sue came up and dragged him out into the empty kitchen.

"What the hell have you done Bruce?"

"It was Raele's fault," Bruce insisted trying to shift the blame. "He said he'd be going back the same time he left, he must have miscalculated or something," he added helplessly.

"I know you better than that, you thought it would be amusing to change the course of history didn't you? So now what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Bruce admitted ruefully, wishing he could just sneak away and hide.

"Maybe we could just sneak over and get him back, send him and Raele away again," Bruce suggested grasping for straws.

"Don't you think you've done enough damage?"

"Probably, " Bruce said with a grin, but it can't be all bad can it? Those blokes on tele and in the White House think Mitch is the greatest thing since sliced bread."

"But he's going to address the United Nations," Sue said as if that in itself was important.

"So, he'll get up there, make a pretty little speech about working together and moving forward together which nobody will believe or understand and everyone will be happy ever after."

"I hope you're right Bruce, I hope you're right."

twenty six

In the event, Mitch's address to the United Nations was delayed, then postponed and then finally set for the date that Bruce and Sue had decided to get married on.

The powers that be obviously didn't know how to deal with Mitch. He had no special powers, couldn't turn water into wine and didn't seem to have the support of a large fleet of space ships floating around just out of reach. He was on his own and various groups were comparing Mitch with the unfortunate Rudolf Hess, although there was strong evidence to support the theory that he had been left on earth rather than come of his own volition.

The alien Mitch was a source of interest and wonder for he was an exact replica of the real President Mitchell. While he had his genes and mannerisms, he also showed that he didn't quite have his brain. For the alien Mitch could barely repeat a word coherently let alone a sentence that, though he did preach a message at every opportunity which could not be ignored. He was like a preprogrammed clone of the President struggling to fulfil it's destiny. He also believed that he was the President of the United States of America and great care was taken to keep him safely under wraps in case he got out and created confusion and disorder in the Presidents name.

His very presence lent credence to the fact that humans weren't alone as sentient beings in the universe and the manner of his appearance led those in power to suddenly realise that all powerful as they might think they were, there were more powerful forces in at work in the universe. This was the most frightening aspect of Mitch's presence, the alien in question was a quite inoffensive sort himself, it was what he represented that was the problem.

How would his masters react if he wasn't treated well, properly? What would they say if he wasn't given the chance to speak at the only global forum that most governments recognised?

Despite their better judgement the date was set when Mitch would address the world and communicate the full extent of his purpose for being on the planet in the first place, as if his leaked statements hadn't said enough already to send the world into a spin.

But there were other important events taking precedence, not the least the long awaited marriage of Bruce and Sue and an international cricket match

or two.

"I'm getting married mum," Bruce broke the news over the phone.

"Are you home dear? This line is so clear that you could be down at the pub."

"No mum, I'm still in America, I just rang to tell you I'm getting married and to ask you both to come to the wedding."

"That's nice dear, but I don't think we can....." The impact of what Bruce was saying finally filtered through.

"You're what?!"

Bruce sighed and wished he was talking to his father, his mother was so thick at times.

"I'm getting married mum."

"I hope she's a nice girl Bruce, I don't really fancy you marrying a foreigner, those sort of marriages never work."

"She's a nice woman mum," Bruce said trying to put her mind at rest wondering what her reaction would be when she found that Sue's parents were as black as the ace of spades and as if that wasn't enough so different otherwise that they might as well be from a different world.

"Cyril!" Bruce heard his mother call as a door slammed somewhere, "Bruce is getting married."

Bruce heard his father's heavy footsteps pad closer and then he was on the other end of the phone.

"What's this son?" Cyril asked.

"I'm getting married dad, we want to know how soon you two can get here so we can set the date."

"I dunno about that son, there's a lot of work to do about the farm, I can't just up and leave."

"Yes you can dad, it's the middle of bloody winter," Bruce said becoming a little exasperated. He'd never hear the end of it if he didn't make sure they were at the wedding and here was the old bugger saying they didn't want to come.

"Rangi won't mind looking after the farm for a couple weeks and anything else can wait till I get back."

And so after much wheedling and little talks between Sue and Bruce's mother and Cyril and Sue's mother and father a date was finally set.

Bruce stood nervously close by the arrivals gate, silently contemplating the large screen television that was showing footage of Mitch and himself talking to each other, walking in the grounds of some large house screened by worried looking security agents. Talking in an informal setting in some room, standing at a lectern together. That must be the address to congress, Bruce thought. A preliminary to his speech at the General Assembly of the United Nations.

There were plenty of pictures but not much in a spoken sense from Mitch. Like the old adage, he was to be seen and not heard. Bruce didn't blame whoever was stage managing the whole affair one bit, though he wondered how they were going to manage the upcoming speech to the United Nations. Perhaps they could get the real president to give the speech and Mitch could just sit there keeping quiet and looking intelligent.

"Flight TE 3402 is now disembarking at gate one."

"Bruce looked up to make sure he was standing by the right gate and relaxed, they would be ages getting through customs and grabbing their baggage.

Fidgeting nervously Bruce wished he could have a smoke, but even he could see the no smoking signs plastered around everywhere.

"Bruce! Over here." Bruce swung around and saw his mother approaching him with her arms stretched wide. His father followed at a discreet distance manfully pushing a laden luggage trolley.

Bruce deftly avoided his mother's embrace, though he did allow her to peck his cheek and solemnly shook his father's hand.

"Hi," he said, noticing the way his mother looking around suspiciously.

"Where is she," she demanded.

"Who?"

"Your fiance of course, I thought she might be her, I'm dying to meet her of course," she added.

I bet you are Bruce thought. "Sue and her olds are waiting at her place, they kinda thought I'd like to meet you alone." Bruce still hadn't let on that Sue was black, well dark and they had a kid between them. He had thought that the airport or the trip back to the house might give him the opportunity but his mother dominated the conversation bringing him up to date on all the local gossip and anything else she could think of. She was obviously nervous because she couldn't keep her mouth shut.

Bruce made the obligatory enquiry about the farm.

"It's ok," was his father's simple reply. If he was nervous he wasn't showing it. But he must be because he'd never travelled away more than fifty miles from the farm in his life, except for the odd rugby trip away with his mates when he was a young man. What an education this must be for him Bruce thought.

"Well here we are," he said pulling into Sue's driveway, noting another car beside her parent's. Who's this he wondered? He caught a glimpse of Mrs Pratt, the nosy old bat from next door peeking out her window.

"This is Sue's place," Bruce announced. "You can meet everyone and then I'll take you down the road to where you're going to stay."

"Ok son." Bruce thought his father sounded knackered, his mother probably was, though she wasn't saying. She wasn't saying anything. Bruce looked across at her and saw how her face had gone completely white and her jaw had dropped open as if she had seen a ghost.

"Oh Bruce, how could you?" She asked in a sad defeated voice.

"Whaddaya mean?" Bruce demanded and then followed her gaze. Sue was approaching the car and her parents were standing apprehensively on the doorstep.

"Oh that, well I meant to tell you," he said, "but I just couldn't find the right time."

"What's wrong Mavis?" The long suffering Cyril asked.

"She's black," Mavis whispered just loud enough for Sue to hear.

Sue hesitated and then came on.

"Did you have to say that?" Cyril hissed, exasperated that his wife of many years could continue to surprise and embarrass him with her insensitivity.

"Hello Mrs Harwood," Sue said nervously through the window as Bruce got out of the car.

"Hello," Mavis replied sullenly, still shocked at the colour of the woman her son had decided to marry, ignoring Sue's offer of assistance to get out of the car.

Cyril Harwood climbed out of the car stiffly, now totally disgusted with his wife. Their son was finally getting married and she was already showing her disapproval at his choice and she'd hardly met the girl.

"Mr Harwood?"

"Call me Cyril, most people do," he replied ignoring the hand Sue extended to be shaken and giving her an awkward hug instead. Cyril Harwood wasn't a man given to displays of emotion as his only son would attest to, but he knew he had to do something to make up for his wife's outright rudeness.

"Come on mum," Bruce said wearily, just as he'd feared, his mother wouldn't take to Sue or her parents "lets go and met Sue's olds."

"You two go along, I'll wait here." And hurry up she didn't snap, Mavis felt tired, she wanted to use the toilet and felt completely let down by her son. She'd show her disapproval by waiting in the car and ignoring Sue and everyone else. She knew she was being slightly irrational, no matter how much she disapproved the wedding would still go on and that woman would end up sharing her home.

The two men looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders and rolled

their eyes at Sue as if to say: "well we're not going to let her worry us are we?"

Sue thought she was looking at two images of the same person when Bruce and his father looked at her, she couldn't get over how alike they looked.

Cyril Harwood was a tall strong silent looking man, who radiated strength and competence, the same qualities she saw in Bruce, though the father seemed more even tempered and tolerant than the son. She was put out, if not offended by Bruce's mothers' attitude, even though Bruce had told her what to expect. And there was still the biggy to come. Little Bruce was inside crawling around his playpen like a caged animal, already exhibiting the same sort of raw energy that Bruce did when he got motivated.

Like his son before him, Cyril Harwood couldn't get over how black Sue's parent's were. Sue herself wasn't what he would call black, but her parent's were so black that they looked almost purple. He had to struggle to prevent himself reaching out and touching their skin just to see what it felt like.

"Giddae," he said shaking Sue's father's hand and then her mothers. Then he repeated himself inside where the rest of the family waited.

"Have a good trip?" John Clarke asked.

"Yeah, thanks John, a bit longer than I thought. I guess you'll get to know it when you come and visit us."

"Eh?" John Clarke asked a taken aback.

"Well I guess Bruce and Sue are coming back to NZ aren't they?"

"I don't really know," it was clearly something the Clarke's hadn't considered.

"Cup of tea?" Sue asked hastily.

"Thanks," Cyril replied suspiciously, wondering whether Sue could make a decent cup of tea, didn't americans drink coffee mostly? Cyril caught sight of little Bruce prowling around his playpen, eying him. Cyril felt his heart thump as he realised how much like Bruce the toddler was at the same age.

Holy shit! He thought. Mavis is really going to throw a wobbly over this one!

"There's something else I didn't tell you dad," Bruce said catching the direction of his fathers gaze.

"Well I'm pleased you didn't tell your mother, but I guess she'll get used to the idea, eventually," he said grinning as he lifted the toddler out of the pen and dangled him on his knee.

Cyril's obvious pride in his grandson eased the tension of the meeting and Mavis was forgotten as she squirmed uncomfortably in the car seat waiting for the menfolk to return and take her away from the scene that she found so humiliating and distasteful.

Doubly distasteful as eventually unable to contain herself she had to swallow her pride and join the happy party inside to use the toilet.

Mavis's hesitant knock on the door went unanswered so she pushed on the door and tried to work out where the toilet might be so she could sneak in without anybody noticing.

"You can't keep on calling him little Bruce," she heard her husband say as she peered around. Little Bruce she thought?"

"We're not going to call him Cyril if that's what you mean," Bruce laughed.

"What about Bruce junior?"

"What about Bruce junior?" Mavis recognised the taunting retort of her son.

"Bruce!" She heard another voice warn him.

"I guess we'll have to sort something out before the wedding, cos Sue's wanting to get the little critter baptised at the same time."

"Aggggggggh," Mavis screamed just working out what the others were talking about, "aggggggh," she screamed again and felt her legs giving away and a black shutter seemed to drop over her eyes.

Mavis found herself having a nice little dream about swimming, which quickly took a more sinister turn when she caught sight of a large shark

tracking her across the sand as she somehow swum up the beach. ' Agghh,' she heard herself scream as she fell into a puddle as the shark caught her by the foot in it's massive jaws.

"Are you ok?" She heard a voice say from close by. Mavis flicked open her eyes and found several faces frowning, worried looking faces looking down at her.

"I must have fainted," Mavis whispered, at the same time realising much to her embarrassment that she wouldn't need to find the toilet.

"Shall I call the doctor?" A voice asked from out of sight.

"No, I'll be ok in a minute," Mavis insisted hoping that if she stayed put the embarrassing puddle would dry up quickly. But no, to her mortification, somebody was already busy with a cloth down by her bum.

The day was off to an auspicious start.

twenty seven

Despite herself Mavis found she couldn't keep the tears out of her eyes as she watched her son and his chosen one exchange their wedding vows. She had always hoped that Bruce would one day settle down and find himself a nice girl to marry. They would have a great big wedding, all her friends and family, hers and Cyril's would turn out and the day would as much be their's as the young couples.

The celebration in a building that didn't even look like a church among people she didn't even know wasn't what she imagined, just as Sue wasn't the bride she'd always imagined. Mavis expected she'd get used to it in time. She didn't even know Bruce's best man, although Bruce had said something about him being the brother of somebody he knew. Besides making Trev best man meant that he was forced to give them a cut price deal on the reception which would be held in his poky little restaurant.

As for the other tall pale man Mavis didn't know what to think. He didn't seem to come from anywhere or do anything and was in most respects quite the oddest person Mavis had ever met. Bruce had ever been too choosy about his friends.

"You may now kiss the bride," she heard the black minister say, marking the end of the service that had been more like a rock concert with all the singing and clapping and loud yells from the pulpit than the sort of service she was used to. Cyril, never a noted church goer had even started singing along at one stage and she'd had to kick him to stop him making a fool of himself.

At least there wouldn't be much booze flowing at the reception, Sue's parents were strict teetotallers, as were most of the guests. That would decrease the chance of both the men making complete fools of themselves, though Bruce looked a little the worse for wear this morning.

Mavis followed the happy couple outside, carefully avoiding everyone, especially the minister and snapped a quick photo, before wandering off to the rental car to wait for Cyril.

The crowd quickly broke up and drifted away once Bruce and Sue disappeared with Raele in the bridal limousine. Trev should have been in the limo as well but whether by luck or design he was left behind.

He must be off to organise the reception Mavis thought until he came over to where she was waiting and asked for a ride.

"They just went off and left me," he muttered unhappily, wondering why Bruce slammed the door in his face.

"What is this place?" Raele asked for the umpteenth time. He couldn't understand how the United Nations worked like a government but was virtually powerless at the same time. It seemed a singularly stupid idea to Raele to have two governments, one for individual states or nations and one global but useless one. Why not just have one. Skid just had one and whether or not the right decisions were made it had mostly worked effectively.

If the United Nations was so impotent why had Mitch chosen to speak at it's general assembly? The humans were so confusing a times and he was glad that he had his patrol craft so he could get away whenever he ever needed to.

Mitch was a diminutive figure in the vast hall but his words seemed to carry easily to where they sat in the limousine which was another wonder to Raelle, how did they do that? On Skid a speaker had to almost scream to make himself heard over the hubbub of noise that usually accompanied parliamentary sittings. Mitch was speaking normally.

"He sounds almost normal," said Bruce as he listened to Mitch's opening remarks, which were little more than the usual platitudes about what an honour it was to speak to the Assembly and to thank them for giving him an opportunity to speak.

"Shhhh," Sue hissed, taking the precaution of sliding the window closed between themselves and the chauffeur. "And don't drink so much either, she said admonishing Bruce who was making inroads into the complementary champagne. "You know my parents don't hold with drinking, do you want to embarrass them in front of their minister?"

"Cheer's," Bruce replied jovially raising his glass, but he had his eyes and ears glued to the screen.

"As you know I am an emissary from the Planet Skid, sent to make contact with the leaders of this planet in order to facilitate closer relations between our two civilisations," Mitch read from the teleprompter, squarely staring his audience of billions in the face and sending shivers of wonder and fear up the spines of those billions as they heard proof that they were no longer alone in the universe. What did that mean?

"We have been watching this planet for aeons, since your ancestors climbed out of the primordial soup and developed into the primates that roamed the forests and plains. We watched as your ancestors began to spread across the world and slowly learnt the process of building a society, developing agriculture and warring among yourselves." Mitch paused for a moment, frowning in disapproval while people squirmed uneasily in their seats. It wasn't a nice feeling to realise your every move had been followed and your foibles revealed for what they were.

"We did not consider intervening in your wars or other tragedies for we had our own to deal with, we didn't intervene to show you a better way, that the domineering, exploitative systems of government and business that you developed had no place in a sophisticated civilisation because from our own experience we knew that would develop over time. Or we thought they would," Mitch added somewhat ominously, chastising the immature teen for not acting more like an adult.

"If my own treatment on this planet is indicative of the way this world operates then I think you have a lot to learn about government and the responsibilities of government," Mitch raised his voice as if he was chastising a child and wagged his finger at the increasingly uncomfortable audience as if they realised that their collective sins might be visited on them.

But at the same time many of them weren't happy with what they were hearing, what right did this alien have to criticise them and their way of life? He was getting close to openly criticising, making blasphemous remarks about the major world religions, he didn't refrain from his criticisms of some of the worlds most revered and cherished institutions.

"He's waffling," Bruce said. He could tell from the shots that panned the vast chamber that people were becoming unhappy, restlessly moving in their seats and murmuring angrily to colleagues, advisors and enemies alike. "He's dangerous and still nuts," Bruce added as Mitch's voice rose to a high pitched crescendo and dropped again.

"I see abject poverty on the streets of the planet's richest nations, I see large and powerful conglomerates exploiting the weak and powerless, I see greedy politicians, I see religious zealots fighting and killing for the sake of killing, I see people wilfully poisoning their environments, I see....."

"He's dangerous, somebody will kill him for sure."

"And it's all your fault, now shutup," Sue insisted leaning closer to the little screen set into the compartment in front of them.

Bruce guiltily swallowed, it wasn't quite true, he also couldn't understand why he wasn't recognised for the lunatic he was. Though Bruce had to admit that Mitch sounded lucid enough.

"I am here to tell you that I have been empowered by the government of Skid to act as their representative on this planet and to act as I see fit."

"Christ, Sue breathed," he's loony."

"You're telling me, what do you think Raele?"

But Raele didn't answer, he wasn't even listening to what Mitch had to say, though he stared intently at the small screen.

"I have been empowered by my government, with the assistance of a fleet of patrol craft to act as I see fit in order to facilitate the economic and social development of this planet. To this end I will shortly be announcing plans for the equitable sharing of wealth and resources..."

"Raele?"

"... the introduction of Skidian technology and the arrival of advisors to implement these changes."

Raele couldn't believe his eyes, there not ten metres away from the podium where Mitch stood making his pronouncements stood one of his brothers who had been exiled from Skid many years ago.

As the assembly erupted into uproar, with members standing and shaking their fists, beginning to fight among themselves or simply sit around bemused by the pronouncements of the alien, whatever security arrangements were in position quickly became overwhelmed trying to break up fights and hustle Mitch away from the situation that had rapidly become untenable.

"My brother," Raele muttered unintelligibly, his eyes rivetted to the screen trying to catch a glimpse of his brother as the camera panned wildly around trying to capture the scene as it fell into chaos.

"Your brother?" Bruce asked stunned to discover that Raele had a brother on earth.

"There," Raele pointed to the screen.

"But that's not you brother, that's Arnold Rumbold," said Sue naming an immensely popular basketball player who had somehow insinuated himself into the assembly and then recognised an uncanny resemblance to Raele.

"My brother," Raele repeated watching a flash of light leap from his brother's arm.

"Oh my god," Sue sobbed, hiding her face in Bruce's shoulder, "what have we done?" She asked as civil defense warning notice suddenly appeared on the screen telling people to remain calm and in their homes.

to be continued.....