

Skid

The tasting of the plant

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A planet called Skid
Keith Fenwick

Also by Keith Fenwick in the Skid series

Skid 2

Return to Skid

Skid 3

Another place called Skid

The tasting of the plant

"We thank you almighty for this harvest." Inel wondered what the words really meant, for on this planet he was the almighty.

It was a tedious, but possibly the most significant duty of Skid's ruler the annual tasting of the plant. The origins of the elaborate ceremony were long forgotten, as was the reason the ceremony was enacted year after year.

Whatever the case it seemed best to carry on regardless. It was a case of continuing a tradition for traditions sake without question, for to question the need for this ceremony, in this age would question all Skid's traditions, the very reason for there being a Skidian society at all.

Despite its tremendous significance there was not much to it really. Trying not to tumble headfirst into the bubbling liquid from his platform, Inel dipped an exquisitely carved, long handled ladle, into one of the vast open vats where the planet's synthofood was produced. Then after much chanting and exaggerated gesturing, he tasted some of the latest batch. It was considered a propitious sign if that he did not keel over on the spot.

It would have been quite a simple process except it proceeded only after an hour or so of

solemn declarations, affirmations of duty, and the usual drama that turns a simple ritual into one of great complexity and length. A theatre which assumed more importance than it warranted in this enlightened and technological age.

Completely unaffected by the ritual the enormous fermentation vats bubbled away quietly, providing the planet' sustenance, the way they had for several thousand years.

Towards the rear of the little group of witnesses, pressed up against the containment wall of the vat, stood a man whose appearance marked him out as someone who was clearly of a different race to the others. Noslow was short, slim, and had a swarthy complexion, in a crowd that was mostly very tall, grossly overweight, and whose skin color almost matched that of the brilliantly white robes they all wore.

Noslow carefully opened a small vial in the sleeve of his robe and concealing the vial in his hand he tipped the contents into the vat.

With a nervous smirk Noslow listened to the final chant. A relic of a more superstitious age when the Skidians believed their survival depended on placating the spirit world, as Inel went through the motions of ensuring Skid would have sufficient food for the coming year. If all went well Noslow hoped one of his own people; perhaps even himself would lead next year's ceremony.

One man and his dogs

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Bruce could feel a vein pulsing at his temple as he drew a deep breath and bellowed the next command at the dogs.

"Get back Punch you moron!" he screamed. "Pheep pheep, pheep pheep," he whistled. "Get back! Walk up, phip phip. Get in behind Punch! Walk up Can. Sit down Punch! That'll do Cop!" Finally the cattle trotted across the hill, mooing and snorting unhappily, then slid down the fence line and through the gate where Bruce stood as it began to rain again.

"Stop that, Cop, you senile old goat," Bruce screamed. The dog sat and waited expectantly on the side of the hill like a wound up mechanical toy waiting to be let loose, his stubby tail wagging furiously, instead of diving through the fence to head the mob of cattle off like he thought he should. Can thought she had better sit too, while Punch, back up the empty hillside just kept on barking like the lunatic he was.

Hunching his shoulders against the squally rain, Bruce counted the cattle through the gateway and slammed shut it behind them.

"Bloody mongrels!" He grunted, as if the cattle were solely to blame for getting him wet. Well, by being unnecessarily pig headed and all but refusing to budge, as far as he was concerned they had been.

"Good boy." Bruce gave Punch, the pup a quick pat, aimed a kick at the other two dogs who also decided that they deserved some attention, then stomped off towards his motorbike.

The rain shower passed but the wind still howled in off the sea, picking sand up from the dunes and flinging it into his face as if he were standing in front of a sandblaster. Bruce pulled up the hood of his swandri and trudged off through the dunes leaning into the wind, brushing through the dead and dying lupines that he had planted as part of a halfhearted erosion control measure in the spring.

At last he clambered over a fence and wearily threw his leg over the motorbike parked on the other side. After a moment he kicked it into life and headed off up the track towards the next mob of cattle that needed shifting, glancing around several times as he rode to make sure that the dogs were following. Once he had to stop and yell at Can who was forever scavenging, inspecting decomposing turkey or sheep carcasses, or anything else she thought had potential. Anybody would think the dog was never fed.

The bike's rear slid about as the tire fought for traction on the steep, slick track while Bruce dangled his feet off the foot pegs in an attempt to keep it on course. The track was almost impassable but Bruce did not believe in walking where he thought he could ride or drive. To make matters worse his swandri hood had blown back and was slowly filling with water, which trickled down the back of his neck.

Eventually the rear wheel did what it had been threatening to do ever since he'd started up the track, and slipped out from under him before he could steady it with an out thrust leg.

"Bugger ya then." Bruce gave the bike a kick and left it lying where it dropped, the rear wheel spinning until the motor finally stalled with a clunk.

The track was almost as difficult to walk up as it had been to ride up. For each step Bruce took he seemed to slide half a one back, heavy clay sticking like lead weights to his boots.

Eventually he made it to the top and started across the paddock towards the last mob of cattle waiting expectantly behind the electric fence for him to shift them onto a new break of grass.

Occasionally Bruce fantasized that he was the only person left on earth when he was out the back of the farm, heading for the cliffs that dropped straight into the sea. Then he would catch sight of a truck on the road that ran inland of the farm or hear somebody doing their nut at their dogs a few miles away. Even so, if he had an accident, fell off the bike, or over the cliff or something, the neighbors might not realize that he was missing for days.

Deep space patrol

Protected by stealth systems that had been activated since before entering this solar system, the patrol ship carrying the members of Committee 21 flew through the planet's atmosphere completely undisturbed. The crew was confident that they would remain undetected by the unsophisticated tracking systems arrayed on the planet below although they really had no idea how anything aboard the ship worked.

An argument raged aboard between the crewmembers as a great empty continent fell away behind the ship as it headed westward towards a group of smaller islands and the vast empty spaces of a large ocean beyond.

"Just how do we judge the suitability of likely candidates? Interrogate them? What questions should we ask?" Mulgoon demanded.

Cyprus was all for simply transporting a likely-looking specimen aboard the ship and disposing of him, her, it, or them, if they proved unsuitable for their needs. However, because of his lowly status his counsel was not taken seriously. He was the token commoner of the committee that formed the crew. He was not supposed to be there to offer an opinion on anything and the others ignored most of what he said. To make matters worse, Toytoo, the chairman of the committee was notorious among a planet of procrastinators, for never being able to make a decision.

Mulgoon was wavering, almost on the point of deciding the whole scheme was really too risky and felt that they should return home empty-handed.

"How can we decide where most of their food is produced?" Mulgoon, who should have known better, asked. He had made a special study of the subject after all.

In an unusual departure from protocol Myfair was inclined to agree with Cyprus. The planet was obviously populated by primitives and any one of them could provide the assistance they needed. Furthermore, he, more than the others knew it was dangerous to loiter around the planet. Despite their low level of technology, the inhabitants below could possibly have developed systems that could sense, damage or destroy, the ship since the last time a Skidian vessel ventured this way.

Unnoticed by the others Myfair slipped into the control room and studied images of the planet unfolding beneath them. A lone figure suddenly appeared on the screen, moving across an area of organic material.

Intrigued by this lonely figure, for Skidians were never really alone, Myfair instructed the ship to hover while he studied the potential candidate and its accompanying four-legged companions.

"He'll do," Myfair decided impulsively. This offworlder had to know something about the organic material over which he moved. He stole a quick glance over his shoulder at the others, who were still arguing in the conference chamber, and activated the transporter beam to bring the offworlder on board.

"What the bloody hell?" Just as Bruce had been about to give Punch a good kick in the ribs for rolling in a nicely rotting sheep carcass at the top of the cliff something had grasped him by the scruff of the neck and yanked him skyward.

One moment he was struggling across a paddock leaning into the near gale force winds to keep his balance lashed by driving rain. The next he was here. Wherever and whatever here was. For a moment Bruce decided he must have been blown off the cliff somehow and smashed his head on something. Was he on his way to heaven? If it wasn't heaven then it must be a hallucination of another kind. Was he still asleep? Had he just fallen over and bumped his head on a rock?

The three dogs? What were they doing here? Surely they wouldn't have been stupid enough to follow him off the cliff. They didn't look particularly happy though. At first they trembled and whimpered fearfully, tails between their legs, their eyes rolling in their sockets. Then all three of them tried unsuccessfully to climb up under his swandri. Finding the struggle beyond them, they gave up and cautiously sniffed the floor instead.

Cop was the first to venture off the platform to investigate a ghostly apparition that was approaching from the far end of the dimly lit room. The apparition solidified into the figure of a man wearing a long white robe of some kind that brushed the floor as he moved.

Bruce tensed. His heart thumped wildly behind his ribs, so hard that he thought it might leap from his chest, as the figure stopped several feet in front of him.

Bruce wondered if it was Saint Peter, whether he might indeed be in heaven. Cop sniffed, whined, and then scuttled back to cower behind his master, resting his head against Bruce's feet, peering suspiciously up at the man.

"Giddyay." Bruce could not think of anything more intelligent to say off the top of his head, and immediately cursed himself for sounding so idiotic. This bloke probably wouldn't understand a word he said.

He shifted uncomfortably and tapped his foot in the puddle of water that had run off his swandri and leggings while the figure continued to stare at him, distastefully twitching his nose.

Despite his pallid skin and dark blue rimmed eyes, Bruce thought he appeared quite human, though he had never seen anybody with such pale skin before. Not even on the bare legs of tourists fresh from a northern winter wandering down a beach.

And if he were in fact a man, he was a big man, standing well over two meters tall like a basketball player or rugby lock with a hormone imbalance.

Bruce started to step backwards, but the man loomed over him and placed his hands on his shoulders, drawing Bruce forward and brushing his lips over each cheek.

Yuk!" Bruce wiped his cheeks on the sleeve of his swandri. "What the?" He stepped forward to avenge the insult, but was halted in mid stride by a raised hand.

"Welcome. Thank you for joining us here." Myfair greeted Bruce in the traditional manner of Skid where visitors were shown every courtesy, no matter what the host really thought of his guest. "My name is Myfair and I am at your service."

Cop took this opportunity of an apparently friendly greeting to leave the dubious safety of Bruce's presence and begin an exploration of the room. He cocked his leg against a cabinet squirting a stream of urine at it, then trotted off his tail wagging jauntily. This was fresh turf and as the boss dog here, he was staking his claim.

"What's going on?" Bruce managed to blurt out, pinching himself at the same time to make

sure that he was indeed still alive and maybe experiencing some extra surreal dream. Myfair frowned, wondering whether the offworlder was as stupid as he looked. Surely that was obvious?

"You are aboard a Skidian deep space patrol vessel in orbit around your home planet," he stated the obvious just in case.

"Bullshit. You're having me on." The alien, if that's what he was pretending to be, spoke with a mid-Atlantic drawl that was almost too good to be true. Bruce was sure now that he must be dreaming. On the other hand, a victim of a CIA plot maybe!

"Kindly step this way and look into this monitor."

Bruce peered into the monitor for perhaps thirty seconds, and then stepped back, stunned at the sight. This was either some kind of elaborate trick, or what? He wondered. On the screen the earth had unfolded like a satellite picture from a television weather forecast. Bruce stepped forward for another look and watched the earth's surface disappear behind them at an alarming rate. They were flying above a sea. Which sea? He wondered. Not liking to ask, he glanced at Myfair, scratched his nose, and reached into his pocket for his smokes.

With a nonchalance he certainly did not feel Bruce lit the cigarette and took a deep puff.

Myfair or whatever his stupid sounding name was, certainly wasn't pulling his leg. He might not be on a space ship but he was in the air.

Too astonished by the idea to feel much fear or anxiety, Bruce asked, surprised at the steadiness of his voice. "Well what happens now?"

Bruce had already decided that Myfair was neither God nor an angel and that he wasn't in heaven or some other dream world. That vision had been replaced by a sudden fear of being spirited off to be an exhibit at an alien zoo or research specimen at an alien laboratory.

Adrenaline coursing through his veins, his muscles tensed, Bruce prepared to run. Anywhere. Then he realized there was nowhere to go.

Myfair seemed to sense his apprehension and laid a kindly hand on his arm. "Do not worry, we merely wish to make use of your talents, for which you will be well rewarded," he lied.

"Eh? Whatdoyou mean?" Bruce asked, the question emerging from his mouth as one word.

"We have traveled to your world." Myfair stopped short at the point of explaining the purpose of their journey as he caught sight of his fellow crewmembers watching him. He realized he had some explaining of his own to do.

"All will be revealed to you in good time. Now you must be tired. Let me show you to our hospitality suite." Myfair's tone was diplomatic, but the grip on Bruce's arm convinced him he had little choice in the matter so he complied without a struggle. The alien was far too big to argue with.

Bruce was guided towards an unmarked wall, which opened to reveal a large empty space. He stood hesitantly on the threshold until Myfair gave him a firm shove.

"Please ask your companions to enter with you."

"Get in." His heart beating even faster now, Bruce stood in the center of the room, anticipating who knew what.

"You will be comfortable in here while I consult with my associates."

Bruce tried to decide whether there was a hint of malice in Myfair's voice. Deciding there wasn't, he relaxed a little.

Myfair motioned to a small keyboard on the wall beside the doorway. "These buttons will call up any amenity you may require." He pressed one to demonstrate, and a toilet appeared. A good old-fashioned dunny, complete with a wooden seat quite out of place in the stark sterile chamber.

Bruce had been anticipating a slip that would prove he was caught up some kind of elaborate hoax. Surely a real spaceship would have something more high tech to sit on. The toilet was so terrestrial in appearance that Bruce almost found its presence reassuring.

Myfair pressed another button and the toilet bowl disappeared.

"Each button has a symbol for the amenity required," Myfair explained as he stepped outside and the wall slid shut behind him with the finality of a cell door closing on a condemned man. Bruce took a nervous drag on his cigarette, waiting for something to happen. Exactly what he wasn't sure. He still half expected to wake up to find himself lying on a bed with needles and tubes sticking out of him and a team of doctors poking him about. He wasn't sure whether he imagined himself to be in intensive care at the hospital, or in some alien laboratory.

Unable to find a suitable receptacle for his cigarette butt Bruce dropped it, grinding it into the floor with his boot. Seconds later he almost jumped out of his skin as the silence of the room was shattered by a shrill whirring sound.

"What the hell?"

A trap door flipped open in the seamless wall below the keyboard and a small drone, shaped like a toaster laid on its side with a bowl on top, rolled out.

The dogs cringed against the wall as the drone shot across the floor and stopped over the cigarette butt. Emitting a sound like a vacuum cleaner it sucked up the butt and ash then spun on its axis with an excruciating squeal and bolted back into its hole.

Bruce shrugged his shoulders as if to say nothing else could surprise him. He lit up another smoke and had a close look at the buttons on the wall. The various symbols etched onto the buttons made as much sense to him as ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics would so he pushed a few at random. A circle with a dot in the middle evidently meant 'toilet'. A sideways 'L' represented a bed. An open-ended rectangle caused a shower, complete with running water, to appear in a corner of the room.

Now that looked like a good idea Bruce thought. For the moment though he continued to push the buttons randomly, vainly hoping that the door would open. Finally he decided that Myfair must have locked it from the outside. Not that Bruce had the faintest idea what he would do if he escaped from the room. He simply would have felt better if he could have got out. He pressed the bed button. A bed shot out of the wall, joined moments later by the shower cubicle. Temporarily cowed by the sudden appearance of the bed, and with Punch's heavy tail thumping a slow steady rhythm on the floor, the three dogs watched Bruce peel off his clothing. Boots first, then the plastic leggings, swandri, jersey, socks, shirt, singlet, trousers, and under strides. All dropped in an untidy heap on the floor.

Almost as an afterthought, Bruce reached into his shirt and pulled out his smokes, chucking them onto the bed for safety then stepped into the shower.

After several moments of standing under the comfortably warm jets of water Bruce instinctively reached out for the soap, only to realize at the same time that the water itself contained some sort of detergent.

"Shit hot!" He said, working a lather up all over his body. Then the dogs started barking furiously.

"Shut up!" Bruce leaned out of the cubicle to see what the dogs were barking at just in time to see a larger version of the drone that had sucked up his discarded cigarette butt in the process of doing the same to his pile of clothing. Bruce leapt out of the shower, slipped as his foot touched the floor, and missed the drone by inches as it bolted back into the wall.

"Bugger."

Bruce stood dripping in the middle of the room, cursing his loss. There was nothing like nakedness in an alien environment to make a man feel completely inadequate.

"Shut up ya bastards!" He yelled at the dogs who were still barking maniacally at the wall the drone had disappeared through. He could do without that racket as well.

Cultural superiority

Myfair followed his companions into the chamber where their discussions had been rudely interrupted by his impulsive beaming up of the offworlder.

"Explain yourself Myfair!" Toytoo demanded.

"I. Er." Myfair fumbled for the right words with which to express himself as the other three crewmen waited expectantly for an answer.

"The expert candidate is now resting in one of the accommodation units along with three other unidentified specimens which were accompanying him at the time of his transportation."

"What were you thinking of Myfair?" Cyprus hissed, offended by Myfair's break from procedure. "Why did you preempt the consultative process?"

"Haven't we all, my friend?" Myfair reminded him dryly, "by deciding to come here in the first place?"

"Be that as it may, we were deciding on how we should identify likely candidates. How do you know that you have made a suitable choice?" Cyprus blustered, suddenly unsure of himself in the company of his peers.

"I am certain he will be ideal for our purposes," replied Myfair, hesitantly. Well he had to be did he not?

"What gives you the right to take this sort of action yourself?" Mulgoon demanded, affronted that his own counsel had been ignored so precipitously.

Unabashed, Myfair made no further effort to justify himself. He knew from his cultural programming that silence was his best defense. Besides none of his fellow crewman was sufficiently his social peer to remonstrate with him at any length. Certainly not Mulgoon or Cyprus.

Toytoo recognized the parallels between Myfair's actions and their collective one by being in this part of the universe at all. Rather rapidly for a Skidian he made up his mind.

"Although I believe Myfair's action to be precipitous, he has forced us to act in a manner that will prove to be productive." The others nodded solemnly. This was Skidian decision making in action. A problem was generally debated at length and then the most effective course of action was taken. In other words, decisions were based on expediency and the self-interest of those in the decision making process. Myfair could not be censured too heavily, for they relied on him to pilot the patrol vessel home to Skid.

"I suggest we observe the candidate in order to assess whether he will meet our needs," he continued. His pronouncement was greeted by three solemn nods. "Meanwhile I suggest Myfair transports several more candidates to the ship so we will have a balanced sample from which to make our final selections."

Mulgoon, Toytoo, and Cyprus watched the primary candidate, who now lay naked on the bed, having completed his ablutions, on one of the internal monitors.

The offworlder was obviously too stupid to find himself some clothing after the drone had automatically disposed of the garments he had carelessly discarded on the floor. Didn't the offworlder realize that the drone management system would immediately sense and remove any waste products from its designated zone of responsibility? If he did not know now, he would soon learn.

Myfair rapidly developed a theory about the offworlders as he returned to the control room.

Being concerned with organic food production, it followed in Myfair's mind that the best candidates would come from areas of the planet below covered by the larger examples of vegetative organic material displayed on his monitor. He accepted that he might have erred in the selection of the first offworlder and he now sought to redeem himself in the eyes of his colleagues by refining his selection process.

Not that Myfair had the faintest idea of what organic material was; organic was simply a technical term used to describe some of the material the vessel's sensors identified. That some of this organic material might be inedible did not occur to Myfair either. Surely anything organic could be consumed as a nutritive source?

Myfair made his selections. He chose a cross section of candidates so they could weed some of them out if necessary and dispose of the one he had already transported up to the ship. Myfair punched several sets of coordinates into the computer and made the necessary alterations to

the vessels' flight path.

In this manner the Skidians became host to an aged prospector from Australia's Northern Territory who had been on an illicit prospecting trip through an Aboriginal reserve. A Swedish forester, who had been checking for signs of regeneration in a forest devastated by acid rain, joined him seconds later.

Before either man could begin to come to grips with this sudden change of scenery. The Australian thought that he was suffering a severe attack of the DT's, while the Swede was sure forest elves of ancient legends had kidnapped him, they were joined by a woman who had given up all hope after becoming lost on a tramping trip in the northwestern United States.

Myfair studied the candidates standing before him, registering their expressions of surprise, fear, and, in the case of the female, surprisingly of relief. For a fleeting moment Myfair wondered how he would feel if suddenly transported onto an offworld spaceship. He did not dwell on that unlikely event as his attention was drawn to an instrument warning light that had begun to flash.

One of the planet's primitive detection systems had stumbled across the ship's presence in their atmosphere. This was not a major problem as the ship could easily outstrip any pursuit offered from the planet below. Nevertheless, it would not do to allow a close inspection of their ship.

Myfair quickly adjusted the controls. With a barely perceptible jolt the ship accelerated, leaving the earth's atmosphere and the as yet disorganized attempts at identifying and pursuing a possible unidentified intruder wallowing in its wake.

A slight turbulence jostled the ship as it approached the light barrier; all pretense of stealth forgotten in Myfair's haste to escape, and the ship became a bright speck in the sky visible to millions on the planet below. Seconds later the ship ripped open a wormhole terminus that would deposit the ship within a light day of its homeport on Skid.

The other members of Committee 21 alerted by the warning joined Myfair in the control room to look over the new arrivals.

Both groups watched each other warily. The Skidians with a curious detachment and indifference, after all these primitive offworlders were lesser beings than they were. Whatever they might think or feel was of no importance when the future of Skid, the most advanced society in the known universe was at stake. The offworlders unsurprisingly viewed their situation with mounting anxiety.

The euphoria felt by the members of Committee 21 dissipated a little as they examined the unlikely group on which their futures depended. For better or worse they were committed to the scenario they had hastily conceived unless they dispatched the offworlders into space and returned home empty handed.

A bump in the night

"What was that?" Bruce was a light sleeper. The barely perceptible jolts as the ship left the earth's atmosphere and accelerated into space and the slight stutter as the ship ripped open the wormhole terminus woke him. He sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and looked around. Can looked up, glanced around the room, and dozed off again. Cop made little doggy snuffling sounds in his sleep, while Punch watched Bruce, his tail thumping against the deck as it wagged lazily from side to side.

Bruce scratched his groin, deciding this was a funny sort of dream. Wasn't he supposed to wake up and find it had all been a dream? Then he remembered the room, the room that the alien had shut him into, the one in which he was sitting.

Although the room was comfortably warm, Bruce wished he had some clothes to put on. His nakedness accentuated his feeling of vulnerability and added to his general discomfort.

To his great relief, despite the deprivations of the drone and his own body, Bruce discovered that his smokes had survived intact, jammed between the bed and the wall. He reached down and flipped open the cardboard lid. There were seven cigarettes left in the packet. Bruce wondered whether he should ration himself. Who knew when he would get anymore? He put a cigarette between his lips, took out the lighter which had been resting inside the packet and lit it.

"A cup of coffee would be nice," Bruce suggested wistfully to the dogs, "a feed wouldn't go amiss, either." However, perhaps he was not as hungry as he imagined. His stomach rumbles could well be caused by tension and worry. Butterflies! He chuckled at that thought. If he was really on a space ship, anything was possible.

"What was that?" Bruce heard a faint noise that sounded like a woman screaming as he thought about his empty stomach. He shook his head. Not likely here, then he noticed the dogs had pricked their ears up.

Suddenly it occurred to Bruce that the spacemen were probably watching him. This was more important than some imaginary noises in his head. He belatedly dropped his hands to cover his genitals. Then he realized they had probably seen all they wanted to by now, so he dropped all pretence at modesty, stood, and wandered over to the keyboard by the door.

Before he had a chance to do anything a tray shot out of the wall laden with a pile of light cotton sheets.

"A bit late for that. Eh boys?" Bruce picked up one of the sheets and shook it out. "A bloody dress!" He grunted in disgust tossing his cigarette butt away. This time Bruce didn't bat an eyelid as the little drone shot out of its lair to clean the butt up almost before it hit the ground. "Too small." He tossed the first robe at Cop who got to his feet, shook it off, and lay down on it. There were three smaller robes and one large one that Bruce guessed was meant for him. He regarded the garment dubiously and then held it up to his body to check it for size. Not the sort of clothing he would have chosen for himself, still he didn't seem to have a choice right at that moment.

He pulled the robe over his head, fought his arms into the sleeves, and began to shake the rest of it down over his body, missing the sound of the door sliding open in the process.

"Agggh, aghhh, let me go you creep!"

Bruce's first thought was that the screaming hadn't been imaginary as he tugged the robe down in order to cover his extremities. Then he realized he was giving whomever a full frontal and tried to turn away.

"Bugger!" He exclaimed as he lost his balance and fell to the floor still struggling to dress himself.

The screaming stopped abruptly, replaced by the sound of someone sobbing. Bruce finally regained his feet, arranged the unfamiliar garment about him with a series of firm tugs, and just about tripped over the floor length hem in the process. Then he turned to see what all the racket was about.

A woman stood, back against the wall, peering at him through her hands that covered the lower part of her face. Her eyes were red and puffy as if she had been crying for hours and dark and tangled wisps of hair stuck to damp patches on her face and hands.

Bruce's eyes were drawn to the twin globes of her dark breasts that the open front of her robe revealed. The woman caught his eye and clutched the material of the open neck together, hunched her shoulders and slid down the wall until she was sitting against it with her legs out stretched.

"Who are you?" Bruce wondered if she might be some sort of slave sent to minister to his needs against her will. "Probably not," he muttered to himself. She was a fellow victim.

Cop got to his feet, stretched, and wandered over to investigate the new arrival. While Bruce wondered what else to say, Cop broke the ice by licking at the hands covering the woman's face. He was quickly joined by Punch, who took a quicker route to her affections by trying to

stick his head up her robe, which had bunched up around her thighs as she slumped against the wall.

"Oh you horrible animal. Get away. Shoo!" She struggled feebly to push both dogs away. Bruce couldn't blame her he wouldn't want Cop, whose favorite pass time was dining on decomposing turkey, licking his face either.

"Go on, get out of it!" Bruce kicked Punch in the ribs and he slunk off to lie down in the corner as if nothing had happened. Cop sat by the woman's side like a bodyguard, hesitantly watching Bruce and occasionally taking a quick sniff at the woman.

"Giddyay." Bruce tried again. However, not for the first time recently he cursed himself for not having anything more intelligent to say. "Well here we are then," he tried again after a few moments.

The woman didn't respond she just stared at him with wild confused eyes.

"Get away from me!" She screamed leaping to her feet as Bruce moved a little closer.

"Ok, lady, ah. Um." He was still stumped for something to say as he raised his hands in a placatory gesture. She didn't think he was one of them, did she? Well, why not? How would she know otherwise?

Bruce backed away, sat on the bed, and groped around for his smokes. Cop came over and rested his head on his thigh while his eyes flicked like a metronome from Bruce, to the woman, and back again. With great deliberation Bruce selected and lit a cigarette.

Trying to sound convincing as possible he said, "I'm not one of them, you know." He shook a cigarette out of the packet and offered it to the woman. "Smoke?"

"She looked up and shook her head. " No."

"Sure?"

"I don't."

Bruce took his cigarette from his mouth and stared at it contemplatively

"I hope you don't mind me then."

"Yes I do," she replied sharply, "but it won't stop you, will it?"

Bruce shook his head. "No, it won't, I'm afraid. But not to worry. I've only got a couple left."

"Then why don't you just go and get some more?"

"Eh? Where the hell am I going to get a packet of smokes around here?"

"From your friends, of course, your fellow space cadets. What is this, anyway? Some kind of joke?"

"Look here you stupid woman, do I look like one of those other blokes out there?" Bruce tapped some ash onto Cop's back, "I imagine that just like yourself I was minding my own business and then suddenly here I was. And I've been here for I don't know how long," he added.

The woman glanced from Bruce to Cop, who was still resting his head on Bruce's knee, to the other dogs, and then backs to Bruce. "You're not one of them, then?" She asked hesitantly. Definitely an American, Bruce decided from her accent.

"Of course not!" he snarled. "Do I look like a bloody alien?"

"No, I suppose not," she conceded. "Not that I've ever met one before," she sobbed. "Ohhh." Bruce reached out and patted the woman tentatively on her shoulder hoping to offer her a little comfort. She immediately tensed as he touched her and started to shrug him off. After a moment she relaxed a bit and sat down on the bed beside him.

"Now what?" Bruce took a closer look at the woman. Well, girl really, because she didn't look that old. He tossed away his cigarette and felt her jump as the drone shot out of the wall alongside her to clear up the butt.

"What's that?" She asked, fearfully

"Just the cleaning lady," Bruce joked, and she relaxed again. With his free hand Bruce hooked her hair back so he could see her face more clearly.

"What's your name?"

"Sue. Sue Clark. What's yours?"

"Bruce. And that's Cop, Punch, and Can." Cop raised his head at the mention of his name and padded over to sit beside Sue.

"And where does Sue Clark come from?" He asked, deciding that getting her talking might get her mind off whatever predicament both of them were in.

"Portland, Oregon," she said, through a new barrage of sobs.

"You probably think it sounds obvious, but how did you get here, Sue?"

"Sniff. I'm a travel agent-my own company," Sue replied proudly, "and well I was on this promotional hiking trip through the forest when I got lost. Sniff. I went behind a tree to pee and when I'd finished, everyone had gone." Sue's body convulsed in a huge sob. "So I picked up my pack and ran to catch up with them. When I came to a fork in the trail, I must have picked the wrong one. By the time I realized that, it was almost dark." Sue took a deep breath and sighed. "So I sat down trying not to panic. After a little while I decided that if I cut through the forest I would find the other trail so I just kept walking and walking, trying to find it."

"You should have stayed put. Eh? Somebody would have come looking for you once they realized you had gone."

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"Well what happened next?"

"I'm not certain. Just when I had about given up, I found myself out there thinking I had been saved. It was so horrible."

"Oh it's not that bad really, is it?"

"Out there, I mean," Sue sobbed, gesticulating wildly when the words would not come.

"Take it easy. It can't be that bad."

"You want to bet? There were two men out there when I arrived."

"Two others? Well, where are they?" Bruce demanded. If there were two or three others, maybe they could overpower the spacemen and fly the spaceship home.

Sue dashed his hopes almost as quickly as she had raised them. "No, it's too horrible. I can't."

"Tell me, Sue. Tell me." Bruce shook her roughly. "What about the two men?"

"I found myself standing out there on a platform," Sue sniveled, "with a man like none I'd ever seen before, watching me," Sue sniffed again. "He was really pale, like an albino. Then I realized that there were two other men standing beside me on the platform as well."

"Go on."

"Then three other spacemen joined the first one."

At least four then, thought Bruce grimly.

"Then there seemed to be some sort of problem. A warning light flashed on the bench. The first alien pushed a few buttons and there was a bump and the ship seemed to accelerate."

I felt that, Bruce thought, that's what woke me up. Sue started crying again, pressing her face into Bruce's shoulder. "Come on. Tell me what happened then," he insisted softly.

"One of the men beside me, he seemed quite old, suddenly fell down clutching at his chest. I guess he must have had a heart attack or something."

When Sue had finished, Bruce had to admit it was quite a harrowing tale. No wonder she was so upset.

The man, who had collapsed an old guy apparently, had writhed on the floor while the others looked on helplessly, unable to move. Suddenly a large drone had shot out from somewhere and sucked up one of the men. It must have made a mistake because it didn't suck up the man on the floor but the one who had knelt down beside him to see what he could do to help. Then, as if the drone had realized its mistake, it sucked up what was probably its priority target. Not a pretty sight, Bruce conceded. Watching two men being sucked up by a self-propelled vacuum cleaner and wondering if you were next. What a way to go!

Sue had been left standing there, numbed by the sudden brutality of the act and waiting for her own end. She only recovered enough to scream and struggle when she was forced into another

room, where she had been stripped, thrown under a shower, and then been thrown in with Bruce, where she now shivered with delayed shock. Little wonder that she had been scared witless!

Taking agbar

The members of Committee 21 stood around a low table in the ship's debating chamber waiting for Myfair to explain why he had partially decontaminated the transporter's precious cargo, his second major misdemeanor in just a short time. Once that was out of the way, they would begin to discuss exactly how they would introduce the two remaining candidates to the ruling council and validate their actions.

At this stage the misguided members of Committee 21 were ignorant of the fact that the ruling council knew all about their 'secret' operation and were preparing to take advantage of their initiative.

This was thanks to Myfair, who being a typical Skidian followed the letter of the law no more and no less by filing a flight plan to gain authorization for the use of the patrol ship to visit the offworld planet. It had never occurred to him to file an inaccurate flight plan. It was beyond Myfair to show that sort of initiative and suggest that he was planning an acceptable joyride to the other end of the universe. This facet of Skidian culture made the present journey of himself and his companions all that more remarkable.

"One of the candidates appeared to be terminally incapacitated, so the disposal unit automatically dealt with him." Instant disposal was the standard medical treatment for any but the most minor of Skidian infirmities.

Myfair cleared his throat noisily. "Unfortunately, the unit selected the wrong individual, so I immediately rectified this error manually." Myfair lowered his eyes, avoiding the accusing stares that were aimed in his direction. Feigning shame for his incompetence would be accepted as sufficient punishment for his mistake. However the others well knew he did not feel any remorse, let alone responsibility for his error.

"So now we have only two candidates, and one of them, the male is probably not equipped to help us." Cyprus stated the obvious. "And their home planet has been alerted to our presence so it would be unwise for us to return there for the present."

The four of them stood silently around the table, as if assimilating this latest piece of intelligence for several minutes. At the center of the table sat a bowl half full of a murky liquid, beside which rested a scoop on a white mat. The scoop was in fact the shell of a marine crustacean, the history and significance of which had been lost in the mists of time. Indeed, if asked, none of the Skidians could have said anything about the shell's origins and it would have come as a shock to them to discover that it was the mobile home of a tasty marine animal. The Skidians did not know what an animal was; they attached no significance to knowing such things. This simple failing was one of the reasons why they could all soon starve to death despite their dominance of the known universe. Not only had the Skidians become complacent, Skid had long since ceased to expand and grow in both a technological and social sense. Most Skidians had ceased to learn or do anything at all, living from day to day, without an apparent care in the world. Their society had become moribund; most Skidians were totally ignorant of the fact that their world was slowly falling to pieces about their ears. Those few that we aware of this fact either didn't know what to do about it or hoped the crisis would just go away of its own accord. More importantly most of them had also conveniently forgotten the mighty Skidian achievements of the past because they did not suit the image that latter day Skidians had of themselves.

In accordance with tradition Myfair reached across the table, dipped the scoop into the bowl, and collected a small amount of the liquid in the scoop. He swilled the liquid around the scoop several times in the correct manner, then flung the contents over his shoulder with a quick flick of the wrist. In order of seniority, he offered the replenished scoop in turn to each of his

companions to drain and took one for himself. Then the ritual was re-enacted until the bowl was empty.

Bowing his head Myfair began the last stage of the traditional process of flagellation. He produced a small pouch from within the folds of his robe and extracted a small book of thin papers. He then took a pinch of leafy material from the pouch, one of the papers, and rolled up a cigarette. In contrast to their dignified behavior of a few minutes earlier the others threw themselves at the pouch as Myfair produced a glowing plug and lit the cigarette poked into his left nostril.

"The offworld male takes agbar orally," Myfair commented to the general disgust of the others as they puffed away. Taking agbar, the leafy material that they smoked, was a solemn ritual. The offworlder's abuse of the ritual served to reinforce to them that he was a base and primitive being.

Before they could apply themselves to the task of how to introduce the primitive offworlders to Skid a shrill beep heralded an incoming communications signal and they crowded around a monitor to see if the nature of their unauthorized journey had been discovered.

It had, but the news could have been worse. The ruling council had somehow discovered the reason for their journey and even more astonishingly had retroactively approved it. There was no doubt as to whom would bear the responsibility for the failure or success of their wild scheme. Nevertheless, for the moment the Skidians aboard the space ship felt as if they had already succeeded beyond their wildest dreams, even if they were not entirely sure what they were trying to achieve.

Toytoo stared thoughtfully at the screen, then said. "Brothers, let us look beyond the present moment to consider how we can best prosper from the events that we have set in motion." It perplexed Mulgoon and Myfair that Toytoo deemed it proper to suggest that a commoner such as Cyprus could be casually termed a brother. However, at the same time Toytoo had also presented them with another new and far more puzzling notion.

It was not often that Skidians stopped to consider where they were heading or to peer particularly analytically into the future. This was a foreign concept for people that wanted for nothing and for whom the possibility of impending famine was totally incomprehensible. On Skid, whatever a Skidian wanted he got. There was no work, no sacrifice, no struggle to survive, or to improve oneself. None was necessary on a world where a super industrial complex that required almost no Skidian involvement met every conceivable physical requirement. The sole reason for living for almost an entire race was to procreate perhaps once or twice in a lifetime and ensure the survival of the Skidian race.

This indolent lifestyle meant that the Skidians were easily controlled and manipulated by an aristocratic ruling elite that three of the Committee 21 members belonged and Cyprus had just successfully aspired to, which had evolved in parallel to the development of a society of immense technical ability.

Toytoo had some understanding of the situation, recognizing that the offworlders might provide him with a powerful lever with which he could catapult himself into the leadership of Skid. While he was the head a senior family in Skidian society he was not of the ruling family. If he was going to change the present order of succession he was going to have to instigate a revolution the likes of which had not been seen on the planet in generations.

The unheard of decline in the production of synthofood that Skid was presently experiencing might mean that Skidians would have to be directed into producing organic food themselves. This unheard of phenomenon could result in the development of a crisis that he might be able to take advantage of to foment a rebellion. Unfortunately exactly what form this potential revolution would take or how he could use it to his advantage, Toytoo could not begin to imagine even after months of studying the idea.

What he did know was that he needed the faithful support of his companions and control over the future activities of the offworlders if they survived their introduction to Skid, which at this

stage was by no means certain.

On the other hand if the introduction of the offworlders proved to be of little or no value to Skid, then he would do his utmost to distance himself from any involvement with them.

"Mulgoon."

"Yes, Toytoo?"

"Could you please establish the nutritional requirements of the offworlders and see that they are provided for."

Mulgoon nodded and trotted off to consult his instruments. Toytoo believed he could be relied on for support and total obedience, as could Myfair, who even by Skidian standards apparently lacked any ambition. Only Cyprus's allegiances were suspect. Toytoo wondered if he could be maneuvered into becoming a close associate and confidant of the offworlders. He hoped so. Cyprus was the least valuable of his companions if someone needed to carry any blame for their actions.

Shanghaied

Sue had settled down a little, though she was obviously still quite dazed, still not really believing that she was on board a spaceship racing through space to who knew where. The idea was a bit far fetched after all.

Bruce on the other hand was trying to work out exactly what a man did when he found himself shanghaied by a bunch of aliens. In the movies he would be outraged. Well he was. Though he wasn't getting worked up about it, banging on the wall and demanding to be released because the aliens had no right to take him when he didn't want to go. Despite the fact he didn't feel like it, he seriously doubted whether they would take any notice even if they heard him.

In a movie he would have rerouted the circuitry on the keyboard by now, would have opened the door, and would be working out how to turn the spaceship around to take him home.

Unfortunately this was neither TV nor the movies this was reality. So Bruce pulled out another smoke and lit it. There were only a couple left in the packet now.

How was he going to cope when he ran out of smokes?

"Well, I've been thinking about giving up for ages now, and here's the best chance I'll get," Bruce decided aloud, though nicotine withdrawal symptoms weren't something he looked forward to.

Sue snapped out of her trance as he puffed away contentedly.

"You're not going to smoke in here are you?" she snarled, "I can't stand cigarette smoke. It's disgusting."

"Tough." Bruce snapped back, rising from the bed. He began to pace up and down, coming to a standstill before the keyboard, pressing a button at random, and then resuming his pacing. He did his best to ignore Sue, whose nagging was beginning to annoy him. Synthetic music suddenly spilled into the room. The lights dimmed and some sort of heater switched on.

Bruce, sensing Sue was about to erupt stopped playing.

"Where do you think we might be going?" Sue asked suddenly, obviously worried about her immediate prospects.

"How the hell would I know, you stupid woman? Geez Wayne," Bruce muttered under his breath.

"There's no need to get nasty about it, is there?" sobbed Sue.

If the truth was known, Bruce was actually starting to get quite excited about the prospect of being whisked away to another planet, though he was sure Sue wouldn't share his fantasy.

He stubbed out cigarette on the floor and opened his mouth to say something conciliatory.

"How gross."

"Eh?" Now what had he done to upset the stupid woman? He almost hoped the aliens would come and take her away and leave him in peace.

Sue tucked her feet up as the drone shot out of the wall too suck up the butt.

"Oh. That you mean? Well, where else am I supposed to put it?"

Before Sue could reply the door slid open to reveal one of the spacemen standing in the opening. This one was a little shorter, with a big belly evident beneath his robes, than the alien who had greeted him when he was beamed aboard.

"Hello, my name is Mulgoon." Having introduced himself, the Skidian stepped aside to reveal a self-propelled trolley that swept silently into the room.

The dogs looked up with interest and trotted over to investigate the trolley, sensing before Bruce and Sue, that it contained food. Mulgoon became alarmed and began to back away when the dogs started to leap up at the trolley and bark.

"Shut up you bastards!" Bruce yelled. However, his dogs had never been the most obedient of creatures so he had to yell at them again until they sat in front of Mulgoon, panting and drooling expectantly.

"I have some food for you," Mulgoon said after he had regained his composure. Lifting a flap on the trolley he withdrew a plate of something that resembled boiled rice and offered it to Bruce.

Punch could not contain himself. He leapt at the plate, knocking it from the alien's hand. In an instant the other two dogs charged at the plate, devouring its contents in seconds. Not satisfied with this meager offering, they pushed the plate around the floor until it slid under the trolley, out of reach.

"I trust that meal was to your satisfaction sirs?"

"Woof."

"Oi, what about me?" Bruce was more than a little hungry himself.

"Don't worry about the dogs. They don't understand a word you're saying."

"You require sustenance?"

"Yeah, of course. What about you Sue?" Bruce added almost as an afterthought, thinking she could probably use a good feed.

"What have you got in there? Food, drink?"

"I have a wide selection for you to choose from." The alien said opening up the trolley, revealing trays of various sizes and colors.

"Get out of it!" Bruce snapped at the dogs who were showing renewed interest in the food.

"I will leave you to make your own selection, unless there is anything else you require."

Mulgoon said with great formality.

"Nah. Can't think of anything. Sue? Oh, hang on a minute! Is this stuff ok to eat?"

"Oh yes," Mulgoon replied. "I have analyzed your physiological profiles and have found your nutritional requirements are quite similar to our own."

"Thanks mate," Bruce grunted sardonically.

Mulgoon bowed almost imperceptibly, an insult that would be recognized by any Skidian, and left the room without a further word.

Bruce pulled some of the trays out of their racks, peered into the containers, pulled lids off others, and sniffed at them all suspiciously. None of it looked particularly appetizing. Bruce poked his finger at some of the rice-like material that seemed to have the consistency of rubber. He looked at some of the containers that held fluids some hot and others cold. His sniff test revealed one lot that resembled coffee, another that might have been beer, and one that was probably water.

But was any of it ok to eat or drink? He scooped a blob out of a bowl and threw it at Cop, who wolfed it down and came looking for more. Mind you the dogs ate anything without a second thought.

Bruce shrugged, popped some of the stuff into his mouth, and waited for his taste buds to react. It was like eating rubbery tasteless rice, a bit bland, but not otherwise offensive.

"Seems ok to me," he said mostly to himself and partly to Sue who seemed to be hypnotized by the sight of the trolley.

He took a spoonful from another bowl and then sampled the others in turn only to find that each bowl appeared to contain the same bland unappetizing material.

"Go on, try some, Sue. You must be hungry." Bruce said shoveling food into his mouth.

Finally Sue seemed to snap out of her daze, mustered her confidence a little at the sight of Bruce eating, and tentatively tried some herself.

"What do you reckon about it, then?" Boring the food may have been, it certainly seemed to fill the spot.

"Reckon? Well it's a bit like yogurt, sort of."

"Dunno. I've never really been partial to healthy food like yogurt. I'm a fan of proper food myself," Bruce said.

Proper food included things like roast mutton, steak, eggs and chips, roast spuds, peas, carrots, bacon and eggs, bread, butter, and marmite.

Bruce turned his attention to the liquid refreshments. The liquid that smelled a bit like beer tasted a bit like it too, Bruce took a swig from the flask, wiping foam from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"That tastes good." He swallowed some more beer and suddenly felt quite lightheaded. So much so, that he had to steady himself against the trolley. "Got a bit of a kick to it as well."

"Is this de-caf, do you think?" Sue asked sniffing suspiciously at the coffee like liquid.

Highly bloody likely, thought Bruce.

"Dunno, try some anyway." He tossed a couple of bowls of food onto the floor which the dogs immediately launched themselves at and filled the empty bowls with water for them.

Taking another draught of beer for himself, he began to hunt about in the trolley, moving containers around until, feeling a little uncoordinated, he accidentally knocked one to the floor.

Can began to devour the mess, trying to shoulder the other two dogs out of the way at the same time. The sight was so comical, like feeding time at the zoo, that Bruce laughed and deliberately knocked another couple of bowls off onto the floor.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Just feeding the dogs," Bruce slurred.

"You're drunk."

"No way," he retorted. Not yet anyhow he thought, as he rummaged through the trolley.

"Hello! What have we here?"

On a recessed shelf in the end of the trolley Bruce found a small flat box. After fumbling with the catch he flipped open the lid to find a sheath of wafer-thin papers and a fibrous material that smelt like toasted tobacco.

"Shit hot!" he exclaimed loudly and somewhat theatrically, knocking more food containers off the trolley as he swung around to show Sue.

The drone maid who had shot out of its hole and was competing with the dogs to clean the mess up on the floor ran over his foot.

Bruce gave it an experimental nudge with his bare foot. He suddenly felt like wrecking something, felt like lashing out the unfairness of it all. The drone responded by rolling to a stop and emitting a high-pitched outraged squeal. He chucked the rest of his beer over it and then rammed it into the wall with the trolley, barely missing Sue, who jumped out of the way.

"Stop it, you maniac!" she screamed, afraid his behavior would get them into deep trouble with the aliens.

"How dare they kidnap me!" Yelled Bruce, ramming the drone into the wall again. "Bloody stupid looking thing," he panted. "Must be just about idiot-proof." Disappointingly the drone seemed to be quite undamaged so Bruce picked it up and flung it into the corner as hard as he could, pelting it with food and drink until the trolley was nearly emptied.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to wreck things, what does it look like, you silly woman?"

Sue was momentarily stunned by Bruce's insult, then after a further moment's hesitation

pitched in and started throwing things around the room herself.

The dogs did their best to contribute to the mess, although they spent most of their time dodging misguided missiles. When the ammunition was spent Sue and Bruce slumped onto the bed, the dogs retreated to their places in the corner and the drone righted itself and went about its business as if nothing had happened.

Bruce found the box of tobacco and rolled himself a smoke. By the time he had located his lighter, the drone had somehow righted the trolley, replaced the bowls and plates, and cleaned up the mess on the floor and walls with. The sight of the drone disappearing back into its lair made Bruce wonder why he had even bothered.

A higher form of life

"What is your initial assessment of the offworlders Mulgoon?" Toytoo asked as they watched the offworlders throw their food around the guest suite.

Mulgoon took a few moments to consider his reply, because he really had no idea.

"Without an in-depth analysis of the sort we will be able to conduct on Skid, it is difficult to say accurately."

"Yes, yes, we understand," said Toytoo impatiently, disliking Mulgoon and his fellow quasi-intellectuals for their evasiveness. Given even a simple question they never seemed able to reply directly.

"Just give us your initial impressions."

"I would say that they have a limited mental capacity. For instance, their inability to use the amenities keypad effectively, indicates this."

"Sufficiently capable enough to satisfy our needs?"

"Possibly." Mulgoon was not going to commit himself if he could avoid doing so.

"Mmmm."

"How do you suggest we prepare them for their role on Skid?" Cyprus was more concerned with practicalities. The offworlders' intellectual abilities concerned him little.

However he was secretly envious of their primitive status which allowed the offworlders to get away with the violent outburst he was witnessing. Although he had managed to claw his way up the Skidian social pecking order Cyprus realized his peers would never really accept him as an equal. If only he could vent the feelings of inadequacy that this knowledge gave him in the same fashion the offworlders were he was sure he would feel much better. Generations of cultural programming denied him any form of release, physical or otherwise. He was not even sure that it was acceptable for a Skidian to have these feelings. He was not about to discuss them with anybody either because one misplaced word or action could mean permanent detention in a social reeducation camp.

"Oh, I wouldn't do much at all. I consider they will be of most use to our cause if they first prove their adaptability to Skid." Mulgoon was not sure how the offworlders should be primed to complete their mission on Skid. Leaving their destiny in their own hands might neatly sidestep the whole problem of having to think how.

"Like all Skidians they should gravitate into whatever occupation was ordained for them, in this case to produce food organically for Skid and peacefully accept the way of things. We should make the offworlders subtly aware of our problems, and then provide them with the means to solve them in their own fashion," Mulgoon waffled on.

Toytoo nodded wisely. Not that he really understood the rationale Mulgoon was advocating. This was not surprising, since neither did Mulgoon.

The matter was complicated by the impossibility of simply telling the offworlders what was required of them on Skid. It was not just a matter of an admission of weakness or failure of Skidian technological might which would have been bad enough, making any statement directly

about any matter simply was not done on Skid.

"Have you managed to collect any other data on the offworlders?" Toytoo asked, changing the subject slightly.

This was much safer ground for Mulgoon, and he began to reel off the paltry details he had assembled on his subjects. "We have in our possession two specimens, one female and one male who are, as I have already mentioned, physiologically very similar to ourselves. Three more primitive specimens that I have not been able to identify accompany the male.

"Primitive? How primitive?"

"I don't know. I won't be able to tell until I have studied them further." Mulgoon hurried to cover his uncertainties. "However aggressive they appear to be, the male specimen has them firmly under his control. I suspect that they may have a role in personal security, though I am only guessing. Hopefully things will be clearer with the equipment available at our medical research unit in Sietnuoc."

Mulgoon paused to study his book. "The female appears somewhat emotionally unstable. At this stage I am not convinced she will prove entirely satisfactory for our purposes because of this. However it must be remembered that we transported her from a region of vast organic structures, so she may be of some long-term value to us. The male, according to initial investigations, is of low intelligence and should be easy to manipulate. Unfortunately he also appears to be somewhat aggressive."

On screen Bruce and Sue were in the last throes of trying to pull the trolley apart.

"See what I mean?"

"Brothers, it looks as if we have failed in our mission," said Cyprus summing up the situation up for his companions.

"I hope not," Toytoo muttered, just loud enough for the others to hear. "Our need is too great, and these offworlders may be our only chance of salvation."

"They could be intergalactic explorers, taking us back as research material to their planet." Bruce speculated. "This whole spaceship could be crammed with all kinds of animals and plants that they are taking home to analyze. Maybe they want to see what makes us tick."

"So we're just guinea pigs, then?" Sue shivered. "I wonder if they are watching us?"

"Probably. Mind you the alien I met out there said something about helping them. Bugged if I know what he meant?" Bruce was thoughtful for a moment. "It's funny, you know, I've been laughing for years at the reports of deranged old bags from some hick town or another who says she's met a Martian or been taken for a ride by one. And look at us!"

"I beg your pardon?"

Bruce thought for a moment. "We're just like the first Indians that the early European explorers of America took back with them, you know?"

Sue shrugged.

"You know, to be poked and prodded and paraded through the streets and then to die of the flu or some other white man's disease." Why the hell did I start on about this? Bruce asked himself. Getting Sue worked up over what might happen to them in the near future was the last thing he needed to do.

"What are you talking about? I don't understand a word you Australians say. Why don't you speak proper English for crying out loud?"

"You watch your tongue woman!" Bruce wagged a finger in Sue's face as if nothing enraged him more than being mistaken for an Australian. "Don't you ever call me that again!" He sounded so angry that the dogs cowered in the corner. But like Sue, the dogs had no way of knowing that Bruce was far more annoyed at himself for winding Sue up unnecessarily than anything she had said; sometimes he just couldn't help himself.

"I'm a New Zealander," Bruce explained, "it's a different country!"

"But I thought New Zealand was a part of Australia," Sue pleaded ignorance, paling at his

verbal assault. "Isn't there a bridge joining Australia with New Zealand then?"

"Oh shit, woman, I give up!"

"Do you have kangaroos in New Zealand as well?" She asked, wondering why Bruce was getting so upset over such a trivial issue.

"Are you really that dumb? Why are you people so insular and ignorant? Don't you know anything?"

"Oh the whole world's against me," Sue wailed as tears started trickling down her cheeks again.

Deciding that he had probably overdone it a little Bruce sat beside her and the dogs relaxed a bit. "Don't worry about it," he said giving her a hug. "It's just that we New Zealanders have a sort of love hate relationship with Australians, probably a bit like you do with Canadians, we're a bit touchy about being mistaken for them."

"I'm sorry," Sue mumbled, but Bruce did not seem to hear her.

"Look, New Zealand is further from Australia than the westernmost part of Russia is from America. How would you like to be mistaken for a Russian?"

When Sue just shook her head and started crying even harder, Bruce realized he wasn't improving the situation.

"Listen," he said, scratching at his nose, "I read a book once. Hey don't laugh," he added as Sue began to giggle. "What's so funny?"

"Oh nothing. It's just here we are on a spaceship going God knows where, you are giving me a hard time about not knowing where you come from and then you suddenly mention a book you once read."

"Yeah, well it's sort of relevant to our present plight."

"Do you read much?" Sue asked, finding it hard to accept that the oafish redneck sitting beside her might even be literate.

"I read this book once," Bruce continued undeterred, "based on one of those hostage dramas in the Middle East. Beirut I think. A bunch of Arabs had kidnapped some poor sods and well, anyway, these hostages amused themselves by telling each other every detail that they could remember about their lives."

"So?"

"It gave them something to do to pass the time eh. Take their minds off things. I'll start, if you like."

"Oh, I see what you mean. No, I'll start," said Sue eagerly, grasping at the opportunity to take her mind off her present predicament.

Fellowship

"What is the condition of our passengers Myfair?" Toytoo asked.

"Satisfactory at present." Myfair replied. "They seemed to have settled over the last hour or so," he added, turning back to the monitor. "Though I have noted that the male makes much use of agbar in a most casual manner." Though feigning outrage at this excess, Myfair was secretly envious of the offworlder, because agbar was in short supply at the moment. "I think we may have to reassess our original analyses of the male as well."

"How do you mean, Myfair?" Toytoo asked. "Surely we should leave these assessments to the experts."

"Perhaps, but I have a strange feeling about him, that's all," Myfair suggested. "I don't trust the so called experts," he added to himself as Mulgoon waddled into the control room accompanied by Cyprus.

Myfair could not understand why his fellow crewmen were making such an issue out of what to do with the offworlders. Surely simply telling the offworlders what was required of them was a far less radical departure from the Skidian way than actually embarking on the trip to their planet in the first place. What was the point of retaining their dignity if it meant that they

were going to starve?

Myfair also knew that it was pointless arguing with his fellow crewmen. They thought they were some kind of rebels, pushing for change. However all they really wanted was to secure their own positions and ensure the continuation of the status quo. He despaired of his fellow Skidians and was frustrated by his powerlessness to do anything constructive to shake them out of their smug complacency.

"What will be the procedure for the offworlders when we return to Skid, Mulgoon?"

Toytoo asked.

"They will be placed in strict quarantine while they undergo a variety of tests and I imagine they will be presented to the ruling council, perhaps the entire senate, at some stage."

"Then we simply let them loose to solve all our problems? Impossible" Cyprus shook his head.

"I hope, for all our sakes it isn't impossible," Toytoo replied seriously.

"Are the offworlders free from harmful diseases and other pathogens?" He asked turning to Mulgoon, who was a physician. It wouldn't do to have the offworlders land on Skid, only to discover that they needed to be disposed of because they carried diseases potentially lethal to Skid or Skidians.

"Yes. Amazingly for such primitive creatures, they are remarkably healthy. They will pose no disease risk to us." Mulgoon was pleased to be able to display his simple talents to an appreciative audience. "The male has undergone some basic surgery on his right knee to correct a structural problem, coincidentally not inconsistent with the sort of knee injuries suffered by some Stim performers. The surgery was successful, though the cosmetics leave a little to be desired."

"The female?"

"Physically fine, if a little undernourished, and I am a little concerned about her skin pigmentation. But consistent with my initial observations, she is emotionally unstable and does not possess the physical and mental strength of the male."

"What about the difference in their skin coloring? Why is the female so much darker than the male?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps it is because they come from opposite hemispheres of the planet, a genetic scan suggests they are of one species."

Mulgoon did not add that the offworlders genetic material that was so close to their own that the offworlders and Skidians must share the same evolutionary heritage. He knew this could not be true. His equipment must be malfunctioning because it was a known fact that Skidians were racially superior to any sentient species in known space.

"In other respects there is no more difference between them than there is between males and females on Skid, except for their facial features, the nose and lips especially." Mulgoon coughed discreetly, he was still a little shaken by the knowledge of, and the implications of discovering that the offworlders apparently shared his racial heritage. The idea that Skidians could have been as unsophisticated and primitive as the offworlders at some time in the past called into question all he had believed about his own illustrious ancestry. That Skidians had always been the highly sophisticated and technologically advanced race that they were today.

"Though the male initially appeared to be of low intelligence, I may have to alter this assessment after using the more sophisticated equipment that will be available to me on Skid. He seems remarkably adept at concealing his thoughts."

Myfair glanced significantly at Toytoo, as if to say I told you so.

"And the other specimens?"

"With these creatures I believe my earlier assessments to be correct. They are unintelligent and appear to have some role in personal security. But as I say, I can't really be sure at this early stage."

"Very well," said Toytoo with unusual decisiveness. "We must develop and maintain a close relationship with the offworlders, ingratiate ourselves with them, no matter how distasteful that

might be."

Toytoo turned to Cyprus and Mulgoon and said; "we have a little less than sixteen standard hours before we reach Skid. I want you to spend at least part of that time speaking with the offworlders. Gain their confidence, speak freely about Skid, though make no mention of our synthofood crisis. We don't want them to get the wrong idea about us."

Mulgoon and Cyprus wandered away to prepare themselves for entering into fellowship with the offworlders.

Myfair sighed at the inherent stupidity of his fellow crewmen and decided to get himself assigned to a long range patrol vessel and off Skid before the synthofood crisis intensified and left Toytoo to his own thoughts.

Carefully Toytoo withdrew a pouch of agbar from inside his robe, rolled a cigarette, and carefully placed it into his left nostril. He was highborn and in the years to come would be in the running for elevation to a seat on the ruling council. For some time he had been seeking a means by which he could accelerate this process, to gain more influence in the largely impotent senate and maybe aspire to the hitherto unattainable position of Skid's supreme ruler. Perhaps he was now closer to gaining this position than he had ever been, thanks to the offworlders. Despite the fact that the high council had effectively usurped responsibility for the expedition that he and his companions had embarked on, their part in it would not be forgotten. Especially, he thought wryly, if scapegoats were required. Cyprus the commoner upstart would definitely make an admirable sacrifice if he were needed to ensure his own survival. Mulgoon who was so transparently hiding something could join him if necessary.

Toytoo inhaled deeply, manipulating his eustachian tube so that smoke squirted in perfect rings from his ears. Now, how best to employ the offworlders to maneuver himself onto the high council? By the normal process of attrition it would be years before he could achieve that status.

Could the offworlders be used as assassins? Perhaps? The very idea disgusted Toytoo, but he filed it away for future reference nonetheless. As far as he could recall, no incumbent had been disposed of in that fashion for several hundred years.

Toytoo yawned; the unaccustomed mental activity had left him feeling quite drained. "Let's see how they progress on Skid before we make any plans," he muttered, unable to even begin formulating a plan he wandered off to lay down.

"Ok where do I start."

"Name, date of birth, where you were born, that sort of thing," Bruce suggested.

"My name is Sue Louise Clark and I was born twenty-seven years ago in Portland, Oregon, which is where I still live. I own my own apartment, 1997 Prebble Drive, Portland. 696-1976."

"Go on."

"I have two brothers, both older than myself and married, and my parents are still alive."

"Kids?"

"One brother has two boys."

She added that almost guiltily, thought Bruce.

"What sort of work do you do again?" he asked, trying to sound enthusiastic, already wondering if this little discussion was such a good idea.

"I run my own travel agency, Trekkers Tours."

"What are the names of your parents, sister, brother and the like, and what do they do for a crust?" Bruce prodded Sue, sensing she was flagging. He was already thoroughly bored with the whole idea himself.

"My elder brother's name is Scott and he's a math teacher at a Portland high school. His wife's name is Thelma and the boys are Willard and George. My other brother is Lesley, he's an accountant and makes lots of money. Mom and dad live in a retirement village in Northern California. Is that enough?"

"Nah. Not really," Bruce shook his head. "What about boyfriends? Your best girlfriend? When did you lose your virginity? You haven't really told me anything yet."

"I don't really feel like it at the moment. I'm just so tired," she snuffled weakly as her voice trailed away.

Bruce looked down at her. "Ok it was my idea. I'd better have a go then."

He lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. What should he tell a total stranger about himself? There were many things that he hardly even admitted to himself, let alone a complete stranger. He certainly didn't want to tell her about all the stupid things that he had done in his life. The total meaninglessness of his existence to date. Not that it really mattered he decided. Pulling out his last tailor made cigarette; he lit it and puffed away until he had assembled his thoughts. Not that the few extra seconds were a hell of a lot of use. Bruce had no idea what he was going to say before the words began to tumble out.

"Like you, I'm twenty-seven and was born in a little place that doesn't even exist any longer"

Bruce was spared any painful revelations by the wall opening and two of the spacemen waddling into the room. The fat one called Mulgoon who had delivered the food and another one that Bruce couldn't recall having seen before.

"Greetings, my new friends," said the Mulgoon. With a wave of his hand he indicated his companion. "This is my associate, Cyprus."

"Hello."

"Giddyay."

"We wish to have some fellowship with you," Mulgoon announced, conjuring up two chairs by pressing the appropriate button on the keyboard. "May we sit for a while?" He asked.

As they were obviously about to do as they pleased, Bruce said, "Feel free." Though the irony was lost on the two Skidians.

Bruce lay back, stared at the ceiling, waiting for them to get on with it, and not particularly concerned if he were breaking some sort of alien etiquette. When Sue seemed about to speak he nudged her and brought a finger to his lips as if to indicate 'Lets see what they have to say.' Which initially appeared to be not very much.

Cop did not have any of Bruce's scruples, rising from his apparent slumber and wandering over to investigate the newcomers. Neither of the spacemen knew what to make of Cop.

"Hello," said Mulgoon. "How are you?" Cop took this as an invitation and jumped up onto Mulgoon's ample lap. Mulgoon tried to push him away, but Cop was not going to be denied this pleasure once he had been invited. Mulgoon, believing Cop's behavior was some primitive ritual let the dog sniff at, and lick his face.

"That'll do. Sit down!" Bruce barked when he'd decided that the alien had probably had enough of Cop and the other two dogs showed signs of wanting to join in the fun. Cop jumped down and pranced back to his spot on the floor.

Bruce cleared his throat, still waiting for the spacemen to speak. The one called Mulgoon opened his mouth and then, seeming to think the better of it, closed it again.

For something to do, Bruce rolled up some of the space tobacco into a cigarette then popped it between his lips. As Bruce lit the smoke from the butt of his last tailor made cigarette; he caught the incredulous stares of the two spacemen. Didn't they smoke the stuff then? Maybe they chewed rather than smoked the tobacco. Maybe it was some kind of snuff.

"That is the most disgusting things I have ever seen," the spacemen called Cyprus said, receiving support from an unexpected quarter.

"I agree," said Sue.

"In all my time I have never seen agbar used in this obscene fashion," Cyprus continued, as if Sue had not spoken.

"Do you chew it or sniff it, then?" Bruce inquired, genuinely interested.

"I'm sure it must be unhealthy," Cyprus informed Mulgoon haughtily, who nodded his agreement.

"What's the problem?" Bruce asked, taking another contented puff.

"We have come to prepare you for your visit to Skid," Cyprus said, recalling why he was there and trying to ignore the offworlder's vulgarity.

"Visit? Skid?"

"We will answer any queries that you might have to the best of our abilities." The Skidians seemed quite matter of fact about the whole thing, as though Bruce and Sue were guests rather than kidnap victims.

"That's nice," Bruce replied derisively.

"I'm used to organizing my own vacations, thanks," Sue added, equally scornfully, "and I want to go home now."

"I'm afraid that will be impossible," replied Mulgoon gravely.

"But you can't keep us here against our will."

"We can and we will if that suits us."

"Sometimes a crisis can only be satisfactorily resolved with by the adoption of unconventional measures," said Cyprus enigmatically, adding, "there is no possibility of your ever returning to your own planet."

Although Bruce had half expected to hear something like this, to be told it so bluntly still came as a shock. He felt empty and angry. 'Never going home' had a ring of finality to it. I'll see about that he promised himself. There must be some way of escaping this mess. On the other hand, he might as well resign himself to his fate for the moment, because getting worked up wouldn't help at all. He looked across at Sue with what he hoped was an encouraging smile.

"What's your name again mate?" Bruce asked with a bravado he didn't really feel, as the familiar looking Skidian opened his mouth to speak. He might as well learn a little more about Skid

"Mulgoon, and this is my associate Cyprus."

"Pleased to meet you." Bruce didn't see there was any point in making it easy for the bastards. "I'm Bruce, this is Sue." Bruce did not bother introducing the dogs either.

"Skid is situated in the Pacificus system, about four hundred light years from your own planet," Mulgoon began woodenly, as if reading from a teleprompter. "Skid is in many respects similar to your own planet, water covers much of the surface, our atmosphere has similar chemical constituents, and we have a single star providing all our solar energy needs."

"Generally," Cyprus took up the story as if on cue from Mulgoon as if he were the second half of a news reading team, "in respect to size, temperature variations, and climatic conditions, Skid is also similar to your own planet. Skid has a population of nine hundred and seventy million people who live in three immense cities spaced evenly around the equator or in vast underground industrial complexes, leaving most of the planet's surface empty and uninhabited."

"Whoopee shit," Bruce grunted as Cyprus paused dramatically.

"We on Skid are renowned and envied throughout our system for our technical sophistication and degree of civilization," Cyprus continued proudly.

Mulgoon suddenly remembered his manners and asked, "How are you to be addressed?"

"I'm Bruce and she's Sue."

"The others?"

"Eh? Oh, the dogs. Cop, Can, and Punch."

"Have you any questions before I continue?" Mulgoon asked in a perfunctory fashion, obviously not expecting any.

"Yeah, can you tell us why we're here?" Bruce demanded bluntly.

Mulgoon considered the question carefully, choosing an answer that he hoped would placate Bruce without revealing too much about the crisis that was facing Skid.

"Oh, we wish to learn from you of course and perhaps improve life on Skid," he replied casually.

"How?"

"In any fashion you think useful," replied Cyprus vaguely.

"Why us two in particular?"

"You were assessed as being suitable for our requirements," Mulgoon lied.

"Technically sophisticated and civilized eh?" Bruce muttered. If they heard the two Skidians chose to ignore his comment. For the life of him Bruce couldn't think why he would be selected to help a planet that obviously considered itself to be pretty clever. His ego though, was suitably inflated.

"What about the two men who arrived with me?" Sue snapped.

"Unfortunately our monitors informed us that they were irrevocably contaminated and had to be disposed of."

"So much for the selection criteria of universe's most sophisticated planet," Bruce muttered.

"Are we irrevocably contaminated?"

"I am pleased to inform you that you are not."

"When do we arrive on Skid?" Bruce asked.

"In about ten of your hours," Mulgoon replied inaccurately.

"We will be available at all times if you have any questions to ask of us." Mulgoon beamed.

He slapped his thighs heartily and hauled himself to his feet. Neither Skidian cared if the offworlders realized that they could not leave the room fast enough now they had done their duty. They left the room happy in the knowledge that they had completed the offensive task of preparing the offworlders for life on Skid.

Bruce would have been amazed if he had been privy the thoughts of the Skidian's, for he was still none the wiser about Skid or why they were being taken there. The events of the past few minutes had taken on a surreal quality. There was something quite odd about the Skidians, though he couldn't quite put his finger on what exactly what seemed so odd about them. What the bloody hell could he do to help the self appointed master race of the universe? He turned to ask Sue what she thought but she seemed to have fallen asleep and was snoring softly.

Skidfall

As Bruce woke from a dreamless sleep he realized that he wasn't alone. There was a great mass of dark hair and a body beside him. Who's this? He wondered, and then it all came back to him.

"Hey wake up!" Bruce gave the body a nudge.

Sue stirred, turned her head, and screamed "Ah! Get away from me!"

Bruce didn't think that he was that ugly. Maybe he had bad breath or something. Sue scrambled over Bruce in her haste to get away from him and tumbled on to the floor.

"Morning."

"Morning." Sue replied, sounding a little bewildered, as if she expected to wake up from a nightmare and find her life had returned to normal.

"Shit, I feel horrible," said Bruce as he stood and stumbled over to the keyboard stabbing at the buttons that would hopefully call up the dunny and the shower. Bruce never felt as though the day had started properly unless he had used both.

"Excuse me," he muttered, a little embarrassed as he pulled up his robe and sat on the toilet facing Sue.

"What do you think you're doing? Bruce?" Sue screeched, appearing to have difficulty recalling his name. "Have you no decency at all?"

Bruce shrugged apologetically. "Sorry, but when a man's gotta go a man's gotta go." He wriggled around and looked around for the magazine or book that should have been on the floor beside the toilet.

"Wish I had a cup of coffee and something to read," he mused, forgetting he had an audience.

"You're so gross."

"Eh, what's wrong now? I spend some of my happiest moments sitting on the bog."

"All I ask is that you don't dribble on the seat," Sue retorted making an issue out of not looking at him while Bruce sat contentedly for far longer than necessary.

"Are you quite finished?" Sue asked at last.

"Yes, I think so." He glanced around. "What do you reckon they use for toilet paper? Can't see any, can you?" The Skidians seemed to have forgotten this basic necessity and it wasn't as if Bruce could grab a handy dock leaf or something.

"Just hurry up and find something. I'm busting," Sue snapped.

After a bit of scratching about, Bruce found a shoehorn shaped object in a small compartment behind the bowl. He turned it over in his hand.

"Hey, look at this! A disposable bum scraper! Neat eh?" Bruce tried it out and found it surprisingly soft.

"Just the gears," he said dropping the scraper in the bowl. He stood up and looked for the flush mechanism. There wasn't one, unless it was cunningly hidden. However, as he stepped away from the bowl there was a whoosh and the contents were sucked away, leaving a little pool of water in their wake.

"Aren't you going to wash your hands?" Sue demanded as Bruce wiped them on his robe.

"Find me a tap, why don't you? Anyway I'm going to have a shower." Bruce jumped into the cubicle, throwing his robe out as the water began to run.

Sue was relieved to see Bruce disappear. Now she could use the toilet herself with some degree of privacy, discounting the interested stares of the dogs. It was a great relief to be able to regain some personal space, even if only for a few minutes. She just was not emotionally equipped to deal with spending so much time confined in such a small space with a total stranger even if he was relatively harmless.

The flow of water stopped just as Bruce was starting to enjoy it replaced by a blast of hot air.

"Don't come out yet!" Sue yelled from the toilet seat as Bruce opened the cubicle's door.

"Why not?" Bruce asked, sneaking a hand out to grab his robe. "I've seen it all before.

Anyway, it's not fair, you watched me." None the less he stayed put until Sue gave him leave to emerge. It was too early in the morning to start winding her up.

"I think I'll have a wash as well. How does it work?"

"Jump in and the water starts automatically. And hey! Don't forget to wash your hands, eh."

Sue frowned. "That's not funny," she said.

You snotty bitch, Bruce thought. He sat on the edge of the toilet seat and rolled himself a cigarette. The first and most satisfying of the day.

"Are you smoking again?"

"Yeah. What of it?"

"Do you really have to?"

"Yeah. I have to." What was her problem? He wondered as the door slid open and a trolley laden with containers of food advanced into the room.

Bruce tossed his cigarette away. A drone popped out of the wall to clean up the butt and was so much a part of the landscape now that he didn't even notice its presence. He emptied the contents of a few of the bowls on the floor and filled the empty bowls with water for the dogs. Then he looked in vain for something that looked as though it was good to eat. The Skidian food he had tried so far, despite slight differences in color and texture, had the same bland taste. There was not any need to bother with a menu.

"Must be pretty nutritious stuff no matter how bad it tastes." Bruce said to Sue, who after her shower was showing the same sort of limited interest in her tucker as he was in his, "considering the size of the Skidians."

"At least you could wait until I've finished eating," Sue grumbled as Bruce rolled and lit another cigarette after discovering a liquid that looked and tasted a little like coffee to wash his breakfast down with.

"Yes dear, no dear, three bags full dear." Bruce chucked the half smoked cigarette at the trolley where it fell into one of the empty bowls and tossed what remained of his breakfast on the ground for the dogs to fight over.

Seconds after Sue carefully put the bowl with her own unfinished breakfast on the trolley and found herself something to drink the door slid open and the trolley whisked almost silently out of the room.

They weren't left to their own devices for long, which was just as well because an under current of hostility was developing between them as they sat at either end of the bed trying not to look at each other.

Just as Bruce cleared his throat to say something the door opened and Mulgoon waddled into the room.

"Welcome to Skid," he announced extravagantly, as if the offworlders by some telepathic process should have realized that the ship had landed on his home planet.

"You are privileged to be the first offworlders to visit our planet," he added uncomfortably, aware, given what he now knew about the offworlders that this traditional belief probably was not true. If that was not true, what else was there that he had always taken for granted that was not true either? Not that Mulgoon was about to openly question traditional Skidian beliefs, because that was the quickest way to be transported to a social re-education center that he knew.

"Isn't that lovely?" Bruce grunted preparing to be as bloody minded as possible.

However Mulgoon was unfazed by Bruce's sarcasm, he actually seemed pleased by Bruce's remark, as if he interpreted the comment as a compliment.

Bruce decided that the Skidians had a particular talent for ignoring that which they didn't want to hear, had very thick skins, or were merely ignorant. Most probably a combination of all three he decided after a moment of reflection.

"We are going to present you to our senate, an honor not accorded even to most Skidians," Mulgoon continued self-importantly.

"I demand to see the United States ambassador!" Sue demanded, then she bit her lip as she realized how silly she must sound.

Mulgoon continued as if she had not spoken: "Until the appropriate time we have a documentary for you to watch in order that you might learn something of Skid." He pressed a button on the keypad by the door which turned the opposite wall into some kind of screen, sat heavily on a chair that seemed to appear from nowhere and without any preamble the show began.

"Interesting eh?" Bruce grunted cynically after a few minutes.

"It's like one of those old Soviet propaganda movies," Sue whispered discreetly not wanting to upset Mulgoon, "extolling the tawdry virtues of the old communist state."

The documentary did provide them with some insights about Skidian life. The tobacco like material was called agbar and demonstrations of its use caused Bruce to double up with laughter; at least he wouldn't run out of smokes. However, he'd never seen anything like it before in his life, it was no wonder the Skidians had been so upset with him when they saw him smoking. Taking it up the nose indeed! That wasn't natural!

Skid seemed to be something of a worker's paradise, a utopia of sorts. However the presentation made Bruce uneasy, reminding him of communist propaganda from his youth. Few of the Skidians appeared to be involved in any activity resembling work. In fact they didn't seem to do much at all, though Skidian culture apparently gave all the inhabitants a say in the running of their planet and provided a comfortable niche for each of them. Sure. So how did it all work? Bruce wanted to know. The documentary did not make this particularly clear. What was the catch? He kept asking himself.

He was about to check his observations with Sue, but she forestalled him.

"Doesn't it look wonderful," she said, "imagine never having to work for a living."

Bruce decided not to destroy her illusions. He could well be wrong after all; the Skidians looked happy enough on the surface. Despite this he thought he detected something else in their faces. Lurking behind the peaceful, contented façade he was sure a volatile cocktail of emotions was ready to explode, a barely suppressed combination of violence, hostility, and resentment, looking for a way to express itself.

"Ah well. You can't tell all that much just from a picture," he replied instead.

Bruce reckoned he might be happy in a place where no one seemed to work and could occupy themselves in any fashion they wished. But only if he could find himself something constructive to do.

The Skidians seemed to be freed from the drudgery of working for a living that enslaved most people on earth. Their food and almost every other conceivable need was supplied without their needing to labor for it. It seemed idyllic really, but the more he saw, the uneasier Bruce became. It all seemed too good to be true.

The scenery was familiar enough. There were forests and grasslands, snow and mountains, seas and lakes, arid plains, and tropical forests. Skid looked very much like earth, not the exotic wonderland that Bruce had always imagined a highly sophisticated alien planet would be.

One thing that did strike him was the lack of wildlife on Skid. There were a few strange-looking cattle like beasts, several species of birds and fish, and a variety of insects. But nothing like earth's abundance or diversity of wild life.

The absence of habitation outside the great cities struck also struck Bruce as a bit unusual. Surely some of them would live out in the country? Skid was heavily industrialized, though the factories were largely run without Skidian involvement and the factories themselves were mostly hidden underground or in vast undersea complexes. Skidian industry mostly used raw materials imported from other planets and asteroids since the planet's own resources had long since exhausted through millennia of thoughtless plunder.

The process by which the asteroids were mined was an indication to Bruce just how incredibly technologically advanced the Skidians were. Small robot spaceships were continuously launched towards an asteroid belt several light years from Skid. Once a robot ship identified a suitable asteroid it landed on it and turned itself into a mining and industrial module. This module proceeded to mine the asteroid and build a propulsion system that propelled the asteroid toward an orbit around Skid.

By the time the asteroid had swung into orbit around Skid not only was there a stockpile of raw materials for further processing on the planet itself, it was also possible to program the industrial modules to manufacture specialized products on the journey.

A continuous stream of these asteroids was strung out through space, on their way to join those in various stages of consumption already in orbit. As soon as one came into orbit around Skid another robot ship was dispatched from Skid. And not a Skidian in sight anywhere.

Despite being dependent on these imported raw materials Skid seemed to be the only place in known space, apart from earth, that actually created anything of value.

The documentary ended abruptly, as though the producer had lost interest towards the end of the task and decided enough was enough, encapsulating Bruce's experience of Skid and things Skidian to date.

"Interesting place, isn't it, Bruce?"

"Yeah." He snorted noncommittally.

"Don't you get the feeling there's something a bit creepy about the place though? Did you see any old people?"

Bruce hadn't, and realized that Sue was more on to it than he had given her credit for.

"Tell me about your food production systems," Bruce asked Mulgoon. The documentary had not been clear on that, either. He'd seen no evidence of cultivation or animal husbandry and hadn't understood the allusions to the synthofood plants. How did they produce the stuff they

had the gall to call food? Surely what they ate at home must be better than what they had got on the ship?

Mulgoon thought he neatly sidestepped the subject by saying he was not competent to comment.

Bruce probed further, sensing an uneasiness behind Mulgoon's evasive reply.

"I notice you don't farm animals in any fashion."

"Farm?" Mulgoon examined this unfamiliar term closely. Mulgoon, who liked the sound of his own voice, suddenly decided it would not be prudent to say anything more.

"Yes, well, I must leave you now." Mulgoon decided hastily, which did nothing to allay Bruce's suspicions that the Skidians were hiding something from them.

"Perhaps they have some taboo about discussing how their food is produced," he suggested to Sue once the Skidian had left.

"This is one weird place," Sue sighed. "What do you think will happen next? After we've been presented to their government or whatever?"

"I would imagine they'll give us a good going over to see what makes us tick. Hook us up to who knows what kind of machines, stick needles into us. That sort of thing." Not a pleasant thought.

"Really?"

"Yeah. You don't think they're going to let us off here, say howdy doody and let us traipse round as we please, do you?"

"I have no idea. I wouldn't have asked, otherwise."

"Consider it this way Sue, If the situation were reversed and it was a couple of Skidians on earth that we'd got a hold of, what do you think would happen to them?"

"I expect there'd be doctors, psychiatrists and all sorts of people pawing them all over. But."

"But what?"

"This is different."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know. It would just be different, that's all."

"You basically mean it would be ok for us to do it to them, but it's not on for them to do it to us? That's a strange sort of morality, don't you think? And if they managed to survive that treatment, then what?"

He paused to let his words sink in. "They couldn't be allowed to roam about at will, because people might get upset. People like church leaders and politicians would demand they be killed in case they carried around some deadly disease or wanted to marry one of their daughters. Imagine the reaction if that ever happened!" Sue's naiveté astounded Bruce.

"That's horrible. We'd never do that."

"You want to bet on it? Still they don't seem exactly hostile, do they? Maybe things will work out all right." Bruce wondered whom he was trying to convince. Nevertheless, as helpless as he felt, he saw no value in thinking negatively. Were the Skidians merely softening them up, having some ghastly future in store for them? What frustrated Bruce most was that they were entirely at the Skidians mercy.

"All we can do is resist passively and be as difficult as possible in the process. You know, like Gandhi." Bruce rolled himself a cigarette, and something else occurred to him. "You know, I might be on the wrong track, but I've got this oddest feeling the Skidians think we might be able to help them somehow." It was a comforting fantasy. "Something one of them said about helping them or being guests. The one called Myfair I think. Or was it the one called Cyprus?"

"They sounded fairly friendly, anyway."

"Sue, just think positively and anything might happen," Bruce said as the door slid open again, "and probably will."

Two of the tallest men Bruce had ever seen clad only in loincloths and Sikh like turbans that accentuated their semi nakedness and height, stood in the door way.

Bruce hoped that they hadn't come to take his blood or something because there was no way he would be strong enough to resist them.

The Skidian called Cyprus pushed his way past the two grim figures and said gravely, as if passing a sentence, "It is time for your presentation to the senate, these guards will escort you."

Bruce rose slowly to his feet, his knees wobbly, and his heart pumping. He became acutely aware of each little detail about him. A trace of ash on the floor, a blemish on Cyprus's cheek, and a slight nicotine stain around his right nostril. He was ready for either flight or fight.

"Come on, Sue," he said more calmly than he felt, pulling her to her feet and commanding the dogs to get in behind. Unfortunately he never had much control over them at the best of times and once they sensed daylight they were off out the door, almost knocking over Cyprus and the two security guards in the process.

"Get in, bugger you!" But the dogs had perfected the knack of embarrassing Bruce when he least needed it. He put two fingers in his mouth and whistled his stop command. The high pitched whistle caused Sue, Cyprus, and the guards to jump almost out of their skins and clamp their hands over their ears. However, the dogs completely ignored him and shot out of the open doorway.

Skid

Bruce stepped out of the spaceship after the dogs and shaded his eyes against the brilliant sunlight. Resisting the insistent nudges of the guards who were prodding him forward, he turned to inspect the spaceship. It was a bit of a disappointment really; he had expected a space ship to be far more elaborate. It was also a lot smaller than he imagined, no larger than an ordinary three bed roomed house, shaped like a smooth inverted pudding bowl, with the lip of the bowl resting on the ground.

Bruce wondered what powered the space ship because there was no outward indication of rocket motors that he could see, unless they were on the bottom of the saucer. Apart from the doorway they had exited from, the surface of the space ship was smooth and seamless. There were no windows, no flashing lights, no hiss of escaping gases or steam, it was simply an inert gray lump of metal crisscrossed by long brownish scorch marks.

The dogs loped across the vast cobbled plaza that the ship had landed on, reveling in the open spaces after being cooped up inside. At any other time they would have made a comical sight, so excited at being let outside, they could hardly stop to relieve themselves as their wild exultant barking filled the still air.

Stepping the two or three steps to the ground from the spaceship's doorway had felt a bit like walking into an impenetrable wall of humidity that Bruce imagined he could almost lay on and he started to sweat profusely.

"Bloody humid, eh?" He whispered to Sue who walked woodenly alongside, apparently resigned to whatever fate decreed.

Bruce felt like a pygmy from darkest Africa suddenly being confronted with a city like London or Rome; he was almost overwhelmed by the vastness of the plaza they were walking across and the size of the building they were headed to.

The small party was headed for a long low building, domed with an immense cupola, which was in turn capped by a tall spire, on which a flag hung limply. The building stretched away on either side of the cupola as far as the eye could see flanked by the poplar type trees that also surrounded the plaza, isolating it from whatever was on the other side.

Looking over his shoulder Bruce caught glimpses of other bowl shaped objects beyond the trees with busy unrecognizable shapes rushing between them, and realized that the plaza must be adjacent to some sort of space port. What really struck him was the almost total silence. The only sound he could hear apart from their own footsteps and someone's heavy breathing beside him, came from the soft scuffing of paws on the cobbles accompanied by the furious

sniffs and yelps of the dogs as they zoomed around like lunatics.

"Get in!" Bruce's yell echoed around the plaza and one of the guards glared at him as though he had committed some grievous sin. The guard brandished his stave at the dogs as they got in behind, and they were suitably cowed, for the moment at least.

The procession finally entered the lobby of the building and stopped in front of a massive door of polished metal.

"Wow!" Sue seemed to have snapped out of her daze. "It's magnificent!"

Bruce had no particular interest in, or appreciation of architecture, recent or historic.

"Yeah," he muttered under his breath. He looked up and noticed the rough plaster finish on the ceiling as though the builders couldn't be bothered finishing off that bit because it was too hard to reach.

One of the guards approached the door, rapped twice upon it with his stave, and stepped back.

"You'd have thought aliens who can build a spaceship that can fly faster than the speed of light could be a bit more imaginative in their building, wouldn't you?" Bruce suggested, peering around critically at other examples of shoddy workmanship.

"Don't be so negative," Sue said. "Nothing bad can happen to us here, I'm sure of it." Her spirits were suddenly noticeably brighter.

Bruce decided she was a yo-yo, up one minute and down the next. He couldn't see what she was suddenly so optimistic about. Personally the place gave him the creeps.

To disguise his anxiety, he pulled out his pouch of agbar, and with difficulty, because his hands were shaking and damp, rolled himself a smoke.

"You can't smoke in here!" Sue hissed. "Put it out." Reluctantly Bruce frugally pinched off the glowing tip and put the cigarette back into the pouch. He wasn't about to argue with her this time. Perhaps she was right, although neither Cyprus who stood alongside them, nor their guards had shown any disapproval.

Bruce tapped his foot nervously, waiting for something to happen. After a minute or so one of the doors creaked slowly open and their guards ushered them inside.

They found themselves in a room like a large lecture theatre, with rows of benches stretching upwards away from them. Hundreds of men and women were chattering away, gesticulating at them. On a low stone bench facing the tiered rows, six large white haired men dressed in purple robes sat imperiously and turned to stare at them.

The guards withdrew leaving Sue and Bruce to stand doubtfully in the doorway, bewildered by the sight of so many people staring at them, nervously wondering what might happen next.

Cyprus seemed to have disappeared completely as if by magic, then Bruce caught sight of him making his way to an empty seat beside some other Skidians that looked vaguely familiar.

"I feel as if I'm in a goldfish bowl watched by a hungry cat," Bruce whispered to Sue, who reached out and gripped his hand.

"Can you work out what they're saying?"

Even amongst those closest to them, who's voices they could clearly hear, nobody seemed to be using the strictly formal English the other Skidians had used on the ship as far as Bruce could tell.

"No," he replied, "but I can see one of the Skidians from the ship. Over there," Bruce pointed for Sue's benefit, "second row, third from the left, by the big fat woman."

"I can't see him, they all look the same to me. Oh yes, I see him now." Bruce cringed as she waved at Mulgoon and Cyprus.

"Geez woman, what are ya? " How long will this go on for, I wonder?" He added. No one had appeared to usher them to a seat or give any other directions. Bruce sensed the entire crowd was waiting expectantly for something to happen, for them to do something as if it were part of a test.

He noticed an empty bench on the other side of the room. Bugger this he thought they might as well sit over there.

"Let's go and sit over there," he suggested, pointing to the empty bench. "C'mon," he insisted, when Sue remained rooted to the spot.

"No, they would have already told us if we were supposed to."

"So what? We're supposed to be difficult, remember?" Knowing Sue would just argue the point; Bruce took a firmer grip of her hand and dragged her across the floor in front of the six old fat men sitting at their bench.

"See? Nothing happened," he said as he pushed Sue down. "Hello?" It looked as if he might have been wrong. The crowd had hushed and every eye seemed to stare at them accusingly.

"Now look at what you've done!" Sue whimpered.

Their guards stood mouths agape, as the offworlders committed the almost unforgivable sin of passing in front of the ruling council without bowing respectfully.

However, after several moments the sound of excited voices regained their former pitch.

Bruce gave Sue a knowing grin as they both relaxed slightly. He pulled out his pouch of agbar, determined to have a smoke to pacify his nerves. Shaking off Sue's restraining hand, he lit the cigarette he had earlier extinguished and bowed his head self-consciously. Again the chatter abated, although not altogether this time. Bruce looked up, half expecting to be told off, only to find that every Skidian in the place, bar their escorts, was following his lead. They had all taken out their own pouches and were busily rolling up cigarettes.

Bruce and Sue watched, open-mouthed as the chatter stopped almost completely and the Skidians puffed away happily, cigarettes dangling from one nostril or the other. Bruce could not suppress a chuckle at this incredible sight.

"Look at them, Sue." He hated to miss a dig at her. "Maybe you should take up smoking like everyone else."

"No way," she retorted angrily.

Inhaling through his mouth rather than his nostrils didn't seem to faze the Skidians at all now. Catching his eye this time Cyprus nodded in Bruce's direction, which could only be taken as a sign of approval.

One by one the Skidians stubbed out their cigarettes on the benches before them and the butts were cleaned up by small drones moving along the benches as unobtrusively as only drones could.

Once the butts had been cleared away, one of the six fat men, who sat on the bench beside Bruce and Sue, rose and began to speak. He grasped a baton in one hand and slapped it in the other from time to time as if to punctuate his remarks, which neither Sue nor Bruce understood. Heads nodded wisely and the speech was punctuated by loud grunts from the audience. Bruce couldn't tell whether they were dissenting or agreeing.

"Greetings friends." Sue nudged him and Bruce suddenly realized they were being addressed.

"I have just introduced you to the members of Skid's governing body and formally opened this extraordinary session of our senate." The speaker who had turned to face them now turned back to face the rows of Skidians.

"After the last session to discuss..."

Bruce had trouble understanding everything the man said.

"...we decided to dispatch a patrol ship to the carbon based planet 100083L situated in the Lani Galaxy to obtain material for research purposes."

Sue gripped his arm tightly and Bruce felt his own optimism fade. So their fate was to be guinea pigs for Skidian scientists to play with after all.

"From the background material that has been supplied to each of you, you will note that most of this planet's population, examples of which you see before you, is involved in food production. Furthermore, as the planet's population is expanding at an incredible rate, it would be logical to assume that this growth, no matter how primitive they might be, can only be sustained by efficient food production systems."

"Ha! What a load of!" Bruce managed to suppress a guffaw, but not before the speaker had

paused to glare at him.

"Be quiet, you fool!" Sue hissed, nudging his ribs.

"Ok, keep your hair on. I just can't believe what he's saying. I've just realized they're not as clever as they'd like to think they are."

"Shut up, will you? Everyone's staring at us," Sue whispered urgently.

"Initially, four offworld specimens were transported to the patrol ship along with three other unidentified creatures. Two specimens were dispatched due to their infirmity, after the patrol ship had been detected in the planet's air space by local surveillance systems."

"That'll cause a stir. Another UFO sighting."

"If only the authorities knew how accurate reports of UFO sightings really were," sighed Sue.

"Nobody could have done anything about it, even if they knew we were on board dummy!"

"At that stage it was deemed inadvisable to linger in that proximity, so the patrol vessel returned to Skid. Initial analyses of the offworlders indicate," the speaker who would later be introduced as Inel, Skid's supreme leader, paused to glance at the handheld unit that he appeared to be reading from before continuing. "That the specimens are of limited intelligence and are emotionally unstable, riddled with primitive hostilities and prejudices."

"Bullshit!" Bruce yelled, unable to contain himself, reinforcing in the minds of most the initial assessments of Mulgoon.

"Bruce!" Sue hissed. "Shut up or you'll get us into trouble."

"Trouble! Shit, girlie, look around you!" he said desperately. "We're already in it up to our eyebrows."

"Despite this lack of sophistication, this primitiveness..."

Bruce was beginning to feel like some lower form of life.

"...for our sakes and the sake of Skid, not to mention the other inhabitants of our system, I hope they will still be able to assist us to solve the crisis that confronts us at this time." None of which made any sense at all to Bruce.

"Oi, one day you might find out we're not as basic as you'd like to think we are," Bruce shouted, unable to restrain himself any longer.

Inel interrupted his discourse and glared at the offworlder who had the audacity and bad manners to speak out of turn.

"Now we have had a chance to meet our guests, they will be conducted to the Central Medical Facility for further evaluations."

"I wonder what's really going on here?" However, Bruce's question was lost on Sue, who had been gripped by a terror that rendered her speechless and incapable of movement at the mention of medical tests. Something about the place was completely out of whack with reality. Is this guy a few cents short of the dollar or what? He wondered, reminded of a slightly ineffectual schoolmaster imploring an unruly class to pay attention on the last day of term. Bruce would later discover, misguided as he was, Inel was not the absent minded, ineffectual, and weak figure he seemed on first impression.

Discovering that Toytoo and the other members of Committee 21 had taken the unprecedented step of attempting to bring offworlders back to Skid Inel had initially been stunned. After he had assessed the potential of their scheme he found time to wonder at their unusual audacity in actually thinking and doing for themselves an almost unheard of feat. It would never do for the members of Committee 21, or anyone else for that matter, to get too used to thinking for themselves if he was going to remain in control of events on Skid.

Soon news must leak out to the general population about the deepening synthofood production crisis, and despite a tradition of obedience Skid might fall into a state of chaos from which it might never recover once that news became public.

As he watched the offworlders being led away by members of his personal guard Inel hoped the offworlders could show them how to produce food organically, or better still that the scientific community would discover a cure for the virus that was ravaging the synplants. He realized that

by accepting their unprecedented and illegal presence on Skid he was also admitting the desperateness of the situation. A bold move that could not only signal the end of his reign, but also the end of Skid as he knew it, and the planet's role as the most powerful planet in known space.

Escape on Skid

For a moment Bruce was thoroughly disoriented as he tried to work out what was going on. This wasn't his bed! Where am I?

After thirty or so confused seconds he remembered where he was and discovered that he was lying on a hard white bed, clad only in a scanty cream colored loincloth.

"Bloody hell!"

Slowly his brain rolled into action and he vaguely recollected leaving the debating chamber. How long ago, he had no idea. What had happened between then and now was a bit of a mystery, as if a fog had settled over his mind.

Bruce didn't remember one of the Skidian guards placing his stave under his nose and firing a jet of gas into his face. A gas whose victims were left temporarily senseless but mobile, which enabled them to be led away or herded like sheep.

The room was bare except for the bed, and painted in what in a mental institution would be called soothing green. There was no sign of any clothes, dogs, or more importantly for the moment, any smokes. No bedside table and jug of water, no curtains on the window, flowers in a vase, or, to his relief, any medical equipment either.

Bruce ran his hands over his body, the inside of his elbows especially, for telltale needle marks but could find none.

They can't have started their tests on me yet, Bruce decided, unaware that an exhaustive series of tests was long since complete.

He rolled off the bed and shook his head to clear a brief giddy feeling as his feet hit the floor.

Somewhere outside the room an alarm bell rang, but it didn't concern him. He was more interested in the view out of the window and the possibility of making himself scarce.

Trees dotted a field that rolled away towards the horizon, split in the distance by the lazy winding course of a river that sparkled in the sunshine.

Quite a pleasant little scene, Bruce thought searching for a window catch so he could get out.

There was none, and nothing he could throw through the window either.

"Oh well." Bruce shrugged his shoulders, returned to bed, and lay down.

He must have dozed off again, for he had a dream. A nightmare almost, about an immensely fat woman who sat in a chair and watched over him while Bruce could only lay there, unable to escape her menacing gaze.

Suddenly his eyes blinked open and Bruce was horrified to find the face staring down at him. A fat gross face, with little piggy eyes set too close together, above a number of chins that wobbled each time the head moved.

The nightmare hadn't done the woman any justice at all. She had enormous arms and mammoth bulges pressed against the front of her robe. What a monster!

Smiling grotesquely, the woman asked, "How do you feel now? I hope our testing procedures were not too exacting?"

"You're finished then?" Bruce replied, quite relieved.

"Of course, due to your cooperation they were a simple formality." This was a euphemism for Bruce being so knocked out that he did not know what was going on.

"Shit, I wouldn't have been if I'd have known what was going on." Bruce was taken aback by a clear little voice in the back of his head telling him the Skidians could and would deal with him exactly as they pleased and there wasn't a lot he could do about it.

"What about a feed then?" Bruce demanded.

"Feed?"

"Yes, you know, food. I'm hungry." Bruce rubbed his belly to emphasize the point. Not that he had a particular craving for anything but a nicotine fix. Then he would work out how to get out of this place, find the dogs, and, well, Sue, he supposed.

"Certainly. I will convey you to a dining area," said the woman, having understood his requirements, "if you will dress."

"Fine." Bruce jumped off the bed. "Where are some clothes?"

"My clothes?"

"In the closet."

"What closet?"

With a condescending smile, no doubt recalling she was dealing with a primitive being, she opened a closet by pressing an inconspicuous dimple on the wall and then stood aside to allow Bruce to pull a robe over his head.

Bruce then followed her from the room noting carefully where she placed her hand to open the door.

The woman looked like a quivering mass of jelly as she waddled along an empty white corridor trying to keep pace with Bruce. Bruce chuckled at this unlikely vision, and she turned with a questioning look in her little piggy eyes. He raised his eyebrows and shrugged, tactfully deciding to keep his thoughts to himself.

Somewhere a dog barked. Bruce suddenly realized he hadn't seen them since he'd walked across the plaza and into the senate building. At least one of them was ok. It was Can barking she had a distinctive pitch to her bark. This one meant: "I can see food. Feed me before I bite your hand off."

The woman paused, swaying slightly as if it took a few moments for her considerable bulk to come to a standstill. "How can we stop that terrible noise? Your companions respond to no known form of communication."

"Have you tried feeding them? Failing that. Pheep!" Bruce whistled piercingly. "That usually does the trick."

The woman jumped in surprise, bringing her hands to her ears and almost but not quite tumbling to the floor in the process. Bruce would have hated trying to help her back to her feet.

"You have some degree of control over them?" she croaked, amazed at the noise emanating from someone who was almost Skidian after all.

Bruce nodded. "Some. After all, they are mine."

"Mine?" Skidians had no notion of personal ownership. 'Mine,' was just a figure of speech in a foreign tongue.

"I've had them all since they were pups."

"Pups?"

"Yeah. Babies, you know?" Bruce cradled his arms and made a rocking motion. The woman gave him a dubious stare, then continued down the hallway.

A little further on she stopped and placed her hand against the wall where Bruce discerned another slight depression. How the hell she had found it on an otherwise blank wall Bruce could not understand. A door slid open, revealing a large room filled with easy chairs set around low tables. Sitting in one of them was Sue.

"Hi," she said diffidently, unsure of Bruce's feelings towards her. "Are you ok?"

"Yeah, no worries. Why should there be?"

Sue's breast heaved with an emotion that eluded Bruce. She did seem pleased to see him though he noted, wondering why.

"You've been out for three days now. I was getting a little worried about you. That's all."

"Really?" said Bruce, missing the point altogether. "No wonder I felt a little dizzy when I got up."

"I will order a food trolley for you," said the big woman, leaving them alone for a few minutes

in case they needed to follow some strange offworld ritual of reunification.

"Thanks very much, Sideshow," Sue thanked the woman as she left the room.

"Sideshow? What a ridiculous name! She certainly looks a bit like a circus attraction, doesn't she?"

"Now don't start on her Bruce. She's been very good to me while they were working on you."

Sue said defensively. "You made things really difficult for them, I understand."

"Is that right?" Bruce asked proudly.

"Something to do with actively repressed thought processes and emotional responses."

"Sounds good," said Bruce, wondering what she meant. "Is that good or bad?"

A knock at the door interrupted them, and another large Skidian wheeled in a food trolley.

Bruce fell on it eagerly. Chances were the food on Skid would be a big improvement on the stuff they had on the spaceship. Surely?

He was sorely disappointed. They would have to make do with the same sort of muck they had eaten on the way here.

Sue took only a cup of coffee, saying she had eaten earlier, while Bruce ate standing up and slopped his food as far and as wide as possible.

Sideshow reentered the room and made a beeline for the trolley, helping herself to a pile of food, before sitting beside Sue.

The women indulged in a little female idle chitchat as Sideshow devoured her meal. Bruce tried to ignore the two of them, but he suddenly felt a bit left out. The thing

was though, that Sue just rubbed him up the wrong way. Not for any reason he could point to, they were almost as culturally incompatible as both of them were with the Skidians.

Finished eating, Bruce searched the trolley for agbar, found some and then with a cup of coffee sat opposite the two women while he rolled himself a smoke.

"You are familiar with agbar then?" Sideshow was already well aware that Bruce was, but she was eager to show the unsophisticated brute how superior Skid and Skidians were.

"Oh yes. We call it tobacco at home."

"It's bad for your health, it stinks, and I wish you wouldn't smoke around me," Sue snapped.

"To use agbar on Skid is a great privilege. Why don't you don't use it, Sue?"

"Where we come from, only people with no concern for their health or the health of others; smoke," Sue informed Sideshow sharply.

Bruce placed the cigarette between his lips and lit it, tossing the dead match carelessly to the floor.

Sideshow stared at him with an expression of disgust and disbelief that Bruce was quickly becoming familiar with.

"Why do you put it in your mouth in that manner?" Sideshow asked, for a plausible reason had eluded them to date.

"Everyone knows that smoking causes cancer and heart disease," Sue continued, to no one in particular.

Bruce suddenly remembered that the Skidians smoked through their noses. He took the cigarette from his mouth and studied it for a moment. "Well that's the way we smoke it." He inhaled deeply and blew a stream of smoke in Sue's direction.

She waved the smoke away. "Yuk! Do you have to be so inconsiderate?" She got out of the chair and walked over to the window.

"Always have. In fact I've never seen anybody put a smoke up their nose unless they were drunk or just being silly. It must be bloody uncomfortable." Bruce considered trying it, decided not to, and took an extra noisy slurp from his coffee cup instead.

"Pig!"

Sideshow reached across for the matches and agbar that Bruce had dropped onto the table.

"How often do you use agbar? We use it only sparingly, especially as it is in short supply at the present time."

Bruce was appalled. "Any time I feel like it. Oh, twenty or thirty times a day, whatever. I hope I don't run out."

Sideshow was in turn appalled at this excess. She placed her own cigarette firmly between her teeth and lit it. After several puffs she decided this positional change was not for her and returned to smoking in the accustomed manner.

"Don't you grow the agbar then?" Bruce asked, wondering why it might be in short supply. Disease, drought? An insect plague perhaps?

"Grow it? Please, I don't understand," Sideshow replied after a brief pause.

"You know, this stuff comes from a plant. To get agbar you chop the leaves off, dry them, and dice them up. You know?"

"Plant?"

Bruce was starting to get confused. Surely she understood about plants and growing them? There, right out the window, were grass and trees. How was a man supposed to explain something so obvious and fundamental?

"Those are trees and that's grass out there, right?" He pointed out the window and waited for some sort of reaction from Sideshow.

She nodded dubiously and glanced out of the window at the organic structures that existed there. Who knew anything about the wilderness and the structures that had been there for all time?

"Well, those trees, for instance, are big plants," said Bruce triumphantly. Surely the woman wasn't that dumb?

Sideshow was not sure what to make of Bruce's explanation. Plants were the immense structures under the sea where synthofood and other products were manufactured. Sideshow thought Bruce must have become deranged as a result of his recent experiences.

Maybe she was. Bruce tried another tack. "Where does your agbar come from?"

Sideshow brightened. "From the plants under the sea close to Larrel."

"Oh, it grows under the sea?" Well, Bruce thought, he couldn't expect everything to be like it was at home.

"No it is manufactured there."

"Oh, I see now. It's synthetic like the food!" Little wonder, then, that Sideshow didn't understand about growing things. Did they grow anything here? What about kids? Were they made in factories as well? That idea conjured up visions of baby farms and rows of test tubes containing developing embryos.

"Please explain this growing to me," Sideshow demanded, realizing they had missed something vitally important when they analyzed the offworlder's brains. Much of their accumulated data was virtually useless to them because it could not be related to any relevant experience or knowledge on Skid.

Were the offworlders more complex than had been realized? Sideshow quickly dismissed the idea.

"How would you explain plants and growth Sue?"

"The obvious way would be to show her, but I don't," he voice trailed off hesitantly as Bruce walked over to the window.

"Leave it to me. Sideshow how do I get outside?"

This new direction confused Sideshow even further. Why, on Skid, would anyone want to go outside and into the wilderness? Sideshow had never been out there and did not know anyone that had been. Still the male did appear to have an affinity for the wilderness.

"Here we are," Bruce muttered, finding a depression that made the window swing open wide enough for him to jump out. Before Sideshow realized what was happening, Bruce had vaulted out of the window.

The sticky sea of grass seed heads swaying in the breeze reminded Bruce of paspalum. He picked off a couple of the more mature looking seed heads and turned back to the window.

"Chuck us a couple of those empty bowls will ya Sue."

Bruce scraped dirt into the bowls, then clambered back through the window.

"Right, Sideshow, have a look at this." Bruce placed the two bowls of soil on the table and held up the seed heads.

"That green stuff out there is grass. Right?" Bruce pointed out the window and Sideshow nodded, wondering what sort of madness this was.

"Good. This," Bruce waved the seed head in Sideshow's face, "is a grass seed head and these little things are the seeds." He carefully picked off a few of the seeds. "From these the grass will grow."

These seeds develop into that organic material?" Sideshow asked in disbelief. "That is not possible."

"I'll prove it to you, though it will take a while." Bruce poked several small holes with his finger in each bowl of earth, wiped several seeds off into each one, swept a little soil over each depression, and triumphantly handed the bowls to Sideshow.

Sideshow took the two bowls from Bruce and stared at them dubiously.

"Take the bowls, and put them somewhere in the light, and water them regularly. Like this."

Bruce dipped a spoon into some water and sprinkled it over the bowls. "About this much every couple of days."

What exactly Sideshow might learn from this exercise he wasn't sure. Hopefully she would learn something, as any further explanation he might have provided would probably be met with the same impenetrable blankness he had encountered in the last few minutes. She obviously didn't like being told anything, either, arrogantly believing too much in her own intelligence. Surely, being a doctor type, she was interested in learning new things she must have some understanding of growth and development?

Perhaps not. One never knew with people who thought they had all the answers.

Bruce turned to the window, gazing out longingly. Yearning to be able to stroll out there with some degree of freedom.

"I want to go for a walk out there," Bruce demanded with the simple single mindedness of a small demanding lollies and gestured towards the window.

"It is not done," Sideshow replied sharply.

Bruce would have argued the point, but the look on Sideshow's face convinced him arguing with her wasn't worth the effort. Her lips were set in a grim line, her eyes hard and uncompromising. A formidable sight in anybody's language. An angry fat lady was not someone you would want sitting on you.

Sideshow struggled out of her chair and waddled over to the window, slamming it shut, muttering to herself. "Why me?"

Puffing from her exertion, her jowls now the color of a rooster's hackles, she lowered herself back into her chair. It is so unfair being a nursemaid to the offworlders she thought bitterly. Unconcerned because he knew that if he really wanted to he could be out the window before Sideshow had dragged herself out of the chair, Bruce paced up and down the room with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Tell me something," Sue, asked conversationally, "why is the agbar in short supply? I thought you said it was made in a factory?"

Bruce stopped his pacing, to await Sideshow's reply with interest.

Sideshow hesitated long enough for Bruce and Sue to realize that she was trying to hide something.

"Short supply? I know little of these things," she answered with a dismissive shrug, in much the same way Mulgoon had dismissed a similar question back on the space ship.

Suddenly the apparently unconnected pieces of a puzzle slipped into place for Bruce. "But it has something to do with us being here. Yes?"

On the ship Mulgoon or Cyprus, or had it been Myfair, had implied that they were to be guests

on Skid to help the Skidians in some undefined way. Did the apparent shortage of agbar have something to do with this?

"Don't be silly, Bruce. How can we help these people?" Sue clearly thought that Bruce's idea was preposterous. "These spacemen are far too sophisticated to need our help."

"How the hell would I know, woman? Nobody's told me, have they? It's just that, um." Bruce was sorry he'd said anything now. He might be wrong. He searched Sideshow's face for any sign he could have been on the right track.

"Well," Bruce insisted, trying another line of attack, "can you tell us why we're here then Big Girl?"

"Big Girl?" The insult was over Sideshow's head and she procrastinated silently, trying to think of a way to change the subject.

"I don't know," she admitted lamely.

Bruce was sure she was lying. Before he could speak again, Sue had jumped up and stood over Sideshow, jabbing a finger into her face.

"It's not on to hold us here against our will. I'm an American citizen you know!" She added in her agitation, forgetting that this meant absolutely nothing on Skid.

Bruce grinned, thinking she was going to demand another audience with the American ambassador.

"I want to go home," Sue sobbed collapsing back into her chair.

Sideshow's eyes bulged and her face became even redder until Bruce thought her head might explode like a ripe tomato. However, when she spoke, after a few moments, her voice sounded normal enough, though a little hostile.

"It is against Skidian etiquette to confront another as you are doing so now." As far as Sideshow was concerned the discussion was becoming tiresome, and the offworlders were becoming most uncouth. It was time to put them in their places.

"If you weren't so ignorant of our customs," Sideshow conveyed the impression that this deficiency was all Bruce and Sue's fault, "I would have you severely disciplined in a social re-education center. I certainly will if you continue to behave in such an outrageous manner." Sounds a bit ominous thought Bruce, watching the two women with amusement. Sue, to his surprise, came out fighting.

"I don't care for your customs. What do you care for ours? People aren't usually kidnapped where we come from, it's against the law!"

"What about the Red Indians?" Bruce interjected.

"Shut up, you. Whose side are you on, anyway?"

Sideshow rose ponderously from her chair, holding up a hand, halting Sue in mid flight.

"As you are ignorant of our customs, I will ignore these insults this time. Seat yourself!"

Sideshow shoved Sue unceremoniously back into a chair. "Since you are now on Skid, you must do as Skidians do. Life here will be much more pleasant if you learn and understand our ways." She paused to catch her breath and added almost maliciously. "You realize, of course, that you can never be allowed to return to your own planet."

"Why not?" Bruce demanded.

"Isn't it obvious? You cannot be allowed to return, with news or evidence of our existence."

"And just who do you think would believe us?" Bruce inquired angrily. "Don't you realize that if we went back home with a story about being kidnapped by aliens, from a planet called Skid for heaven's sake, they'd think we were nuts?" Bruce pointed a finger at his head and rotated it.

Sideshow responded with a malicious grin. "You will never return. You will stay forever on Skid."

"Bugger that for a joke." It occurred to Bruce that for all their outward pleasantry, the Skidians didn't give a shit about them at all. However, that still did not answer the important question of why they were there in the first place. What was so secret about it that Sideshow

wouldn't say? It gnawed at Bruce like a hunger pang. Truthfully he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

"I suppose when you've finished checking us over, you'll knock us off in case we contaminate your precious Skid any more," Bruce turned on Sideshow, tersely, forgetting his recent lesson on Skidian etiquette.

Sideshow squirmed in her seat, attempting to admonish him for his rudeness. But he gave her no chance.

"Don't give me that rubbish! Leave us alone!" He had suddenly had enough Skid, and of this Skidian in particular. He knew it was being childish, like a kid throwing his toys out of his cot. Skid wasn't about to go away, but he had to lash out now. There would be time enough later to come to terms with Skid and whatever the future might hold.

Fleeting, he recalled an image of a place from his past where he might never walk again, the place where he felt most secure and comfortable, even if he didn't get there too often these days. A metal road leading to the sea, the dusty oily smell of a hot car at the end of a long trip, the sharp odor of fennel, mingling in his nostrils. Sideshow became a focus for his anger.

"Get lost, bitch. I'll not tell you again!" Bruce grabbed the neck of her robe and with difficulty pulled her to her feet. Grunting at the effort he propelled her to the door and bundled her out into the corridor where she collapsed in an untidy heap on the floor. Bruce shut the door behind her and lay back against it, breathing heavily. No worries he thought. Now what?

"Wonderful macho man, what makes you think that you can get away with roughing these people up?"

The door started to open. Bruce aimed a kick through the gap, had the satisfaction of hearing a grunt of pain, and the door slid shut again.

"Piss off bugger ya! Look Sue, I don't really care one way or the other at the moment." And Bruce realized that he didn't. "It's not going to make any difference in the long run, so don't worry about it."

"How can you say that?" Sue was petrified the Skidians would retaliate in kind.

Bruce shrugged off her fears. "I'm going to have a look around," he said, harboring a faint hope of being able to escape into the countryside and maybe live off the land for a while. He strode over to the window, opened it, and vaulted out.

"What about me?" While Sue feared to face the Skidians alone, she was unwilling to follow Bruce and attract even more trouble in the process.

Bruce looked back over his shoulder. His first thought had been to ignore her.

"You can't just leave me here alone," she pleaded. "I'll have to take the blame for everything."

"Well, come on then." He extended his hand to help her out, which was not what Sue had intended and she hesitated for a moment.

"Ok, suit yourself. I'm off." Her fear of being left behind overrode Sue's misgivings about escaping and she started for the window.

"Wait a minute, where are we going?"

Bruce hadn't thought that far ahead yet. "That way," he waved vaguely in the direction of the river and strode away leaving Sue rooted to the spot, still trying to decide whether it had been such a good idea to follow him.

A moment later she ran after him and did not catch up until Bruce stopped in the shade of a tree to look back at the building they had escaped from.

"Look at that, will you?" Sideshow was leaning out of the window obviously looking to see where they had gone. Bruce gave her a cheery wave and wandered off through the trees. The meadow rolled gently away into the distance and was dotted with small groups of trees. It reminded Bruce of the some parts of the English countryside; an artificial scene that had evolved over thousands of years of mans influence on the landscape, but nevertheless an easy one on the eye. Except that there was no sign of any habitation, no sign of life at all, which

made the scene somehow intimidating, as if they were trespassing into an area off limits. On the other hand, Bruce thought with a shudder, where all wildlife had been purged by a nuclear accident, toxic chemical spill, or some other disaster.

Bruce was a little relieved when a bird, winging its way overhead alighted on a branch to regard them, cocking its head as if to say: 'what is this passing below? '

"You know," he mused, "for a place so rich in plant life there aren't many animals about.

"I hadn't really noticed," replied Sue, who turned around every few moments to check for signs of pursuit. "What do you mean?"

"Well on earth a place like this would be teeming with life. Anything from birds to insects, rabbits, to farm animals." They walked on while Sue considered this observation.

"Oh," was all she could think of to say.

By the time they reached the river about fifteen minutes later, Bruce had done enough walking. He didn't mind walking as a rule, but not just for something to do.

"This'll do," he said, sitting and watching the water with interest, after catching a glimpse of something that could have been a fish. "Someone's bound to catch up with us at some stage. I suppose we shouldn't make it too difficult to find us."

There wasn't really anywhere to go, and he had made his point. Sue pouted as Bruce rolled another smoke, but sat beside him anyway, dangling her feet in the water.

A series of ripples spread from the point where something had disturbed the surface of the water.

"Hey look, there's a fish. Thought I saw one before!" Bruce pointed to another set of ripples and even Sue thought she might have seen it.

"What are they going to do when they catch up with us?" Sue asked, as she watched the widening ripples and tried not to let the acrid cigarette smoke upset her too much.

"Dunno. Wouldn't worry about it too much though. You see I've formed this theory." he responded with some confidence. "I reckon this place is a few cents short of the quid, know what I mean?"

Sue shook her head. Sometimes Bruce seemed to speak a language all of his own.

"Can't you explain in a language I can understand?"

"Ok deary," he replied tiredly. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but there's a feeling of." The word he sought remained elusive. "Put it this way: you'd think a group of people who could fly through space and snatch four people and three dogs from earth would have no problems making tobacco, wouldn't you?"

"Don't forget those dogs of yours," Sue reminded him, changing the subject just as he started to get his thoughts together.

"I wonder where they are?" Bruce considered their plight momentarily. "The Skidians must be having all sorts of problems trying to analyze them."

"Aren't you worried about them?"

"Nah. They can look after themselves. I know for sure that one of them's ok, anyway. Look we're getting off the subject. Don't you get the impression that there's something terribly wrong with this place, and that there might be some connection between whatever's wrong, and us being here?"

"But what have we got to offer them?"

"Not a lot, really, unless they're planning to run a farm or need someone to organize a holiday. Which, given Sideshow's earlier statements, is unlikely." His voice trailed away for a moment.

"That's it!" He exclaimed. "You know what I think? I reckon they're having trouble producing food, and they want us to sort everything out for them. What a joke!"

"I've never heard anything so idiotic. They must be able to get what they need from somewhere else. One of those other planets they talked about." Sue decided Bruce was losing his marbles.

"But doesn't Skid produce food for other planets as well? Or most of it."

"Oh," Sue clapped a hand over her mouth. "Remember what they said? About the people on earth being such efficient producers of food because our population is so large and still growing?" Sue was belatedly catching on. "They can't have done their homework very well though, eh? That's if we're right, of course."

"Yeah." Bruce grunted.

"Do you really think so Bruce?"

"Well it's the most attractive idea I've had so far," he flicked his cigarette butt into the water.

"But I reckon we'll find out soon enough. When they do find us and they're all smiles, I'll bet you anything you like I'm on the right track. If not, then we might be stuffed. But I reckon the Skidians, technological master race or not, have made a bit of a cock up somewhere along the line."

"Cock up?"

"A mistake."

"Oh right, a screw up!" Sue felt happier than she had been since finding herself flung together with this oaf from down under.

Suddenly deciding she looked almost spunky when she smiled, Bruce leaned across and gave Sue a platonic peck on the cheek.

"Watch it, sonny," she whispered, giving Bruce a queer look and wondering why her stomach seemed to have tumbled over all of a sudden.

Bruce reddened, wondering what sort of worm had entered his brain this time. "Imagine," he began, trying to cover his embarrassment, "if they'd picked up some peasants from outback India or Peru or somewhere else poor and primitive. They should count themselves lucky that they've at least got us."

Sue sighed and rested her head on Bruce's shoulder. "I hope you're right."

"Yeah," was all Bruce managed. Both lapsed into a silence punctuated by deep sighs as they contemplated the darker side of their prospective futures and the sudden emotional tension that had developed between them.

"It's nice and quiet here isn't it?" Sue suggested at last breaking the silence.

"Unnatural, I'd say. There's hardly any birds or insects, and no big animals."

"We saw a fish before."

"Yeah, but only one. Which brings me to another question: Why don't they grow food rather than make it?" Bruce tried to sort out his confusion, and for the moment missed the nub of the Skidian's problem.

Sue bounced up and down like a child with her hand up in class. "I know! You are right. They are having problems with their synthetic food production systems, and they need us because it has been so long since they have had to that they do not know how to grow food. That is why they need us! For some reason they want to learn how to grow food."

The drone of some large insect began to invade the peace of the riverbank, and was increasing in intensity. When it sounded like a swarm of angry bees Bruce looked around to find the source of the noise so he could get out of the way.

"Over there," Sue pointed to an object coming into view over the trees.

"Well that didn't take long, did it?" Bruce got to his feet and watched the aircraft approach.

Sue rose and hung onto his arm. "Don't worry," Bruce tried to reassure her, feeling her fear like a bitter metallic taste in his own mouth. "Don't worry. They need us, remember?" Bruce repeated, as much for Sue's benefit as his own.

Homecoming

The aircraft hovered for a moment overhead then landed a few feet away, its under carriage jutting from its elongated ovoid body from just behind a pair of stubby wings. As the whine of whatever propulsion system powered the aircraft ran down, a ramp fell out of the fuselage and two familiar figures emerged.

Bruce heaved a sigh of relief, Mulgoon, and Cyprus stood cautiously at the entrance, though they didn't appear too happy about something. He'd half expected a squad of storm troopers to appear at the door

"Greetings, friends!" Mulgoon called with a hint of a frown, as he walked towards them.

Bruce turned to Sue, raised his eyebrows, and shrugged his shoulders.

Mulgoon continued forward until he stood in front of Bruce, while Cyprus, managing to hold his smile, kept a little further back.

"If we had known you wished to travel in the wilderness we would have taken you ourselves."

"Aw, thanks mate," replied Bruce, trying to make light of the situation. "We was just going for a bit of a wander."

"Pardon?" Mulgoon glanced at Cyprus, who shrugged his shoulders un-helpfully.

"We have been for a walk," Sue translated for their benefit.

"Greaser," Bruce whispered sourly.

"Thank you. If you would care to accompany us, we will conduct you on a local tour."

"Fine." Bruce said, sensing they had little option. "Come on, Sue."

Mulgoon indicated two rear seats in the cabin and Cyprus joined Mulgoon in seats facing the offworlders as the craft climbed into the sky.

"We didn't get far, did we?" Bruce peered out of the window. "That's where we started." He said pointing out a long low building. "At least we're not going back to the medical facility."

The medical facility lay at the edge of a vast built up area which stretched away as far as the eye could see.

"Wow!" Sue exclaimed. "It's enormous! How many people live here?"

"Sietnuoc has a population of 102,631,987 inhabitants as of yesterday," Cyprus answered.

"That's incredible. Is Sietnuoc the biggest city on Skid?" Bruce wrapped his tongue around the name with difficulty.

"Oh no, Sietnuoc is the smallest of our cities. Ndgarr is the biggest, with approximately 651,000,000 inhabitants.

"That's almost incomprehensible. Can you imagine a city that size, Bruce?"

Bruce shook his head. "Nah. The biggest one I've ever seen wasn't a patch on this."

On the other hand what he could see of the city did vaguely resemble a suburb of any New Zealand city. What he assumed were houses were scattered in neat patterns along streets.

However, unlike any terrestrial city, there seemed to be no towering skyscrapers or tall industrial chimneys spewing smoke into the air. Nor did there appear to be motorways clogged with vehicles. In fact, few vehicles of any sort were in evidence on the streets.

Bruce was about to comment on this when a vast empty area, that looked as though it could once have been an enormous car park, came into view, surrounding a structure that could only be some sort of sports or entertainment arena. Unless it was some kind of Skidian factory of course.

"See, there Sue. Looks like a rugby ground, or a football stadium, eh? Wonder what it's for?"

Cyprus ignored the question, and began to point out various landmarks and other points of Skidian interest. "The large open area below us is our senate."

Bruce recognized it as the place where they had first arrived on Skid.

"We call it the Onofeti. Myfair, fly towards Smrakra," Mulgoon instructed. "We might be able to give our guests a glimpse of a Stim event. Stim is one of our major cultural events," he explained proudly. "As part of your introduction to Skid we must take you to one soon."

The craft circled the large stadium but they were at such a height that neither Sue nor Bruce could see much.

"Can you see what's going on Bruce?"

"No they could be playing anything from bull rush to tiddly winks. Some kind of ball game, though, by the look of it."

After circling the stadium several times, Myfair swung the craft back onto its original course.

"How big is the city?"

Mulgoon gave Cyprus a significant look. Already they had both tired of fielding questions from the almost offensively curious offworlders. Why could they not just accept things, without this ceaseless search for answers about matters of no great importance?

"Here," said Cyprus curtly. He produced two gadgets each about the size of a Walkman from under his seat and handed them one each.

Bruce turned his over, wondering what it was.

"Anything you might wish to know about Skid has been programmed into this appliance that we call a book, it has full access Skid's data networks." He did not add, 'within reasonable bounds.'

"How does it work?" Sue asked.

The book had a dial on one face, reinforcing its walkman-like appearance, and one corner was perforated, as if it were a speaker.

An impatient expression flitted across Cyprus's face: primitives had trouble with even the simplest device. He snatched it roughly from Sue's grasp and pressed his thumb into a coin-sized depression below the dial.

"Once you have activated the book, you simply ask your question or relay your request."

"You call these books?" Bruce asked.

"Yes, of course," replied Mulgoon. Again he imparted this information so proudly that Bruce wondered if he had a major role in the book's development. He had not. He simply took much pride in what some Skidian generations ago had developed.

Bruce grinned at the similarity between these devices and the books he was familiar with. Perhaps the name was not as silly as it sounded.

Bruce looked at his book, feeling a little self-conscious about asking an apparently inanimate object a question.

"How big is this city?" Sue beat him to the draw anyhow.

"The city known as Sietnuoc has a population of 102,631,987 persons and covers an area of almost fourteen million hectares." Answered a melodic female, though obviously artificial voice.

"You can also use the books to deliver instructions to your assistants. They are also programmed to supply anything you may require during your stay here."

"Assistants?" This was something new."

"Yes," Mulgoon continued. "Now that you have been allocated individual living quarters, you must have assistants to see about your business."

"Oh that's nice." Bruce digested this interesting bit of news. His very own servant?

"Let's see how useful this thing really is." Bruce racked his mind for an obscure request. "I want a couple of pairs of short strides and some 't' shirts. I'm sick of walking round in a dress," he explained to nobody," and oh, some jandals too."

Mulgoon's nose wrinkled. "What are you saying? You are most difficult to understand at times."

"It's not my fault if you can't talk proper, is it?"

"Don't worry, I can't understand him most of the time, either," Sue said, trying to diffuse the tension and ingratiate herself with the Skidians at the same time.

Mulgoon and Cyprus sounded a little edgy because they felt, correctly, that Bruce was insulting their intelligence somehow. Bruce ignored the Skidians and shoved his book into a pocket he'd just discovered in the voluminous sleeve of his robe.

"Big, eh?" He said to Sue who was staring moodily at the city still passing below.

"A bit disappointing, really. Looks like any other big city. The suburbs, I mean. Not spacey at all."

"Funny, but I haven't seen any big buildings except for the senate, the medical center and the sports arena. No factories, shops, or anything."

These observations were not appreciated by the Skidians. "Our people live in ordered communities, not spread haphazardly over the planet like your own," Cyprus informed them defensively.

"Yeah, but look here." Bruce tried to explain himself without offending the Skidians any further. "Some of the cities on earth, especially where I come from, look a lot like this one."

"But they're not very big," Mulgoon insisted.

"No," said Bruce sharply, impatient with the pedantic attitudes of his hosts although the disagreement wasn't worth getting hostile about. Size and appearance evidently meant everything to the Skidians. The bigger the city, the better it was, and it seemed nothing else mattered.

He watched from the window as the cityscape was abruptly replaced by the open, empty countryside, as if some town planner had drawn a line in the sand that could never be crossed.

"We are conveying you to an archaeological site which you may find interesting." Mulgoon said after a few minutes of silence.

"What sort of site is that?" Sue asked. Bruce couldn't have cared less. Archaeology, like architecture, wasn't on his list of interests.

"We were hoping you," Mulgoon indicated both of them and cleared his throat loudly, "might be able to help us in analyzing the importance of the site and the artifacts contained there."

"The plot thickens," Bruce chuckled. It wasn't the sort of thing he'd expected. But what did he expect? He no longer knew.

"The site was discovered recently while technical staff recovered an expired weather satellite. The crater made by the satellite's impact uncovered the ancient structure we are going to visit." Mulgoon cleared his throat again, as if embarrassed by this admission of a failure of Skidian technology.

"Do your satellites often fall out of the sky? Sue asked maliciously. "Are we safe in this aircraft?" Neither Skidian chose to respond to Sue's question and Mulgoon continued, unabashed.

"Our historians have discovered many sites of antiquity which give us some insight into ancient life on Skid.

"What part of the planet are we crossing now?" Bruce asked his book.

"Sietnuoc is situated in the warmer temperate latitudes of Skid. The archaeological site you are approaching is in an area of grassland which extends over much of the continent of Noltrac."

"What sort of wildlife does this region support?" Bruce hadn't seen any large animals, or small ones for that matter, so the answer came as a surprise.

"Untold millions of large, four-legged creatures, inhabit this region in enormous groups. Little is understood about their nutritional requirements and habits."

"What they eat, you mean."

"That is so."

"Do you know anything useful about these creatures?"

"No," the book answered as Bruce noticed a cloud of dust rising high into the sky ahead of the aircraft. As they came closer, a great herd of animals emerged from under the dust cloud plodding slowly across the plain.

"Can we have a look at them?" Bruce pointed downwards. Myfair banked the craft and swooped low over the herd. A few of the animals looked up, watched them curiously, and then placidly resumed their grazing. They looked much like ordinary cattle except for the single horn that protruded rhinoceroses like from their noses. There must have been thousands spread out across the plain.

"What are these animals called?"

"We have no name for them. Few Skidians have ever seen one, for they stay away from the cities." Cyprus said. Brilliant thought Bruce.

"Ivops." The book contradicted Cyprus. After several more turns and low passes, the craft returned to its earlier course, quickly leaving the herd far behind.

"They don't need us to find them food," Bruce said. "There's heaps on the hoof down there. We're going to be historians instead. Neat, eh?"

"Are you sure we could eat those things?"

"Oh, probably. I'd like to take a closer look at them though."

Almost immediately the aircraft began to lose height again. It swooped over a low hill, banked steeply, and landed beside what looked like a wide impact crater of some kind. Peering out the window Bruce saw a large building that seemed to have been built in the bottom of the crater surrounded by a cluster of smaller structures, a little like port-a-loos, of more recent construction. Closer inspection revealed that the larger building was well below ground level and at some stage must have been covered by several meters of earth.

After fumbling with the door catch, Mulgoon led them off the aircraft, down a flight of steps, and into the exhumed building.

"Are there any other buried buildings around here?" Bruce asked Yarad, the only Skidian to inhabit the site, after they had been introduced.

"We have not discovered any yet," replied Yarad apologetically. "We haven't yet made a full survey of the immediate area."

He could have added that this was because Skidians had no interest in their history and never had. As far as the average Skidian was concerned Skid had always been as it was and always would be, there was no past or future, only Skid as it had been since time immemorial. Still history was a passion that gripped Yarad, at least.

"It might be interesting if you did," Sue suggested. "There's no telling what you might find." Yarad made no reply so Sue continued. "On our planet archaeologists have been able to discover how our ancestors lived."

"It is an odd building. Most of it was built below the original ground level and it is full of many artifacts that mystify us," said Cyprus.

"What kind?"

"These things are difficult to explain," Cyprus replied with a shrug of his shoulders. "Best that you look for yourself." He led them down a polished corridor and into what could once have been a reception area or an office of some kind lined with real books; the first and only books made of paper or some kind of laminated plastic that Bruce would ever see on Skid.

Was it an ancient library then? Four or five books were strewn haphazardly across a table that Yarad had obviously been working at. Against one wall stood a large cabinet with many small drawers in it, that on closer inspection contained thousands of reference cards. Bruce flicked through a few drawers and realized that not only were the cards a record of books stored elsewhere in the building, but also a catalogue for a number of other things also possibly stored there.

"What do you make of this, Sue?" Bruce had never spent much time in a library, and could make little sense of the catalogue.

"Maybe this will help," Yarad suggested, offering Bruce a heavy ledger from the table.

"Hey, this looks interesting. Register of Agriculturally Important Arable Crops and Seed Stocks, Central Disaster Recovery Center Eight," Bruce read the title aloud, opening the book at random. Sue peered over his shoulder as he ran a finger down a page.

"What is it?"

"A list of seeds or something. Look, I don't believe this. C, cabbage, carrot. Vegetable seeds."

"Incredible!" Sue breathed, flicking over some more pages to reveal further lists. "I don't believe it! How can this be possible?"

"I have no idea," Bruce replied, He wasn't about to dwell on the fact either. Skid was one weird place, but perhaps no weirder than earth might be after a few more thousand years of

development. "But they must be stored in here somewhere, don't you reckon?"

The Skidians looked on silently until Mulgoon asked, "Do you have any understanding of this information?"

1. "Oh yes, it's a register of seeds which must be stored around here somewhere."
2. "Seeds. What are these seeds? We have not been able to figure this out at all. Could
3. possibly be weapons of some description?"
4. Bruce and Sue looked at each other in astonishment. "No, no." Bruce had a
5. sudden thought. "You know what seeds are for. This is a setup, isn't it?"

"Setup? Please, I do not understand," Cyprus replied inscrutably.

Bruce turned on him angrily. "Don't play games with me, you brought us here for a reason." Bruce breathed heavily, collecting his thoughts. "Whether you want to or not, I demand you tell us the full story." He moved towards Yarad in a manner that could only be described as intimidating, although Yarad was somewhat bigger than Bruce was.

"What are seeds?" he asked Yarad, who was visibly shaken by the force of his outburst. "I'm sure you know."

Yarad looked nervously at Mulgoon and Cyprus."

"Ok, look it doesn't worry me if you want to play your little games," Bruce took a stab at what he guessed was the heart of the matter. "I don't care if you're running out of food, because I won't be going hungry."

"So you understand our crisis Bruce, or have some understanding of it at least." Cyprus said after long silence. It was the first time he had called Bruce by name. "We have continually underestimated your abilities, it seems."

"Have a good look around. Take all the time you need," Cyprus said generously. "When you are ready, we will take you to Toytoo, the leader of our group, who will answer any questions you might have."

The road to recovery

It was all so easy, Bruce decided. Too easy? It seemed all too much of a coincidence to him that in the space of half an hour he had found an inexhaustible supply of meat on the hoof and a supposedly lost archive that appeared to have been set up with some future ecological disaster in mind.

Bruce wasn't about to dwell on the matter, he was more worried about how he was going to achieve what they wanted, and more than a little annoyed that the Skidians seemed to think he was some kind of idiot. He turned to Sue, ignoring the Skidians.

"C'mon let's have a look round." He stopped in mid stride and asked: "What are seeds, Yarad?"

Yarad glanced at Cyprus, who nodded. "We think seeds might develop into a form of organic material that we might be able to consume. Unfortunately we have not been able to establish the mechanics of this process."

In the process of establishing the archive to preserve seeds in case of some future disaster, the founders had not thought to include basic information on how to plant, nurture, harvest, and utilize crops. As animal husbandry was a forgotten science on Skid, so was the husbandry of plants and their preparation for Skidian consumption.

"So the discovery of this site must raise some interesting issues for you people?"

Cyprus restrained Mulgoon who might have answered and told the offworlders something they did not need to know, there were, after all many matters they did not need to be privy to.

"Few Skidians know of this place, and as Yarad has mentioned, even fewer would be ever

be interested." Cyprus played with his ear lobe distractedly. "As a race we do not plan for the future, for we have all we desire, or learn from the mistakes of our past, for they were overcome generations ago. Our culture has evolved in this fashion because we want for nothing. What can we learn from history? Nothing." If Cyprus was aware that his comments were totally contradictory he did not show it.

"But that doesn't make any sense at all." Sue looked up from the book she had been leafing through. "Do Skidians think about anything?"

"It does not pay to think about anything, except how to spend the day. The high council makes all of the important decisions on Skid," he said piously.

Who does he think he is kidding? Thought Sue. She could see Cyprus did not like that state of affairs, even if he believed it true.

"Oh yes, that sounds familiar," Sue whispered to Bruce grabbing his arm and leading him off. "They're just like the three monkeys. See no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil, the system is always right."

Bruce didn't really understand what she was on about. "Sounds like some medieval feudal kingdom," she continued. "Serfs touching their forelocks to the lord of the manor and that sort of thing."

"That's exactly how it seems. But they're not peasants. Look at their technology. It's more like a high tech slavery."

Sue looked thoughtful for a moment. "I always thought technological development was supposed to set people free from life's drudgery. The Skidians might be free from the drudgery of work and the struggle to survive. But they are not free from anything else it seems. This place is a total dictatorship and if anybody steps out of line they get the chop."

"Not our problem," Bruce said, pushing open a door and peering in. "This looks a lot more interesting." Packets of all shapes and sizes filled the room, neatly stacked on shelves, along with canisters of fertilizer and other chemicals. Bruce wished he'd paid more attention to his chemistry lectures so he could work out what to do with the stuff.

"Geez, these Skidians must be thick if they can't make anything of this lot." Bruce waved around the walls of another tightly packed room. "It's a bloody gold mine."

"For you, maybe," Sue muttered. She knew little more than the Skidians when it came to growing things. "Don't you think that there's something strange about this place? All the information is in a form we can easily understand. Everything?"

"It had struck me. It's almost as if everything here had been designed with the likes of us in mind," mused Bruce. "It's incredible, almost preordained, do you think? It's enough to make a man think that there might be a god after all." Bruce didn't really think so, saying god did it was just a way of explaining what he didn't understand. It was merely a coincidence, a one in a million coincidence, that he was in the right place at the right time. He still felt a little uneasy, despite his flippancy. Too many things about Skid were simply inexplicable. Was it indeed coincidence, or evidence of some supernatural intelligence inhabiting the universe? Or just prudent planning by a society that since seemed to have lost that art?

At the end of a short corridor was a set of double doors. He pushed through them and found himself in large room filled with machinery and all kinds of tools displayed like artifacts in a pioneer museum.

"Where are you?" Sue called, following him in a few minutes later.

Bruce poked his head up from behind the harvester he had been climbing over, trying to figure out what made it go.

"Over here. Look at this stuff, will you?" he said, excitedly. "There's all sorts here." He led her around explaining what everything was for, baffling her with bullshit when he wasn't sure. After half an hour or so, Sue was thoroughly bored and forced him back upstairs to where the Skidians were waiting for them impatiently. On his way out of the building, Bruce picked up the ledger he'd been looking at earlier and took it with him. He didn't think Yarad would miss it,

and didn't really care if he did.

Mulgoon and Cyprus were eager to depart the scene and all but herded the two offworlders onto the aircraft when Bruce stopped to have a poke around outside.

"What about a feed then?" Bruce demanded once they were aboard and the craft was lifting off. "I'm ravenous. What about you, Sue?"

"Eating is not be possible at this time. It is against Skidian custom to consume food while in a moving vehicle, except on long journeys."

"Well, let's land then." Bruce thought the solution was obvious.

"But we are running late," Mulgoon said to silence him. Who in their right mind would want to land in the middle of nowhere to eat? "There will be ample time for eating later."

After a short flight the aircraft landed beside a scruffy looking building, the size of an average house, on the city fringe. The place wasn't untidy in the sense that rubbish lay about outside or that half the windows were broken. It appeared shabby because the grass and shrubbery outside grew unchecked and the building looked as if it could do with a good paint or water blast. It was as if whoever lived there or owned it didn't really care for it.

Toytoo met the offworlders at the door of what Bruce decided was probably a house and ushered them inside. Bruce flopped onto a large cushion placed against the wall of a room that they were ushered into without being invited. He fidgeted about until he felt comfortable, taking much longer than necessary to do so after catching the impatient scowl on Toytoo's face. Toytoo seemed uptight about something. However, Bruce was in no mood to be polite.

After several moments of hesitation, not wishing to commit any cultural indiscretions of her own, Sue sat beside him on the floor.

"Before we begin our fellowship we will observe the ritual of dipping," Toytoo explained, as Myfair entered the room bearing a bowl of liquid in one hand and a small saucer shaped scoop in the other. He placed the bowl on the table.

1. Solemnly Myfair dipped the scoop into the larger bowl and passed it to Toytoo, who
2. slurped noisily from the scoop and handed it back to Myfair. Myfair refilled the
3. and passed it to Bruce, who drank the liquid without hesitation. It tasted faintly
4. cinnamon and must have contained some kind of stimulant, because he felt a fleeting
5. which left him with an insatiable desire for a smoke. He managed to suppress this
6. until Sue, with a barely disguised grimace of distaste, and then Myfair, had drunk
7. the scoop. When the bowl was empty after several circuits of the room,
8. Myfair pulled out a pouch of agbar and offered it to each of them in turn.

"I don't, thank you," Sue said.

"If you are offered agbar it is rude of you to refuse, an offence in our culture. Taking agbar is also an intrinsic part of the dipping ceremony." The ignorant savage, Toytoo thought. Did they not know anything?

Nevertheless, Sue was not to be shaken from her stand. "I'm sorry but I don't smoke and what's more I find it offensive that you insist."

"You must," Toytoo insisted, growing angry at the stubborn female.

"Where I come from it is most impolite to force alcohol or cigarettes on anyone."

"You are on Skid now and so you must conform to our practices and traditions." Toytoo insisted growing angry with Sue.

"Not by choice, though." Sue replied as if that gave her an excuse to be rude.

Toytoo was about to say something further, shook his head instead, and from then on

steadfastly ignored her. Sue, on the other hand, preened herself at this small victory.

Talk about not trying to antagonize them Bruce thought keeping a hold of the agbar pouch as it was passed to him.

"Recently we discovered a viral infection in the plants that produce our food and most of our other consumables." Toytoo began without preliminaries.

Hearing this, Bruce allowed himself a satisfied smirk and crowed to Sue, "I told you so."

"This virus has been isolated and identified, but up until the present time we have not been able to develop a strategy to combat it." Toytoo frowned as though embarrassed that the might of Skidian technology had been crippled by something as insignificant as a virus. "The virus affects 70 percent of our synthetic plants, reducing their output to almost nothing. This means our ability to feed ourselves is extremely impeded," he continued. He paused to take another cigarette from Myfair. "Our scientists are working on treatments." He inhaled deeply and then removed the cigarette from his nostril and tapped a little ash on the floor. "Despite intensive research, we are no further forward in our understanding of the virus or of possible control measures than when we first discovered it. Needless to say, our food stocks are rapidly declining."

Bruce started to ask one of the many questions that quickly occurred to him, but Toytoo stalled him with a raised hand.

"With no forthcoming solution or any likely in the immediate future, we are facing a severe crisis. For months now we have been discussing strategies to combat this crisis." Toytoo surprised Bruce and Sue by spitting on the floor in disgust. "Talk. So much talk. They would talk forever, until our deaths by starvation became fact."

"But you've got any amount of food available to you," Bruce tried to tell him.

Toytoo seemed not to hear and continued in a strangely offhand fashion as though he were reading from a prepared script, the contents of which he clearly did not agree with.

"Recently a small group of us decided to take some positive action in an attempt to combat this crisis. For many generations the existence of your planet has been well known to us."

If only the UFO expert's back home could see how right they have been all these years, Bruce thought, amused at the idea.

"Our observations have told us that despite your generally low level of technological sophistication, the population of your planet has increased rapidly over the last few decades. Therefore we concluded that somehow, for such a primitive planet, you must have very efficient food production systems." Bruce couldn't stop the laughter that welled up in his chest. Toytoo's discourse sounded even more farfetched the second time around.

"Please let me finish," demanded Toytoo. "Our group decided to travel to your planet and enlist the support of experts in organic food production. Do you think you can help us?"

"Oh yeah, mate, no problems," replied Bruce, though he was still not exactly sure what Toytoo wanted him to do. Organic food production was obviously an abstract concept for Toytoo. He knew there was merit in the concept but he did not understand it.

"Good." The briefing was suddenly at an end, as Toytoo, without another word, turned on his heel and left the room.

"Hang on a minute mate!" But Toytoo had gone, leaving a lot of unanswered questions hanging in the air.

"You know Sue, if this is an example of their attitude I'm not surprised they're in the shit." Toytoo's indifference amazed him. In fact Toytoo had shown no apparent concern at all. Rather than outlining a potentially planet-saving operation, he acted as though he was dispensing with an unwanted chore.

Bruce looked at Myfair. Weren't they even going to discuss the hows, whys, and wherefores of what they wanted him to do for them? Obviously not by the look of things.

"Come!" Myfair instructed Sue. "I will accompany you to your quarters," he said as

Cyprus reappeared from somewhere and started to talk to Bruce. Sue looked fearfully over her shoulder at Bruce's retreating back, wanting him to call out to him. Despite the fact that she found him an offensive, insensitive oaf, the last thing Sue wanted was to be left on her own with any Skidians. Bruce seemed unconcerned with her plight and Sue felt as if an umbilical cord binding them together had been severed. She was on her own, now, and she wondered if she could handle it.

"Where are me dogs?" she heard Bruce ask Cyprus as they walked out of the building and down the street.

"Dogs!" she almost cried. Bruce was more interested in his dogs than her.

	"Dogs?"
--	---------

"Yeah, the dogs that came with me."

"Oh, them. Dogs? Is that what you call them? They have given our research staff a most difficult time, they are most perplexing creatures." Bruce chuckled at the idea of the Skidians trying to talk to the dogs.

"They await you at your quarters. Here." Cyprus indicated a house several doors along from the one they had just left.

Once again, Bruce was struck by the unkempt nature of the place. As if nobody really cared about it. Like houses in a state rental suburb, all the houses around this one seemed to be modules built on the same pattern. Each had different shrubbery planted outside, and each house was oriented slightly differently to break the monotony.

The interior was the real surprise, an identical copy of the house he'd lived in back at the farm. Right down to the positioning of the chairs in the lounge, the color of the toilet seat, and the carpet. There was even a television in the corner of the lounge.

"We arranged your quarters using data taken from your brain scans, deciding that the similarity would make you more comfortable," Cyprus told Bruce proudly.

"Nice touch." Bruce said by way of thanks, suddenly overwhelmed by a feeling of homesickness. What else had they found out about him? How much did the Skidians know? The sort of things a man never wanted to recognize in himself, let alone reveal to others?

"I will leave you now," said Cyprus, for which Bruce was grateful. He could feel his eyes beginning to water and didn't want to break down in front of this alien.

The dogs must have sensed that he was around because Bruce could hear them barking somewhere outside as Cyprus opened the door to leave. He thought he'd better have a look to see how they were.

Bruce found the dogs in the most luxurious accommodations that they could ever have experienced let alone imagined.

"How the hell did the Skidians dream this one up?" Bruce asked Cop as he inspected the kennels. The dogs had started barking and pawing furiously at the doors as soon as he approached, demanding to be released. But it took Bruce a few minutes to suss out how to open the doors.

Finally released the dogs leapt up at Bruce as if to say: "Hello, is it really you?" Then they were off investigating their new home, sniffing and cocking their legs on everything in sight, or squatting in Can's case, while Bruce made a closer inspection of the kennels.

The padded hutches, which were already liberally covered in stiff dark hairs, were some kind of dog heaven by the looks of things. Which left Bruce wondering how the Skidians had decided on the plan for the kennels and the continuous food supply system that would have been an integral feature of any canine conception.

The eerie perfection of the dog kennels, well probably, as far as the dogs were concerned made Bruce wonder what the house was like, so he wandered inside.

Laying on the bed in what he assumed was his bedroom he found the conventional clothing he had ordered earlier, along with a pair of jandals. Cyprus was not lying about the books then.

Bouncing up and down on the bed, Bruce wondered what else was true of Skid and what was merely wishful thinking, the result of generations of conditioning on the part of the Skidians.

Stretching himself out to see if the bed was as comfortable as it looked, Bruce decided he was tired and before he knew it, fell asleep.

A game called Stim

Bruce woke with a start, wondering how long he'd been asleep and in the same instant remembering he'd left the dogs off.

"Shit! I hope they haven't bugged off," he said to the pillow. And then he remembered he was hungry. When had he last eaten?

"How am I supposed to feed myself? Cyprus had neglected to make that important fact clear. Bruce rubbed his stomach and wondered, was it really only that morning that he had woken to find the large form of Sideshow bending over him?

Somewhere the dogs were barking furiously. Bruce rose stiffly from his bed and went in search of the source of the uproar. He found Cyprus eyeing the dogs nervously as they bailed, him and a tall slim female Skidian, up at the front door.

"May we enter Bruce?" Cyprus asked, eyeing the dogs nervously.

"Sure, come on in," Bruce stood aside. "Siddown you noisy buggers!"

"Everything is to your satisfaction?" Cyprus inquired, without bothering to wait for an answer. "Good. This is Leaf, your assistant." Cyprus indicated his female companion. "She is here to satisfy your every requirement."

Cyprus placed a lot of emphasis on the word 'every' and Bruce wondered what he was trying to say. He appraised Leaf with interest. Leaf seeing the intensity of his look, bowed her head demurely. However the long loose robe she wore, the standard dress for all Skidians, failed to hide the pleasant curves of her body.

"I was planning on having something to eat, Cyprus. Care to join me?" Bruce was famished and couldn't put off eating any longer. By the look of most of them, he was sure no Skidian ever passed up the chance to eat.

"Inform Leaf of your requirements and she will ensure we are provided for." Bruce turned to yell over his shoulder,

"Beer?" Cyprus nodded. "Two beers and a feed as quickly as you can, please, Leaf," Bruce bellowed a little uncomfortably. Having a servant would take some getting used to.

Bruce and Cyprus moved outside and sat in the sun on the patio around a small table. Within minutes Bruce was sweltering under the hot Skidian sun and gratefully took the cold beer Leaf brought him.

"Thanks," he said offhandedly as she put them down on the table. "Cheers!" He said raising the glass to his lips.

"Cheers!" Cyprus repeated, finishing off the glass in one gulp and holding it out to be refilled.

Bruce stretched comfortably in his chair and rolled himself a smoke. "Tell me something. One important question has just occurred to me. This virus that's troubling you. Do you know where it comes from?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because it occurs to me that if you knew where it came from, how it evolved, it might help you control it. Right?" Bruce wasn't sure he was, but it seemed logical, especially if someone had purposely-infected Skid. Maybe there was an antidote somewhere.

"We do not know the origin of the virus. At one time intelligence reports suggested outside agents may have placed it in our plants." Cyprus shook his head, discounting the notion. "The problem with that theory is that all planets in this system rely on us for most of their food supplies. Therefore in destroying our ability to produce food, a potential attacker would also deny himself food."

"Fair enough," mused Bruce. "But what if somebody else has worked out how to produce enough food to feed themselves."

"Never. It is not possible. We would surely know." Cyprus declared with insisted with typical Skidian conceit, unaware that this was precisely what was happening on nearby Celcious B.

Bruce, deciding he wouldn't get much further on that tack, tried another. The Skidians seemed unable to believe anybody else in the universe was as sophisticated or as capable as they were. Alternatively, were they more worried that someone might be?

"What about research into the virus?"

"We are. Um." Cyprus remembered at the last moment that Skidians could do anything. "Our scientists are continuing their investigations and we are still confident that they will develop a cure for this viral infection."

"So you just need me to develop a temporary solution. Maybe you've also decided that you need to develop some alternative to your synthetic production even if you do cure the virus."

Cyprus frowned at Bruce as if the thought had not occurred to him or anybody else. "Of course you realize that any system I set up will take time to come to develop." "We are confident you can work miracles," Cyprus' replied unexpectedly. Bruce was astounded by the reply. Surely he hadn't heard right. "What if I can't help?"

"If you won't or can't assist us, you will be disposed of. Another expedition will be dispatched to your planet to obtain more suitable assistance."

"Wonderful." Bruce thought the combined might of earth's agribusiness industry would merely beat its head against a brick wall on Skid.

"But I am sure you won't let us down," Cyprus added pleasantly.

"Another thing interests me, Cyprus: how did you come to select me for your purposes?"

"Simple, my friend. We chose you because you were traversing a zone of organic material," Cyprus replied defying any logic Bruce understood. "Based on previous observations, it was probable you were involved in some form of organic food production."

Bruce never did really understand how the Skidians came to this conclusion, for none of them seemed to know what organic material was. Organic material was just an indicator on their sensors which they could not relate to anything on their own planet.

"Sue was selected using the same criterion?"

"Obviously." Cyprus's voice carried a hint of irritation at Bruce stating the obvious. "She was inhabiting an area of large organic structures. We therefore concluded that she would be an expert on their production." It obviously had not occurred to the Skidians that just because it was organic did not mean you could eat it.

"Geez Wayne. No wonder this place is stuffed," Bruce muttered in exasperation, not bothering to mention Sue had simply been lost in a forest.

"We were also careful to select candidates who were isolated from their fellows, so they wouldn't be missed easily," Cyprus said untruthfully. Myfair had simply beamed the offworlders aboard while the rest of them were arguing how to select them and would still be arguing if he had not.

Bruce suddenly realized the Skidians didn't just want him to show them how to produce food organically. They wanted him to do it for them as well. "I can help you, but have you got any idea how much work will be involved in producing enough food to feed all Skid's people?" He asked.

"We will work things out," replied Cyprus smugly. Relieved that the appearance of Leaf and a trolley load of food interrupted the conversation. While Bruce devoured his unappetizing meal as fast as he could. He might as well have taken a pill from all the enjoyment the meal gave him, Cyprus ate more circumspectly, as Skidians were wont to do, scooping the

synthofood up with his fingers rather than the spoon that he held in his free hand.

"Forget our problems for the present, Bruce," Cyprus suggested as he ate, as if an imminent famine was a trivial matter. "Would you like to attend one of our festivals, Skids major cultural event?"

"Sure." Why not? Bruce thought. He had nothing better to do, after all.

"Perfect." Cyprus sounded pleased with himself. "Then I will give you a few moments to prepare yourself and then we shall depart."

What's to prepare? Bruce wondered. The dogs? Maybe I'd better lock them up. Unless Cyprus was suggesting he have a wash. Bruce sniffed his armpit surreptitiously and decided he needn't bother. It'll be this Stim thing we're off to Bruce decided as he locked the dogs up. I wonder if it's worth watching?

"Ok so how do we get there?" Bruce asked as the two of them stood outside the house a few minutes later.

"We ride if we are ready?"

"I am if you are." Bruce replied as the ground opened up beneath him. Before he had time to be surprised, he found himself crouching on some kind of subterranean beltway with Cyprus just in front of him clinging to a support pole as they were whisked away along a tunnel.

It must have been a feeder tunnel. In a matter of seconds Bruce found he had to step off the beltway he was standing on, and onto another, wider faster one, as they entered a vast cavern full of Skidians going this way and that on similar beltways set in the floor. Before he even had time to enjoy the ride Bruce was following Cyprus off the beltway and onto a small unmarked platform. Then the two of them somehow popped up out of the ground outside one of the vast stadiums Bruce had noticed earlier. They were ascending a massive flight of concrete stairs up the rear of the stadium before he was really aware of what was going on.

As they stepped into the sunlight and looked down on the playing surface a great cheer rang out in response to an announcement over the public address system. Bruce stood there for a moment, trying to work out what was said and stared around the immense stadium that looked about three quarters full of mostly hideously obese, white-robed Skidians, chanting, waving their hands about, and cheering madly, obviously in a state of excitement.

It was a scene typical of any large sports ground Bruce had ever visited. Like Eden Park when the All Blacks were giving somebody a whopping, the MCG at a one-day cricket final. Somehow he hadn't been able to picture a crowd of Skidians, who seemed to be so reserved and dignified acting the same way. Maybe whatever cultural event he was about to see was to Skidians what bread and circuses had been to the ancient Romans.

Gridiron-type poles at each end of the field caught Bruce's attention as he gazed about the stadium, awed by the mass of people and the infectious sense of anticipation coursing through them, though the field itself was empty. So what had the Skidians been cheering about?

Some sort of usher docked his book with Cyprus's and pointed to their seats, giving Bruce a furtive, curious glance. He seemed about to make some comment when another roar rose from the crowd. Bruce craned his neck around the usher to see what was going on, and caught sight of two teams of Skidians jogging onto the field.

Bruce expected Cyprus to tell him what was going on, though it was typically Skidian not to tell him what was happening. As Cyprus was jumping up and down on his seat yelling and screaming along with the rest of them in a state of uninhibited excitement, Bruce realized Cyprus probably wouldn't make sense of anything at the moment even if he tried. After all despite all the excitement, as far as Bruce could see, nothing had even happened yet.

As it transpired explanations were largely superfluous, for after the opening stanzas of the event, Bruce was left wondering how the Skidians could be playing a game which bore such a remarkable resemblance to a relatively obscure game played on earth. A game Bruce knew well.

A member of the team who's uniform consisted of white shorts and red, black, and yellow,

hooped jerseys placed a white oval ball on a plastic tee. After checking the positions of his team members he retired a few paces then kicked the ball towards the stand where Bruce and Cyprus sat.

The ball scribed a neat arc through the air, dropping into a space just inside the touchline. A space being invaded by about half the players on the field, one of whom fumbled the ball on his fingertips and it knocked it forward.

"Butterfingers!" Bruce screamed, getting into the swing of things.

As the players formed a scrum, Cyprus remembered he had a guest and turned to Bruce, intending to explain the finer points of the event to Bruce.

"After the kickoff the ball was knocked on and now a scrum has been formed to restart play. Watch how the halfback feeds the ball to the scrum where it is raked back by the hooker. See?"

If Bruce had not been familiar with the game he would still have been none the wiser about how it was played after Cyprus's explanation. None of the Skidians seemed particularly adept at explaining anything, they took things for granted and assumed that whatever they said was always fully understood.

"Yeah, I know." Bruce replied watching the halfback fumble the ball from the base of the scrum. "Useless!" he screamed.

The scrum reformed and it was the opposing halfback's turn to feed it. His number eight was not taking any chances. He picked up the ball and with his fellow forwards supporting him, formed a slow moving maul that rumbled ponderously down the field. Suddenly the ball popped out of the tangle of bodies to the halfback. The halfback passed the ball on to his first five, who in turn flipped it onto the fullback bursting through outside him, exploiting a sudden gap that had formed in the opposition back line.

"Go, go!" shouted Bruce, leaping to his feet, groaning as he saw that the fullback lacked the pace to exploit his break and nobody else was supporting him. The cover defense caught him and dragged him to the ground, much to Bruce's disgust.

"You know this event?" Cyprus asked incredulously.

"Sure. Rugby, isn't it?"

"We call it Stim," replied Cyprus stiffly.

"Oh well, it's a lot like rugby, a game we play where I come from."

"Are you sure?" Cyprus did not really believe Bruce. How could the inhabitants of such a primitive planet develop an event of such complexity and finesse, and then call it a game? Why had the medical team's analysis of Bruce failed to mention that he competed in Stim events or something similar at least? Cyprus was appalled at the growing realization that some of his fellow Skidians might not have been as thorough in their work as they should have been.

"Yeah, play myself, mate," said Bruce proudly. The game was played at a fairly leisurely pace, which allowed Bruce and Cyprus plenty of time to discuss the similarities between rugby and Stim. Marveling at the lack of major differences between the two games and a shared passion bordering on the fanatic for it.

Half time was a bit of an education for Bruce. As the spectators chatted among themselves and stood to stretch, or call for refreshments from the drones that circulated between the aisles, the two teams went into their huddles at either end of the field to drink their magic water and eat whatever passed for oranges on Skid.

Nothing unusual in that. However, while they drank their respective coaches showed them videos in order to rectify the shortcomings of the first half. Which was an interesting innovation Bruce decided. Sadly, as far as he was concerned, the game as a spectacle was a disappointment. Both teams were lethargic, to say the least, in their approach, with one team totally outclassed by the other. So much so that Bruce thought the result might have been fixed by some crooked players and bookies.

At the end of the game Cyprus led Bruce from the stadium, though Bruce noticed the rest

of the crowd was in no hurry to leave.

"Do you think I could get to play a game at some stage, Cyprus?" Bruce asked eagerly, as they popped up out of the beltway outside his new home.

"I'm sure it could be arranged," said Cyprus, wondering how this primitive being thought he could compete with the specially trained and conditioned Skidian athletes. It would give Cyprus great personal satisfaction to see the offworlder's ego shattered, to see him totally demoralized by some of Skid's best athletes.

"Leave it with me, Bruce." Cyprus would personally see to it. "Tomorrow I will take you on a further familiarization trip around Skid, if that suits your plans?"

"Sure," replied Bruce, he didn't have any plans as far as he knew, "and you won't forget about getting me a game, will you?"

"Tomorrow then."

"Yeah. See ya later, Cyprus." Bruce said as he headed for his front door and Cyprus dropped from sight again.

Leaf met him on the front porch, holding the door open with the dignity of a well-trained butler.

"Good evening, sir. I trust the event was to your liking." There was no emotion in her voice; Leaf had merely made an obligatory, pleasantry.

"Wonderful," Bruce replied, wondering what he should say.

"Is there anything that I can do for you sir?" Leaf asked as if Bruce had not said a word.

"A drink of something." Bruce's throat felt as dry and rough as a piece of sandpaper. "Hi!" he said to Sue, who was sitting in the lounge. "What's the story?" He did not wait for an answer as he made for the bedroom and his 'proper' clothes. Leaf wasn't as efficient as she probably thought she was. Anybody with his best interests at heart would have told him Sue was inside.

"That's more comfy." Bruce said to himself as he wandered back into the lounge after swapping his long white robe for a pair of shorts and a singlet. "Thanks, Leaf," Bruce drained the glass and handed it back for a refill while Sue waited expectantly and with some apprehension for his reaction to her being there. He wasn't even aware of Leaf almost dropping the glass she was carrying and her stunned look as she took in the sight of his limbs. She had never seen anybody, let alone a male, practically nude before

"Are you ok?" Bruce asked Sue, noting her strained look.

"No, not really."

"Tell me about it," Bruce suggested, surprised at himself. "Come over here and sit by me." Bruce made a space for her on the couch. Sue ignored the space and instead sat on his knee and wrapped her hands around his neck. At another time Bruce might have welcomed such a direct approach, for the moment though, her attentions made him uncomfortable. Against his will he felt an erection grow. Surely Sue must feel it pressing against her backside? If she did, she made no comment about it. Or maybe she did because she seemed to wriggle around in his lap for far longer than it should have taken her to get comfortable.

"Let me go will ya? I can't breathe." Bruce peeled her arms away. "Now, tell me, what's the problem?"

"I feel so lonely," she whimpered. "Please let me stay here with you for a while."

"Woman!" Bruce, who wasn't feeling lonely at all, grunted under his breath.

"And there's this creepy man over there who tells me he is my assistant and keeps giving me strange looks."

"He's there to look after you. I have one here too, an assistant I mean, well, you've obviously met Leaf. So what's the problem?"

Sue sighed. "I just don't like it, him. Please can I stay here just for a few days until I settle down?"

"For how long?" Bruce really wanted to be shot of her, but he weakened despite himself.

"Oh I suppose so," he agreed gruffly, "as long as you keep out of my way."

"Thanks Bruce." Sue immediately brightened, gave him a hug and a peck on the cheek, and then untwined her arms from around his neck, having achieved what she wanted.

"Make yourself at home," he grunted sardonically, rising from the couch and walking out to the patio. Bruce set his second beer on the table, slumped into one of the chairs and rolled himself another smoke. Sue's presence was unsettling him for no good reason that he could discover; his former buoyancy had dissipated. He barely noticed Sue come out and sit beside him.

"Do you recognize any of the stars Bruce?" He gazed moodily into the sky. Darkness was falling and the first stars were twinkling overhead.

"Shit, woman," he said roughly. "We're probably in the stars we can see from home and we must be millions of miles from there."

"Do you think we'll ever make it home?" Sue gripped his arm tightly. Bruce felt in his heart there was always a chance. Nevertheless, his brain suggested that it was unlikely he would ever see home again. Sensing that Sue needed to be assured of the possibility, no matter how remote he said: "There's always a chance." Not in my lifetime, he didn't add.

He got up suddenly, drained his beer, and announced he was off to check the dogs. He found Sue's depression was contagious. Just as he thought, even at this early stage, he might be coming to grips with having to stay on the planet for the rest of his days he suddenly felt totally despondent about the whole thing.

The dogs started barking as soon as he approached their kennels; at least they seemed to have no worries. As far as they were probably concerned, Bruce had just moved again.

"Get in Cop." Cop being the leader of the pack, and having certain duties and assumed privileges, had taken it upon himself to investigate the boss's new place as soon as he was let out of his kennel. Bruce wasn't about to encourage that sort of behavior.

"Nice doggie!" Sue had followed Bruce outside and met Cop who wasn't slow in coming forward when it came to a bit of attention. After a few pats he jumped up to lick her face by way of appreciation.

"Cop, you bastard!" Bruce hissed, and the dog trotted away with his tail wagging jauntily.

"Get up." Enjoying their brief romp, the dogs pretended not to hear Bruce. But after another terse command they leapt into their kennels rather than expose themselves to a well aimed kick in the ribs.

An intermission

Without a watch Bruce had no idea what time it was, but with daylight streaming through the un-curtained window he presumed it must be morning. He hated getting out of bed at the best of times, but eventually, after much procrastination he thought he'd better get up and see what was going on.

His first port of call was the toilet and his first cigarette of the day while he wondered what he was going to do with himself. Much pushing and straining produced no result which worried Bruce, for usually his bowels were as regular as clockwork. From memory he hadn't had a movement the day before either. It was only much later that Bruce discovered that bowel movements on Skid, because of the structure and consistency of the diet, were few and far between. So much for the simple pleasures of life.

After it became obvious that nothing was going to happen for the moment, Bruce flicked the cigarette butt into the bowl and went to check out the bathroom. He found a disposable razor, but it was blunt, so shaving was obviously out.

A toothbrush stood in a glass along with a tube of paste that almost tasted like toothpaste, although the brush itself was a bit soft for Bruce's liking.

"You've got to hand to them. At least they try sometimes, even if they aren't always successful," Bruce mused as he brushed his teeth vigorously.

After he'd had a shower Bruce tramped around the house looking for something to do and bumped into Leaf who was carrying what was looked like his breakfast out to the patio.

Bruce sat on the patio and began to eat what there was of it. Not exactly bacon and eggs with last night's left over spud. More like cold porridge or stale weetbix.

"Get my book, Leaf." Bruce felt that saying 'please' to his servant didn't seem to have the right ring about it to him.

Unknown to Bruce, he thought she was merely a servant with no other useful skills, Leaf was a privileged person on Skid. Not only was she a daughter of one of Skid's more important families, she also had an occupation. Though she did not exactly see things in that light, waiting on an ignorant offworlder was not what she had in mind when her cousin Toytoo asked if she wanted to join him on working on a secret project for the senate.

Aware that Toytoo had just returned from a journey to the far reaches of the universe, Leaf had imagined that her years of training as a pilot might be useful to him in some unspecified capacity. Instead she found herself being treated like a domestic drone by a being she considered her intellectual inferior. Leaf seethed with resentment at this treatment, not only in the offworlder's casual abuse of her social status, but at the thoughtless behavior of one of her peers by placing her in this almost untenable position. Even in this emancipated age she could not even begin to object about Toytoo's insensitive behavior. One word out of place, the slightest hint of dissatisfaction or insubordination about her role, and without a second thought he would simply have her shipped off to a social re-education center, from which there was no return.

The book duly appeared, presented with an almost mocking bow which Bruce did not notice. However unwillingly, Leaf had to attend to the offworlder. This did not mean she had to be polite in doing so. Indeed the only culturally correct means she had available to her to respond to the situation was by being extremely impolite. Unfortunately the offworlder was completely ignorant of Skidian culture and the elaborate courtesies which were an instinctive part of any interaction between Skidians. The offworlder was totally oblivious of her calculated insults.

Bruce was looking for the news, but providing a news service didn't appear to be one of the book's functions. The big television like system in the corner of the lounge had nothing either and all he could get off the radio was some really weird music.

The book did tell him that newspapers were unknown on Skid. There was no news, no current events, not even a sports news services. How did anybody find out what was going on in this place if there were no news broadcasts?

Sue did not seem to care one way or the other. She had joined him on the patio, complained about the cigarette butt in the toilet, told him off for smoking while she ate, and then asked him what he was going to do for the day. Maybe the Skidians were like Sue, not at all interested in what was going on in the world around them.

"We aren't exactly tourists, you know," he said after hearing the list of things she had planned. He would be quite happy sitting around the place, resting. Besides, Bruce thought, he'd better stay put and wait for Cyprus.

Rather than let Sue drag him around bored rigid while she searched out places of 'interest', Bruce passed the time asking questions of his book.

Then he remembered the large conventional book he had taken from the archeological site the previous day and decided to have a browse through that while he was waiting for Cyprus.

On the opening pages he found an introduction and brief history of the center.

Articles Of Establishment 18963. By order of the Minister for the Department of Agriculture this Disaster Recovery Center has been established to ensure the availability of pure stock for the replanting of food crops after unspecified destruction of common stocks. Said stocks will be

under the control of the Director of Agriculture and dispensed at his discretion at a time(s) he may deem appropriate. This center contains sufficient seed stocks for the provision of three seasons' plantings at 18963 population requirements without replenishment.

The introduction continued in the same vein for several pages. Bruce flicked through the inventory, wondering what sort of disaster they had been preparing for and why the stocks hadn't been used. Surely the Skidian's technology and sophistication would have prevented any major disasters befalling them? And then Bruce thought about that properly. Nah! As they were in the process of finding out increasing reliance on their technology had just made them more vulnerable to a really sophisticated attack or major disaster.

Bruce was about to set the ledger aside when several creased pages caught his eye, offending his sense of neatness. He flipped over to the pages and found several loose pieces of paper tucked in between the pages. Bruce flattened them out on the table and read.

Sometime not long after the establishment of the center two events had occurred which rendered it virtually obsolete. Until today, Bruce observed wryly. The first was that synthetic food plants were established beneath the oceans at various points around the planet.

As prototype units proved their worth, the planet's reliance on organically produced food decreased until in a few years everyone ate synthofood. At about the time the synthofood plants were reaching their full productive capacity, Skid underwent a surprise attack from the inhabitants of Celcious B, a warlike race from a nearby planet.

For generations Skid had held a stranglehold on universal food and industrial production, thereby keeping the rest of the system firmly under its control. This attack was retaliation for centuries of oppression, and it nearly succeeded. Skid's population had been decimated in the attack, its cities reduced to smoking ruins, its landscape completely rearranged by weapons too awesome to contemplate.

Luckily for what remained of Skid after the attack. In what had been a belated attempt to protect what was left of their environment after aeons of ecological rape, all industry had been relocated to sites below the oceans and was largely untouched during the assault and the population had been confined to several enormous urban areas.

The Celcions may have wreaked havoc on the planet's surface, but Skid's industrial and military might remained virtually intact. The Skidian survivors retaliated by completely decimating Celcious B. Industrial areas were flattened, intellectuals hounded and executed, schools and hospitals closed, books burned, until the Celcions were reduced from a once proud people to beggars existing on handouts from Skid. Stripped of potential leaders and technocrats, the Celcions were reduced to squatting about staging zones like a planet of cargo cultists or welfare beneficiaries waiting for the next handout.

Bruce wondered how super efficient the super efficient Skidians had really been on Celcious B. How long ago did all this happen? The date on the notes was meaningless to Bruce, and his book couldn't or wouldn't say. It was as though a block had been put on any historical information. All he had was this minute fragment and heaps of questions.

Why weren't the Skidians interested in history? Bruce recalled Yarad's observations and realized that such interest must be actively discouraged, as if a call had gone out from somewhere at some point in time that the past had ceased to exist. Didn't they ever question their origins; wonder where it was they came from? Maybe a Skidian religion provided some kind of psychological buffer against the unknown and incomprehensible? The book was disappointingly mute on this subject as well, saying only that the incumbent leader, in this case Inel, was the spiritual and secular leader of the planet. In other words, he's the god, thought Bruce.

It was sobering thought to realize that while on earth advances in technology were being greeted as a means of freeing whole populations from the drudgery of work and to enhance democracy and nationalistic objectives, here on Skid the exact opposite was happening. Skid

was a technological dictatorship; it was almost a wonder that computers or robots had not taken over completely because the place could obviously tick over without any Skidian involvement.

Bruce's thoughts strayed again to the unknown author of the account he had read, which ended by saying that Skid had paid an extraordinary high price for its victory. The planet's surface was covered with ash and other debris, barely a building was left standing, or a living organism remained. On this note the account finished. Unsigned. Had its anonymous author survived?

As the center had been interred, Bruce thought it was likely the person had died there somewhere. "What away to go," Bruce muttered, his own fate paling into insignificance. At least he was still alive.

As Bruce finished reading Sue reappeared from wherever she had taken herself off to. "Here have a look at this." He shoved the notes across to her. Moodily he rose from the table and leaned against the rail surrounding the patio, gazing out over jumble of houses that surrounded them. After several minutes, he turned to the table, poured himself some more coffee, and rolled himself a cigarette.

"Do you mind?" Sue snapped.

"Look, if you don't like my habits then you can just bugger off. This is my space." Bruce wasn't about to take any shit from Sue.

Sue bowed her head, and made a big issue out of waving the smoke away, as fat, silent tears rolled off her chin and made little pools of moisture on the table that Bruce did not even notice.

A scenic tour

The rest of the day passed excruciatingly slowly for the both of them. Sue failed to convince Bruce that a walk around the neighborhood might be a good idea. She finally trotted off by herself, only to return quickly, remarking that she did not feel safe out alone.

Bruce did not take the hint, which left Sue wondering why he was being so unreasonable. For his part, he did not see why he should do something just because Sue wanted him to. Would she jump into bed with him just because he thought it was a good idea?

Cyprus did not appear, so Bruce spent his time, drinking too much coffee, smoking too many cigarettes, and becoming more irritable as time went on. At length it occurred to him to watch TV and he spent a few happy hours watching Stim games, amply supplied by Leaf with beer. However, after a few hours of continuous games the novelty had mostly worn off.

Sue showed some interest in Stim and Bruce tried to explain the game to her, unsuccessfully. It soon became apparent she was just as bored as he was. Her references to the fact that Stim, rugby, or whatever the game was called looked like a bastardized form of American football, and Bruce's towering rage at this comment, undoubtedly contributed to her making herself scarce for a while.

While she tentatively began to explore the surrounding area, Bruce was content to remain slothful. Why worry? There was plenty of time. All the time in the world to look around the city. The whole planet, for that matter.

Sue took the dogs with her, or once they were off, the dogs took her on a search and snuffle mission. For protection, she said, though the only Skidian that they came into contact with, was Leaf. The surrounding area was empty of Skidians, as if they were in quarantine. Bruce suspected that they weren't in quarantine at all, it was just that the Skidians probably spent most of their time roaming the beltway tunnels beneath their homes looking for something to do all day.

After a day's inactivity, when Cyprus had not shown up for the second morning in a row as he had promised, Bruce decided he'd had enough. Spurring himself into gear he announced after a late breakfast that he was off for a wander around. His only problem was, was that he didn't really want to go off by himself.

Rather than admit this to Sue, he intimated instead that she might like to accompany him while he exercised the dogs.

They had barely left the house when an aircraft landed noiselessly beside them and the large, shambling figure of Sideshow emerged and waddled over.

"Hello," Bruce greeted her politely enough. "What are you up to? Are your plants growing yet?" Sideshow halted in her tracks and Bruce continued to snipe at her.

"Going for a walk eh? Do you good. Nice day for it, eh?" Let her catch up if she could. He was off.

"Where are you going?" Sideshow wheezed, as she chased after him.

"There and back to see how far it is," Bruce chuckled facetiously, increasing his pace and leaving the two women behind.

"I think she wants to talk to us," Sue bleated. "Do you have to walk so fast?" Sue had an irritating habit of pointing out the obvious which got right up his nose.

"Geesh woman, you've been on at me to go for a walk, and just when we get started you want to stop. Make your bloody mind up, will you?" Sideshow gawped at the offworlders and wondered what had upset them now.

"Come on."

"Bruce!" Sue shrieked worried that Sideshow might take offence.

"What?" he asked innocently. "Oh all right. Don't wet your pants about it." Bruce thought he had made his point whatever it was. Sideshow waddled up to them and took a minute or so to get her breathing under control. She was not used to any form of exercise and the brief chase had left her quite breathless.

"I have been instructed by Toytoo to conduct you on a tour of Skid today," she wheezed unhappily. Toytoo should have sent someone else; this sort of errand was an indignity for one of her seniority.

"Sounds ok to me. What do you think, Sue?" Bruce thought Cyprus should have been taking him on a tour, "mind you he also said he'd do that yesterday," he muttered. Sue shrugged her shoulders as if she could not care less. Well, she probably didn't have to come if she didn't want to Bruce decided.

"Ok Sideshow, I'll come, but I don't know about Sue. Come on Punch, get up." Bruce grabbed Punch by the scruff of his neck and threw him onto the floor of the aircraft where he cowered until it lifted off. The other two jumped in behind Bruce looking quite pleased with themselves. Like their boss, they did not believe in walking where they could ride. Sue did not really want to get in the aircraft, but given a choice between being left alone on the street and

having some company, no matter how unfriendly, she decided on the latter.

"Are we going to pick up Toytoo or Cyprus?" Bruce asked as the aircraft left Sietnuoc behind and headed out over the 'wilderness.' "Get out of it, Cop." Cop propped his front paws up on the rear of Bruce's seat to get a better view and was slobbering into his ear. Bruce twisted in his seat and slapped the dog away. Cop was nothing if not a persistent fellow, he simply moved across to the pilot's side of the cockpit where the window was partially open. Slobbering over Myfair's neck, who was again their pilot, while poking his head out into the slipstream was doggy bliss for Cop.

Neither Sideshow nor Myfair deigned to answer Bruce's question. Myfair had been detailed to fly the offworlders about, and that's what he intended to do, Sideshow felt pretty much the same and was soon snoring loudly on a couch at the rear of the aircraft.

Nobody had told Myfair where to fly, so he just flew away in the direction he had started. When he reached the limit the aircraft's range he would simply turn around and fly back again. That was the Skidian way and Myfair could not take it upon himself to do anything else, despite being considered a bit of a rebel.

The whole exercise was undertaken with a lethargic disinterest which disconcerted Bruce. Didn't these people have any concern for the future of their planet, their own futures? Or was this air of detachment studied, a cover for some other emotion that he was too insensitive to discern?

"Can we go down for a closer look? Land, maybe?" Bruce pointed down as they flew over a great herd of ivops. With a shrug of his shoulders, as if it were a great imposition, Myfair landed the craft amongst the great herd of ivops.

The ivops meandered out of the way quite unconcerned at the intruder dropping into their midst. A few of them glanced up without curiosity as Bruce disembarked, and then resumed their grazing like a herd of satisfied dairy cows. Bruce stroked the nose of the nearest ivop, which after initially shying away, submitted to the caresses and then began to lick at his fingers with its rasp like tongue. The rough massaging of his fingers sent a sensual tingle up Bruce's spine that made him shiver.

If these animals had endured whatever holocaust had befallen Skid in the past, then Bruce decided they must be incredibly tough creatures. This massive herd alone must have contained thousands if not hundreds of thousands of members. Perhaps the great herds of bison that had once roamed the American west were of a similar imposing size. It was a huge untapped source of food if the Skidians wanted to harvest it.

Bruce called the dogs out and set them about the ivops. In response to the barking and nipping at their heels, the ivops began to move, slowly rising to a trot, then suddenly stopping in their tracks as if they had decided there was no need to panic and that the dogs could not hurt them.

"Plenty of feed here," Bruce said, mostly to himself. "Plenty for you to eat as well," he told Myfair as he retook his seat.

Neither Myfair nor Sideshow showed any interest in what he had to say, preferring instead to gaze haughtily from their respective windows. Sideshow because she still considered that showing the offworlders around Skid was a task beneath her and an unnecessary one to boot. Myfair was far more interested in his next patrol mission to the far reaches of the universe. By the time he was scheduled to return Skid's fate would be sealed one way or another.

"But they're alive, Bruce," Sue pointed out, "and anyway, how do you know we can eat them?" Apparently Sue wasn't keen on the idea of ivop meat either.

"No worries. I'll try it out on the dogs first." Bruce regarded them for a moment, picking his nose thoughtfully, unaware that Sue did not find his logic reassuring.

Still neither of the Skidians made any comment, though Bruce thought the disapproving look on Sideshow's face meant that there was no way she would eat any part of an Ivop either,

no matter how hungry she got. Well she'd learn Bruce thought either that or she'd fade away to a shadow.

		<p>"Is that it?" Bruce wanted to know, soon after as Myfair landed outside the house. All they'd been shown was a vast herd of ivops that they accidentally stumbled on and very little else.</p>
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"Yes," Sideshow replied before they got off the aircraft, "and now we expect you to go to work and provide us with food."

"I don't get it." Bruce was more than a little confused; it didn't seem to have occurred to the Skidians to let him know exactly what they wanted from him, unless that was also up to him. So without even recognizing it, Bruce and the Skidians were at cross-purposes right from the beginning. Bruce waited for some operational guidelines, while the Skidians waited for him to do whatever he was going to do. That was the way of things on Skid.

"You know Sue, I get the impression these people don't really give a shit about their problems. It's as if they expect someone else, meaning us, I suppose, to sort things out for them."

Sue shrugged her shoulders apathetically. "I'm sure you're right." Sue was just trying to be agreeable; she was not showing much enthusiasm either.

What's really going on here? Bruce asked himself, reviewing what he knew about Skid, which wasn't much. Nobody appeared to do a hell of a lot of work, or anything for that matter. Even Leaf had a variety of drones that did most of the work around the house. The washing, cleaning, and carting food and drink around. An entire society that had done away with work appeared quite attractive, yet the Skidians had been programmed to live in great cities, apparently doing virtually nothing with themselves.

"I suppose there's not a lot of point living in the country if there's no food to grow," Bruce mused. So why wasn't the wilderness used for fishing, hunting, tramping, and other outdoor pursuits? Surely there were better things to do than sit under a shady tree, wander around the beltway all day in case an accident happened, or watch Stim games.

Bruce started to wonder how the hell was he going to hack the place. The thought of spending the rest of his days here simply doing nothing wasn't exactly enthralling. The future loomed before him, like a long, dark tunnel with no light at the end. At least I'm still alive. Got to be thankful for something, I suppose Bruce thought as he walked into the house.

"Beer," he yelled hard enough for Leaf to hear in the kitchen as he collapsed into a chair. It was not really a kitchen, more of a food reception room really, for nothing was cooked or prepared there. All food and drink was reticulated to the house through a series of pipes, like town supply water was at home. You only had to press a button and food was ejaculated from a dispenser like toothpaste from the tap.

Leaf appeared with a large jug and carefully poured out two glasses, handing one to Bruce. He gulped most of the glass in one mouthful and belched contentedly.

"Ah, that was good," he sighed, leaning back and closing his eyes.

"Cheers!" Sue said, slipping into the chair alongside.

"Up yours. Transport, how and what?" he demanded of his book. It suddenly seemed imperative to him to have his own wheels so he could just bugger off when he felt like it, giving him an illusion of independence at least.

"Personal transportation is available on request."

"What sort?"

"Ground vehicles or aircraft?"

"Describe a ground vehicle for me." The book regurgitated a mass of technical data that lost Bruce after the first sentence. "Can I have one? " Was all he wanted to know.

"Certainly sir. I will see one is supplied forthwith." It was apparently as easy as that.

"You know, Sue, this place really baffles me." Bruce considered the book. "You can't get any sense at all out of the Skidians, but this book thing is a real mine of info." He took another swig from the glass that Leaf had replenished. "It baffles me, you know," he repeated inanely, unruffled by Leaf's presence. He paused and Sue had to wait several moments for his next gem of insight. "I know we haven't been here long, and for sure we don't know even a small part of what goes on here. But there's something really weird going on"

"How do you mean?" Sue asked, groaning inwardly. Not this again.

"Well, for instance, if you were faced by the prospect of famine, wouldn't you be trying to do something about it?"

"Yeah. I suppose so," Sue conceded, not having given the matter much thought. "Right, so the Skidians," Bruce was warming himself up, " race off down to Earth in their spaceship, pick us up, tell us they need our help, and then practically abandon us. Interesting, eh?"

"But at least they have tried, even if they don't know what they're trying to do. You have got to give them that much credit. Perhaps they don't know what sort of help they want from us."

"What? So why bother us in the first place? Shit for brains, that's all I can say. What are we doing here, then?"

"I'm not sure, yet," Sue replied thoughtfully. "But one thing's for certain, I'm not going to sit on my backside and feel sorry for myself." Bruce realized Sue was pretending to be assertive. Occasionally she gave the impression she was going to be her own woman. However, Bruce could see right through her. If she was so tough why couldn't she cope with living by herself? He yawned and decided that he'd rather watch television, even Skidian television, than talk to Sue.

Games people play

Before Bruce had managed to get comfortable in front of the television Leaf ushered Cyprus into the room.

"Hrrmph!" Cyprus cleared his throat to attract Bruce's attention, who, thinking it was only Sue, ignored him. "Bruce." Cyprus tried again.

"Yes," said Bruce, turning his head.

"Are you serious about wishing to be involved in a Stim event?" He asked.

"Sure. When? Now?"

"The Murd organization with which I have an association is having a trial today and have agreed to let you be involved."

"Yep, certainly."

"May I come too?" Sue asked diffidently. Bruce couldn't think why she would want to, given her obvious lack of interest in the game. It did not occur to Bruce that although Sue thought he was an ill-mannered, insensitive, oaf, she might be terrified at the prospect of letting him out of her sight. She was scared to death at the prospect of being left by herself at the mercy of the Skidians.

"If it pleases you." Cyprus did not seem to care what Sue did either way.

To Bruce's surprise the stadium was almost full for the game, which he hadn't expected seeing as though it was just a trial match.

Bruce met the team he was to play for and their coach in the dressing room. Nobody said much to him, though the coach did wish him well and pointed him in the direction of a locker.

Maybe they were just shy or something Bruce thought. Inside the locker hung a jersey with a number nine on the back. How can they have known that? Bruce wondered, pulling it over his head.

The team talk wasn't stirring, nor was the team plan revealed to him. Bruce thought the others must have it down pat and had simply omitted to tell him, that seemed to be the Skidian way. There were no last minute dissemination of the opposition's known strengths and weaknesses. Nothing.

Nor did the coach bring the team to a fever pitch of excitement, incite them to go out and take the opposition apart or give them license to commit mayhem or murder, as some of Bruce's earthbound coaches had been prone to do for motivational purposes.

It struck Bruce that the team was just going to go through the motions. There wasn't any tension or pent up excitement apparent in the men around him. None of them looked particularly fit, or athletic for that matter either, and the opposition team, when they trotted out onto the field, looked equally unimpressive, though they were certainly big. Still, he felt the adrenaline pumping through his own veins, and was looking forward to working out some of his pent up frustrations and anger on the field.

Bruce's team had apparently lost the toss, and after a brief discussion that he couldn't follow the ball was thrown in his direction, apparently so that he could kick off and start the game.

Bruce placed the ball on a plastic tee and kicked out to where his forwards were grouped. The ball rose into the air and dropped neatly into the hands of one of the charging opposition players, who promptly stopped in surprise, as if someone had dropped a bomb in his lap.

Bruce raced across the field to the maul that formed, arriving as the ball popped out and rolled across the ground towards him. His first pass was a real ripper, missing out the stunned first five, landing in the hands of an equally stunned center, who then spoilt a wonderful attacking chance by running straight into the arms of his opposite number.

The two sets of forwards lumbered across the field to the breakdown, while the backs struggled with each other on the ground.

"Bloody hell, get in there, use your feet!" Bruce shouted frantically and was about to ruck the ball out with his foot when the referee blew his whistle.

"Scrum it. You. Watch your language!" He pointed a finger at Bruce. "Black ball." "Eh?"

This wasn't a game of rugby. It was a joke. Bruce fed the scrum which had formed midway between the opposition twenty two and halfway, calling, "weight," as he rolled the ball beneath the hooker's feet. The scrum didn't move an inch. Bruce skipped around the base of it as his number eight picked up the cleanly hooked ball and ran forward. As the opposition loosies went to tackle him, he turned his back in copybook fashion for his own forwards to group on him and drive. The slow motion dance disgusted Bruce. He leapt into the collapsing maul, wrenched out the ball, feinted to the left, ran right over two or three players, and then sprinted for the try line, touching down between the posts.

"Peep!" went the ref's whistle as Bruce trotted back with the ball to kick the conversion, just as the ref ordered a penalty where the scrum had been.

"What the hell?" Bruce couldn't believe it, and kicked the ball away in disgust. Penalized for over vigorous play! What a load of shit! These Skidians were just a bunch of big girls. Bruce stopped in his tracks, realizing the players from both teams were staring at him. Bruce was even more disconcerted to see that a complete hush had fallen over the crowd, and he felt as if every eye in the place were upon him, thousands of them.

He shrugged in the uneasy silence, half-afraid the spectators might pour onto the field and rip him apart in response to his misdemeanor. When they didn't he relaxed, failing to register the excited buzz that spread around the stadium like a Mexican wave.

Bruce continued his aggressive approach to the game with each of his runs or tackles

greeted by a huge roar from the crowd. Just before half time the referee gave Bruce another warning for over vigorous play after he punched an opponent who had the misfortune to try to tackle him when he didn't have the ball.

"One more warning and you're off," the referee informed him in no uncertain terms.

None of his fellow team members looked at Bruce, let alone spoke to him at half time and he was left wondering what he had done wrong. After all he'd scored two tries, set up several others, and tackled like a man possessed.

To his disgust, just minutes into the second half, the referee sent him off. The sending off was especially perplexing as he had just made a try saving tackle.

The opposition had won the ball from a scrum and the ball had been passed out to the backs. The fullback had lumbered up inside the wing to make an extra man, had received the ball, and plodded on in the general direction of the goal line. Bruce couldn't believe it when his team just watched the man run. He sprinted across the field, felling the fullback just short of the try line. The ball spilled forward from the fullback's arms and Bruce pounced on it, got to his feet, and booted it up field.

A brilliant save, Bruce congratulated himself as the crowd roared. The referee ran up and ordered him from the field with an unmistakable gesture towards the stand that Bruce didn't even bother to argue with.

"You're just a dork!" Bruce told him in no uncertain terms.

As he made his way across the field the crowd began to boo loudly and various missiles began to rain down from the stands. They sounded like a circus crowd that had been deprived of a new and bloody spectacle. Bruce started to run, hoping to make the comparative safety of the changing rooms before he got lynched. At the entrance of the tunnel that led under the stand, Bruce turned to give the ref the fingers. However, the referee had been struck by a missile was being carried from the field on a stretcher.

Bruce counted his lucky stars that he'd got away, unaware that his dismissal from the game had incited the sort of diversionary riot that Stim had been originally designed to create by long forgotten Skidian social engineers .

Unwittingly Bruce had achieved this by playing Stim in the fashion intended by its creators, a fashion that had been absent from the game for more years than could be remembered. Thanks to Bruce and the baying of the crowd, it was now back in style.

Bruce didn't stick around to watch the remainder of the game, he wasn't interested in just watching.

Cyprus eased his disappointment by saying his dismissal had been unjustified and that he was most embarrassed it had happened. The problem was, he explained, that Tutsi, Inel's youngest son was playing for the opposition side hoping to regain his place in the senior team after recovering from an injury.

"And I tackled him."

"That is correct."

Bruce wondered, as Cyprus apologized profusely at the indignity of his being sent off, whether he had been tested in some fashion, and whether he had passed.

Cyprus, on the other hand, was more than a little disconcerted by Bruce's performance. He had expected Bruce to be easily contained by the admittedly second rate players, and chopped down to size. It was an awed Skidian that witnessed Bruce take over the Stim event virtually single-handed. Cyprus hoped Bruce would accept his feeble attempt to save face, and resolved to keep him from the Stim field in future so that the flower of Skidian manhood could not be so embarrassed again. The event adjudicator would have to be rewarded for his unwitting cooperation in removing Bruce from the event, if he ever recovered from the injuries inflicted by the crowd.

Sue didn't hide the fact that she was impressed with Bruce's athletic prowess, commenting more than once on the short journey home that he'd do much better if he didn't smoke and

drink so much. Bruce smiled modestly as Sue's admiration caught him off guard.

"I'm not very good really. Those other jokers were just bloody useless, that's all."

"You were impressive. I am sure the Murd coach will want to talk to you soon about playing for them," Cyprus lied before turning to Sue for a second opinion.

"Is that how you play Stim on your planet?"

"I've never seen this game before. It looks to me like a perverted version of....." Sue knew she had said the wrong thing as soon as the words left her mouth.

"I have already explained to you once, you stupid bitch!" Bruce hissed, not wanting to make a scene in front of Cyprus. "That's what pisses me off about you insular, ignorant bastards. American football is a perverted form of rugby," he snarled.

"There's no need to be nasty about it!" Sue ran off unsteadily along the beltway to put as much distance between herself and Bruce as possible.

"It's difficult to explain, Cyprus," Bruce replied struggling to regain his composure. "Where I come from, like Skid, it's the most important game we play. However, it's not a major sport on our planet. We also generally play it with a lot more vigor than you seem to."

Cyprus assimilated this unlikely explanation and then asked: "Then what is the most important event on your planet?" For Skidians, Stim was not a game, it was more a religious celebration.

"Soccer."

"Explain this soccer to me," Cyprus demanded, becoming confused.

"It's a game played with a round ball," Bruce traced the shape in the air with a finger. "Instead of holding the ball or carrying it, you play it with the feet and kick it. The game is played on a field roughly the size of a Stim field and the aim is to get the ball through the area below the crossbar on a set of Stim goal posts. Understand?"

"Yes," Cyprus nodded. "It sounds like a very complex game to play," he added, trying to picture what the event would look like. "How did Stim develop from this event?" Cyprus wondered how some unwitting Skidian had introduced the game to the offworlder's planet. That was the only explanation he could think of for the event developing anywhere else.

"Oh, easy." Bruce was sure of his folklore. "One day at a school called Rugby a boy called William Webb Ellis picked up a soccer ball and ran with it, so the game was called rugby."

"How did Stim develop on Skid?" Bruce asked, but he should have known better.

"Oh, I don't know," Cyprus frowned and shook his head, changing the subject. "We must be going."

What a moody shit, thought Bruce as they popped up in front of the house again.

Bruce couldn't really have cared less about Stim, Sue, Cyprus, or anything else on Skid for that matter, especially when they got back home and found a set of wheels parked by the house. He wasn't surprised that it looked like a very close copy of the ute probably still parked in the shed back home.

Bruce walked around the vehicle, nudging the tires experimentally with his big toe, peering into the cab and then finally sliding in behind the wheel. He turned the ignition key, but the only indication that anything was happening was the ignition light going out.

He depressed the clutch, engaged first gear, and released the clutch. To his surprise the utility moved forward. Bruce had wondered for a moment if the Skidians had thought to put an engine under the hood or whether they expected him to paddle it along like a Fred Flintstones type car.

"Hmm." Bruce pulled the gear lever into neutral and pulled the bonnet catch so he could check out the engine.

"Hello!" He found to his surprise there wasn't one.

Instead, suspended by several struts in the large engine bay, designed millions of miles

away, and usually occupied by a six or eight cylinder donk, was a small cylinder, the shape and size of a half gallon beer flagon. A shaft ran from the neck of the cylinder back to what Bruce supposed was some form of transmission system. He crawled underneath the ute and had a look there. No exhaust, no gearbox, no fuel line. Nothing. Just a shaft running back to the rear differential.

Oh well, Bruce decided, I don't need to know how it works as long as it does. He could hear his father's voice roaring at him. "If you don't understand it leave the bloody thing alone, boy!" Bruce had always had the knack of pulling things apart, but was not as clever at putting them back together again.

"Want to come for a test run?" Bruce asked Sue, whose inquisitiveness had got the better of her, though she would rather not have had anything to do with Bruce for a while.

"As long as you promise to drive carefully. Where shall we go?"

"Oh, I don't know, let's just go," Bruce replied, wondering why he put up with the stupid woman. How did he know where he was going?

"What if you get lost?"

"Don't worry about it. Look, are you coming or not? Because I'm off now!"

"Hang on!" Sue rushed into the house while Bruce drummed his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel. "Come on, come on!" He muttered under his breath and was just about to take off without her when he decided he might as well let the dogs off for a run.

Travel was one of the dog's favorite pastimes. Cop paused to cock his leg on the driver's side to show the world who really owned the ute before joining Can and Punch on the back. Can and Punch impatiently barked, 'Come on, we're ready to go!'

Sue skipped down the steps at last and went round to open up the driver's side door.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?"

"Oh." Sue peered into the cab. "The steering wheel's on the wrong side."

"Rubbish, you're just used to driving on the wrong side of the road." Bruce pushed her out of the way, banging on the roof in an attempt to quiet the dogs. Then he slid behind the wheel again, started the motor, engaged reverse gear, and roared backwards onto the street. Well it would have been a roar except that this ute didn't have an internal combustion engine or a leaky muffler.

Once on the road, Bruce shifted into first gear and dropped the clutch while pressing firmly on the throttle with his right foot. The ute's rear fishtailed as the tires spun and then caught on the road's surface, throwing Sue around and forcing her to grab the door handle for support.

On the back the dogs barked their approval.

"Be careful," Sue gasped, as Bruce accelerated off down the left hand side of the road. "You're on the wrong side of the road!" She screamed, throwing her hands up in an effort to protect herself from the accident that was surely about to happen at any moment.

"No I'm not."

"How do you know?"

"Dunno. Ask your book. I presume you brought it?" snapped Bruce. Why couldn't she just keep her mouth shut?

"Very good Bruce. Start driving and then find out about the road rules. Real bright."

"Do you want to come with me or not?" Bruce demanded, slowing and pulling to the side of the road, prepared to let her out if that's what she wanted.

"Pedestrians have the right of way at all times," was the extent of Skid's road rules leaving Bruce none the wiser about what side of the road to drive on.

In an instant the road suddenly became alive with Skidians as if they'd all poured out from their homes on cue to catch the greatest show in town, to stare at the strange looking vehicle driving past.

Skidians everywhere, more than Bruce or Sue had seen at anyone time except at the Stim

stadium. Walking along the footpath, all over the road, sitting under trees, on chairs in little groups, young Skidians chasing each other around, all wearing the uniform long white robes.

All of them stopped whatever they had suddenly found to do to watch the ute roll past. Following it with their eyes, faces devoid of any expression. Nobody smiled or waved, and a sinister hostility pervaded the atmosphere, as if the two offworlders had stumbled into some forbidden zone. They would be unknown here. The Skidians they had met, Cyprus and the others, hadn't said anything about not showing themselves, but Bruce reckoned they wouldn't have let on about their presence either.

"Bugger this," Bruce decided aloud. "How do we get out of this place?" The book on the seat regurgitated directions and soon they had stopped circling through the streets and were headed back past the house into the countryside.

"What about a trip to that resource center?" The book spat out directions, travel times and an ETA. "Better leave it for tomorrow," suggested Bruce, realizing that the trip would take several hours and it was getting late in the day. Without further consultation he swung the ute around and headed back home, much to the disgust of Sue, who wanted to continue to look around. At what she would not say, so not surprisingly Bruce didn't feel particularly helpful.

They found the house surrounded by hundreds of Skidians, sitting, lying, or standing about the lawn, chattering in small groups on the road. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason for this activity. They could have been just inquisitive, or perhaps rent a mob. None of them batted an eyelid as the ute drew up outside the house and the two offworlders got out.

The Skidians hung around for ages, the more adventurous of them peering through the windows or knocking on the door before running off quickly as if to irritate the offworlders. If Bruce found this sort of behavior disconcerting, Sue was absolutely terrified by it.

"I can't handle this, Bruce. They're driving me crazy!" She was worried that the crowd might turn into something more ugly and had conjured up visions of a lynch mob.

"I hate it as well, all these people moping around with nothing to do. The first thing I'm going to do is organize a place to stay, out in the country somewhere." He did not make it plain to Sue whether she was welcome to join him.

"Bugger off, ya bastards!" He finally yelled out the door feeling uncomfortably like a goldfish, "can't a man have any bloody privacy round here?"

The Skidians seemed to get the message, for they slowly dispersed.

"I've always harbored this dream of being a pioneer, braving the wilds, hacking a farm out of the bush," Bruce mused, as he watched them leave in ones and twos, "and here, millions of miles from home it looks as if I might get my chance."

"Oh that sounds so romantic. A man and a woman against the land!" Sue gushed, in the mistaken belief that Bruce might have included her in his fantasy. Another thought struck Bruce. A thunderbolt, so obvious that he wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. "You know, that could be just what the Skidians want."

"Eh? How do you mean?"

"The Skidians want us to help them, but for some reason best known to themselves they aren't comfortable with coming out and pointing us in the right direction. Right?"

"Yeah, Bruce, we've gone over all that before and couldn't work out what we should be doing," Sue yawned. "So you reckon you've worked out what they want?"

"Not really," he confessed, "but we've got to come up with a solution to help them out with their famine, or." He drew his hand dramatically across his throat.

"What really gets me, though, is why they just don't come out and tell us what they want," said Sue. "Maybe it's too difficult for them to admit they are in trouble, perhaps impossible for them to admit they're in trouble."

"Things aren't always as clear cut as you'd like to think Sue. It might just be some sort of cultural trait." Bruce scratched his nose. "Anyway, I reckon if I want to build myself a house out in the country, and start off a bit of a farm, the Skidians will let me, even encourage me to

go ahead." It was more a hunch than a reasoned conclusion, but Bruce was sure he was right. It was what he thought he should be doing anyway.

"Tomorrow I'm going to look for a house site, maybe after visiting the research center again." With that Bruce went off in search of Leaf.

Left alone, Sue tried to work out if she figured in Bruce's plans, and considered her options if she were not. With a sob she curled up in the chair and hid her face in her hands, bemoaning her fate and trying to work out why life always seemed to be so unfair to her.

The pioneering spirit

Much to her distress, Leaf was rudely awakened at the crack of dawn to provide what passed for breakfast on Skid and then prepared a lunch that she couldn't believe the offworlders really wanted. Who had ever heard of taking food out into the wilderness let alone eating out there?

Bruce had hoped they could be away before any of the Skidians turned up to annoy them, like Sideshow or Cyprus. However, the women conspired separately to delay him.

"C'mon, lets get a wriggle on!" Bruce yelled at Sue, who was still half-asleep and dawdling. He presumed she wanted to come with him.

"Bloody typical!" Bruce cursed under his breath "I'll bugger off without you if you don't hurry up."

The dogs had started barking as soon as the house lights came on, sensing that an early start to the day meant that something interesting was on. Mad with excitement they tore around the yard a few times after Bruce let them out of their kennels, then completed their morning ablutions on the wheels and the deck of the ute.

"You grubby bastards," Bruce scolded them to little effect, ripping a branch off the nearest shrub to wipe the deck clean. Then he walked back inside, picked up the hamper that Leaf had packed, and stuck on the back of the ute hoping it was dog proof.

Sue finally deigned to make an appearance just as the sun peeped over the horizon. She had spent a fairly long time debating just how one should prepare oneself for a foray into the unknown, collecting, with the help of her book, a pile of essential survival equipment. Contemplating the heap on her bedroom floor that had appeared out of nowhere she realized that Bruce would not be impressed. She decided to live dangerously for once, copying his studied casualness and skipped out doors with her book, wearing one of the Skidian robes over her shorts and 't' shirt for fear of offending any Skidians that might be about, and a hat to keep the sun off her.

The streets of Sietnuoc were empty at this time of the morning, and it was only as they left the city that an inquisitive head popped up from behind a hedge, betraying any sign of life.

Bruce drove slowly through the long grass once the road petered out at the city boundary, expecting to encounter rocks, logs, or other hidden obstacles at any moment that would impede their progress.

After hitting nothing after half an hour's travel, Bruce decided it was safe enough to increase speed through the bonnet-high grass that rolled away to the horizon and beyond.

Bruce imagined that the great plains of earth must have looked like the Skidian one they were rolling over until man ploughed them under, replacing the native grasses with more productive species and arable crops. Before the soil was blown away because of his mismanagement. Until man had slaughtered the animals that had once roamed free across them and built his fences and buildings, marring and changing the plains forever in his eternal quest for wealth, land, and power.

Beside him Sue was almost silent on the outward journey. Bruce thought he must have offended her again, and being the sensitive chap that he was, tried to be companionable.

"Does the wild west look a bit like this, Sue? You know, where the buffalo don't roam and the skies are cloudy all day."

Sue pondered the question for a moment. "Parts of it might, but I haven't seen much of it, so I can't really say. But it's beautiful isn't it?"

Like most things about Skid, Bruce didn't really appreciate the view. As far as he was concerned, Skid compared unfavorably with what he was used to. Forest-clad hills, sheep-dotted paddocks, the influence of man and the raw beauty of the Kiwi countryside.

After a while they passed through the fringes of a vast ivop herd. Bruce yelled, tooted the horn, nudged them in the backside with the ute's front bumper, and slapped his hand on the door. Nevertheless, none of them bothered to move themselves. Only when he set the dogs on them did they reluctantly move enough to let the ute through.

"Piss poor bloody country really, there's no hills for a start, and it all looks the same," Bruce muttered, as he eased through the gaps left by the ivops.

"Oh, I think it's simply wonderful," Sue gushed enthusiastically.

"Really?" Bruce raised his eyebrows in mock astonishment. "Bugger that!" he muttered as he stopped to let the dogs up. Punch scrambled up onto the bonnet and scratched his way over the windscreen and roof to the deck, leaving long claw marks on the paintwork. "Ya bloody idiot Punch!" Bruce didn't bother to get out and give him a whack over the head for scratching the paintwork. Despite his immense size, Punch was really only a pup and didn't know any better. Besides the ute would get knocked about pretty quickly, it was only the first scratch or ding that hurt.

"The scenery can't be up to much around your way, then," Bruce said derisively. Forgetting that he was supposed to be nice to Sue who responded to the comment by starting to cry again.

Suddenly, after breasting a low hill, they were looking down upon the resource center. As they drew up, Yarad was waiting to greet them, as if he had been expecting their arrival. Was nothing secret here? Bruce wondered.

"Greetings sir," Yarad said, ignoring Sue completely. "It is a rare occasion that I receive visitors."

"Giddyay," replied Bruce sympathetically, knowing what it was like to live in the middle of nowhere, supposedly too far out in the sticks for visitors. Although he was still expected to drive hours to go and visit someone lest he be castigated for becoming a hermit.

"How is it?"

Yarad shrugged his shoulders. "I make slow progress, I'm afraid. The relics and archives I have found here, while in good condition, are over five thousand years old, so I have much difficulty in discerning their meaning and significance." Yarad sighed as though he carried the weight of the planet's woes firmly on his shoulders. Which in a way he did. "And of course there is little interest taken in my work by our leaders, so." He sighed again, and blinked as if he might have said too much. "Nobody else is much interested in my work."

"Maybe we can help you," Sue suggested, feeling sorry for him.

"Any assistance you could provide would be most gratefully appreciated, sir." In the face of this obvious snub, Sue looked like she might break down and cry again. The whole world seemed to be against her at the moment. She pushed past Yarad and went down the stairs and into the building.

"Yeah, no worries mate. Let's have a look around." Bruce made to follow Sue. "I'll see what I can do for you later." Yarad followed Bruce down the steps chattering away as if he spent a lot of time by himself, but not saying much of substance. But then what Skidian did?

"Unfortunately it will require greater understanding than I possess to unravel more than a few of the mysteries." Yarad wrung his hands modestly, pleading for help or a little company with his eyes.

"Seems straightforward to me, mate," said Bruce, prepared to answer a few questions if that would get Yarad off his back. Bruce picked up a small sachet from a box someone, Yarad probably, had brought into the reception area. The sachet was still sealed and marked 'peas'.

Bruce ripped it open and tipped some of the seeds into his palm. The contents did indeed resemble pea seeds. Bruce dropped them back into the sachet and handed it to Yarad.

"Take these, mate. Push them into the soil, about this deep and this far apart." Bruce suggested with his hands. "With each of these objects we call seeds place a marker so you know where they are. Ok?" Yarad nodded, eyeing the sachet and seeds in his hand suspiciously.

What sort of insanity was this? Was Bruce making a mockery of him?

"Each day sprinkle a few spoonfuls of water over each seed." Yarad nodded again, wondering what a spoonful was. Bruce grinned encouragingly. "Good, I'm sure that in time this little exercise will help you towards greater understanding." Bruce was sure he had explained thoroughly how to plant the seeds. Yarad was now more confused than he had ever been, and was even more incredulous when Bruce said that he would be able to eat the seeds at a later date.

"Do the offworlders think we're stupid?" Yarad muttered, as Bruce walked away, leaving him holding the seeds. Yarad flung the sachet into a corner sending peas rolling across the floor like miniature runaway cannonballs, and stomped off towards his living quarters.

Bruce plodded around the storerooms poking, prodding, and turning over vaguely familiar objects in his hands. He checked sharpened edges, hefted others for weight or balance, turned knobs, and peered into large open spaces where an engine might normally be positioned.

He mentioned this to Sue, who had wandered in from wherever she had been scratching around. "Real frontier stuff," she agreed, trying to sound intelligent.

"It must have been a tough existence on this planet in the old days."

"Geez Wayne!" Bruce muttered pityingly. Sue wasn't going to be much help to him at all. He wondered what her cooking was like.

"How are we going to get what equipment we need out of this place to where we want to use it?" Sue asked, attempting to sound interested, knowledgeable, and failing miserably on both counts.

"No worries. Leave that to me and my book." Exactly how the book would provide what he wanted was still a mystery to Bruce. Still it hadn't failed him yet, the appearance of the ute and the clothes he stood in were proof of that. Even if the Skidians weren't able or willing to help him directly, they'd certainly provided him, however unwittingly, with a tool that was quickly becoming indispensable.

"Seen enough?" Sue hinted, bored and impatient to leave.

"Yeah, I think so." Bruce grudgingly replied. Next time he'd come by himself and spend all day pottering about. "Let's buzz off eh?"

"What?"

"Let's go."

Bruce and Sue found Yarad outside where he proudly showed off his efforts after retrieving the seeds from the floor where he'd earlier flung them in disgust. Despite his doubts about Bruce's claim that the 'seeds' would grow into something he could eat Yarad felt bound to investigate Bruce's allegations. After all he prided himself on being one of the few real researchers of any kind left on Skid.

"Where are the seeds Yarad?"

"Underneath here," Yarad showed off his handiwork, lifting one of the discs he had used as markers revealing a damp patch of soil.

"Don't cover the seeds like that, Yarad. They'll need sunlight when they emerge from the soil." Bruce supposed normal photosynthesis would occur here. Or something similar, Skidian vegetation was green after all. Bruce's only worry was that the seeds might not germinate. Four or five thousand years stuffed in a plastic sachet was a long time for them to remain viable. "Let me know when the seedlings poke through the soil. Ok?"

Yarad cursed Bruce for his inadequate instructions, still not sure of the purpose of his

efforts of the past hour, wondering if he would ever know.

Back at the ute Sue started to take the food box down and set out their picnic lunch.

"Let's drive for a while before we eat, towards the river," Bruce suggested. Yarad would probably expect to be invited to share the meal with them and Bruce was not keen on that idea. If they went off elsewhere that possibility wouldn't arise.

"Ok," Sue agreed brightly. "That sounds like a nice idea."

"Yeah, just lovely," Bruce grunted, suddenly desperate for a bit of personal space.

Bruce started driving towards the river that snaked off across the plain in the distance. He couldn't really have cared less where they ate their lunch. As long as it was a place where some Skidian wouldn't annoy him. Besides he'd need a supply of water close to where he built his house and he reasoned that the best place to find an easily accessible supply of water was close to the river.

"Do you think it rains here? I like walking in the rain, jumping in puddles." Sue asked inanely as if she needed to be reassured by the sound of her own voice for some reason and said the first thing that came into her head.

Bruce shook his head sadly, the best place to be when it rained was inside.

"Ask your book. How the hell should I know?" He regretted the moment of weakness that made him ask her along for the ride, she was getting on his nerves with her incessant chatter and dumb questions. Her very proximity in the cab was irritating him unreasonably. Once he'd found the right place to site a house and organized a roof over his head, he could make it plain that he wanted to be left to his own devices. He hoped.

"Ok," she said, more than a little hurt at Bruce's unwarranted outburst. She had only been trying to make conversation. However, Bruce seemed to take every opportunity to put her down and be generally nasty. For the life of her she could not think why. After all, she had always considered herself reasonably popular with men and knew for a fact she looked ok. A strict diet and work outs three or four times a week in the gym saw to that. Maybe it was time she struck out on her own she thought regretfully. She did not really want to cut herself off from Bruce, to face life alone on this strange and sometimes frightening planet.

In the background the book informed them that the climate of Skid was controlled by a series of satellites and that rain was conveniently programmed to fall in the early morning, causing minor disruption to Skidian life.

"Not that I'm complaining at the moment, but that sort of weather might get a bit tedious after a while."

"Yeah, I kind of like skiing the snow in winter time. Have you ever been skiing?" Sue asked, in an effort to pre-empt the wall of silence that she knew would soon fall between them. Bruce did not seem to need to talk or have the company that she required in abundance. Her decision to break away from him had been made, but she did not want to withdraw completely.

"Nah, never really been interested."

"I'll take you one day," she promised rashly, wondering immediately why she had bothered.

"Don't even think about it. Whether we like it or not, we're stuck here forever," Bruce snapped, more harshly than he had intended, not wanting to be reminded continuously of home and what he could be doing there. He racked his mind to think up something positive to say, something to console Sue with, regretting his obnoxious outburst.

"I know it sounds a bit absurd, but look on the bright side. What a great experience we're going to have here." Bruce gave Sue a platonic pat on the knee but she started sobbing again and turned away. Bruce clamped his mouth shut, stung by her reaction. He had only been trying to help! Didn't she realize he had his own problems to deal with?

Suddenly Bruce was overcome by a feeling of total helplessness. What was the point of doing anything? He wondered, suddenly nauseous with fear and worry. Why bother at all? It looked as if it would be quite easy to while away what time he had, drinking, and generally

doing bugger all.

Snap out of it! He told himself, trying unsuccessfully to shut out Sue's sobs, and the gloominess that seemed to have settled on them like a shroud.

"Nothing ever goes right for me," Sue moaned inaudibly, clenching her fists and sniffing. Eventually the sobbing ceased and Bruce relaxed a little, but he didn't say anything more for fear of starting her off again.

Sue for her part now stared steadfastly straight ahead, trying to ignore Bruce, loudly sniffing every few moments, which grated on his nerves more than anything else she had done. Why couldn't she use a handkerchief? He wondered unreasonably.

By the time they reached the top of a low ridge overlooking the river, Bruce was absolutely famished, and was relieved when Sue pointed to a small grove of trees and suggested they stop. Obediently he drove down and pulled up under a large tree beside the riverbank. He switched off the engine and climbed stiffly out of the ute.

"Not a bad spot," he decided aloud looking around. He lifted the tucker box off the deck of the ute and dropped it on the ground, grateful the dogs hadn't managed to get into it.

"We didn't bring a blanket to sit on," Sue wailed. The prospect of having to sit on the ground did not appeal to her.

"Oh shit, woman, don't worry about it. Nothing's going to bite you." Bruce got up, grabbed the robe he'd put into service as a rag from behind the ute's seat, and thrust it at her. "If you want to be a big girl about it, sit on this."

Punch jumped off the ute, lumbered in his puppyish uncoordinated fashion down to the river's edge, and lapped at the water. Cop and Can, deciding that was not a bad idea, followed suit.

Bruce stood and watched them, the water looked invitingly cool and pleasant.

"What about a swim?"

"Do you think it's safe?" Sue asked dubiously. Bruce picked Can up by the scruff of her neck and threw her into the water. She landed with an almighty whelp of fear, found her bearings, paddled back to the bank and hauled herself out of the water. Then she vigorously shook herself dry over Bruce and Sue as if to say; 'it served Bruce right for throwing her in.'

"Looks ok to me." He said pushing the wet dog away with his foot. "Whatever's in there doesn't like dogs anyway."

"It's a wonder to me why those dogs stay with you, the way you treat them."

"You can look after them if you want." That'd be a shock to her system, Bruce thought.

"Here boy, here Can!" Sue called the dog over to pat her. He's a horrible man, isn't he?"

"He's a she, can't you tell?" Bruce laughed as Can jumped up at Sue's chest, almost knocking her over in her excitement at receiving some affection. Not wanting to miss out on the action, Punch and Cop were not far behind and overwhelmed her.

"Oh, you horrible things," she bleated weakly, pushing the dogs away.

While Sue was occupied, Bruce got up and walked into the river. Once the water lapped around his waist he leant forward and struck out across the sluggish current.

"Shit, it's cold!" Bruce exclaimed as he stopped half way across and trod water, goose pimples breaking out over his body. Still the chilly water was a pleasant respite from the almost oppressive heat of the Skidian day. "Jump in Sue, it's great!" he called, as she tentatively dipped a toe into the water and withdrew it quickly.

"It's too cold!"

"Balls!" Bruce replied, trying not to let his teeth chatter too loudly.

"Oh all right." Sue half turned, drawing her robe over her head. Slightly embarrassed and not knowing where he should be looking, Bruce looked away. Needlessly, as it turned out, for underneath Sue wore a tee shirt and bikini style pants.

"Is it deep enough to dive?" She asked from the bank.

"Yeah, no worries. Look." Bruce stood on the bottom and the water lapped at his chin.

Sue dived, her olive colored body contrasting with her light clothing as it gracefully arced through the air.

Bruce flipped over and tried floating on his back, but as the sluggish current tugged him down river, he flopped over again and swam underwater to where Sue trod water. He surfaced directly below her unsuspecting form and threw her out of the water.

"Jaws!"

"You pig!" Sue squealed and laughed for the first time that Bruce could remember, her unhappy mood vanishing in an instant. "Leave me alone."

Bruce moved away a little, turning his back to her so she could try to dunk him. She failed dismally, and Bruce held her down underwater for a moment to prove who was the strongest. When she emerged spluttering, they wrestled, trying to dunk each other. He grabbed her around the waist, his fingers making contact with the skin of her lower back. He froze, his body tingling and his groin suddenly warm and throbbing.

Bruce felt as though a light had been switched on somewhere in his head. Slowly he leaned forward to kiss Sue on the lips, asking himself why he hadn't thought of doing that before.

"No!" Sue wriggled from his embrace and swam quickly to the bank. Sheepishly Bruce followed, berating himself for getting out of line.

"Sorry," he said, climbing out of the water and sitting awkwardly by the chilly bin. "I don't know what came over me," he added untruthfully. Good old-fashioned lust, that's what. He wiped his face dry with the edge of the robe he had spread on the ground earlier, and stared moodily at the river while Sue busied herself behind him.

"Don't turn around," she said. Bruce could hear the rustle of cloth, the soggy slap as waterlogged garments hit the ground. More rustles, then another, and a grunt as she finally tugged a dry robe over her head. Outwardly composed, but apparently keeping her distance from Bruce, Sue sat on the other side of the chilly bin.

"Have you ever been married?" she asked, delving into the bin and setting out various containers on the ground. "Are you now? No, of course you are not. I remember." Bruce was startled by the question and winced as an old wound reopened in his heart.

"Almost," he replied, after a moment's pain.

"Oh, what happened?" Bruce wasn't used to this sort of openness with strangers or with people who were almost strangers; Sue's forwardness made him uncomfortable. Should I tell her? He wondered.

"I don't really want to talk about it," he grunted.

"Sorry." Sue dropped the subject, wishing she could discuss Bruce with her mother. She handed him a spoon and a bowl of synthofood. "Thanks."

"Beer?"

"Yeah." Bruce took a healthy swig and addressed himself to the synthofood with little enthusiasm. "Stuff this." In disgust he tossed the bowl and the spoon as far out into the river as he could.

"That's all there is to eat. I am sorry. I can't help it." Sue said defensively.

"Rubbish! Bruce declared, "there's heaps of food here. We just have to get off our asses and get it."

Bruce stood and peered into the river. A couple of fish flitted in and out of the weed along the bank. Bruce figured that if the river hadn't been fished for several thousand years it ought to be teeming with unsuspecting fish. He grabbed his agbar from the ute's dashboard, rolled a cigarette, and thoughtfully resumed his appraisal of the river.

"Right!" Bruce flicked the butt away decisively. "Grab some wood for a fire, woman. I'll have a go at trying to catch some fish."

"How are you going to do that? Where's your rod?"

"I'm going to tickle them."

"I don't believe you."

Bruce shrugged. "Watch this, then." Sue's skepticism didn't faze him. He hadn't actually tickled trout before but he'd seen it done on the television. Bruce lay on his stomach, head, and shoulders hanging out over the water. As luck would have it, two fish hovered directly below him, their tails moving with just enough power to hold them against the sluggish current. Carefully Bruce dipped his right arm into the water, reaching out as far as he could so that his hand would come up beneath the so far unsuspecting fish. To his surprise the fish seemed to view the descending arm with curiosity rather than apprehension and moved closer to investigate. He positioned his cupped hand below the rearmost fish, stretching out his forefinger and running it along the fish's underbelly.

As it settled onto his fingers, Bruce firmly grasped it behind the gills and scooped it out of the water in one rapid movement. "Grab it!" He yelled as the fish landed momentarily stunned beside Sue.

"Ooh, how?" Sue finally managed to pick up the slimy creature with the help of a bowl, and tipped it into the food bin.

"Put the bloody lid on so the dogs don't get at it." Bruce could hear the fish flapping around as he turned back to the water for its mate. To his astonishment it was still there, totally unconcerned about its companion's sudden departure.

"How'd you do that?" Sue asked incredulously. "I thought you were kidding me."

"Years of practice." Bruce said, privately amazed at how easy it had been. In quick succession the first fish was joined in the bin by its mate. And then two more, within five minutes of moving a little way down the bank.

"That's enough," he said looking at the fish flapping around the bottom of the chilly bin. They were quite small and looked like small, speckled, mullet.

"Ok. I caught them. While I organize a fire, seeing you haven't bothered, you can gut them."

"I don't know how." Sue regarded the fish with disgust. Bruce did not actually mean to eat them did he?

"Let's have a look then." Bruce prodded one of the fish and looking around for something he could use as a knife, his gaze settled on the ute's wing mirror. Bruce picked up a rock, smashed the mirror, and carefully picked out several large slivers of glass. He used cloth ripped from the robe they'd been sitting on to make a makeshift handle for his crude knife, then he gutted each fish and laid them carefully on the chilly bin lid. Bruce sniffed and decided they smelt, well, fishy. What did he expect?

"Got the fire organized yet, woman?" He called over his shoulder. Sue had not, she had been too engrossed in Bruce's preparation of the fish, and trying not to be sick in the process, to find any firewood. Bruce quickly collected an armful of dry leaves and twigs from among the trees, and built a fire.

"Lucky one of us smokes, eh," he commented as the fire started. "Otherwise you'd have had to rub some sticks together."

Sue ignored the attempted sarcasm, marveling at Bruce's survival skills as he quickly conjured up rotisserie using a few sticks, threaded the fish on one of the sticks, and then squatted contentedly beside the fire, happily sipping a beer.

A man isn't meant to live on food alone

Bruce picked a little flesh from one of the fish and threw it over to Can who quickly snapped up the dirt-soiled morsel. After watching the dog carefully for several minutes, Bruce picked off another sliver of flesh and popped it into his mouth.

"You're not going to eat that are you?" Sue asked incredulously.

"Yummy," Bruce replied, pretty certain that he wasn't about to poison himself. "Try, some. It's good!" It wasn't particularly, but that was neither here nor there, the bland flesh was hardly more to his taste than the synthofood. But at least it was real food.

Sue looked at the fish, wondering if Bruce really expected her to eat some of it.

"A bit bland, perhaps," he began, "but aggh" Bruce clutched his neck, rolled over onto his side, and began to throw a fit.

Sue, about to reach tentatively for a small piece of fish quickly withdrew her hand and screamed. "Bruce! What's the matter?" She panicked as he writhed and moaned on the ground, frothing at the mouth. Visions of a life without Bruce on Skid flashed through her mind and she knew she was lost. She would never survive long by herself.

"Nothing. Just testing!" said Bruce sitting up with a stupid grin, in time to catch the fish before they fell into the fire as Sue stepped back and dislodged one of the forked sticks that formed part of his rotisserie.

"You bastard!" Sue screamed at him. "What a stupid thing to do. I was so worried."

"Why?" Bruce asked ingenuously. "You should have seen the look on your face. Wish I had a camera."

"I, I." Sue hesitated. "I can't handle the idea of living here on this godforsaken planet by myself. So don't ever scare me like that again!" She shook angrily. Or thought she did, as she suddenly discovered her feelings towards him were not all that she had imagined previously.

"No worries. Here, have a piece of fish. It's not that bad, really."

"Oh, ok."

"Now that's what I call a halfway decent feed," he said polishing off the last of the fish and throwing the scraps into the river. "Not that I've ever been partial to fish, and we didn't have any chips." Bruce said as he watched the plate float slowly away.

"This is a nice spot, don't you think, Bruce? So green and peaceful. Is this the sort of place you'd build a house in?" Sue asked wistfully.

"Not right here, exactly. It might flood, and then we'd be in the shit. Up the hill there maybe."

Sue swiveled round and stared where Bruce pointed casually, not having given it much thought.

"I'm going up to have a look." Sue continued to stare at the low ridge. "Coming?"

"Oh yeah, I suppose so." He got to his feet slowly and followed her, rolling a cigarette as he went.

Bruce had to admit the view was fairly impressive from the ridge. A slash of green foliage contrasting with the drier, lighter, hue of the surrounding grassland marked the meandering course of the river as far as the eye could see in both directions.

"Hey look, there's a herd of ivops." Far out on the plain, accompanied by a cloud of dust, the herd moved steadily across their line of vision. "Nice and handy," he muttered, deciding that this place would be as good as any.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Are you blind as well as deaf, woman? I was just saying to myself this would be as good a place as any to knock up some kind of house."

"Yes," Sue sighed. "It's so nice here," she repeated dreamily for what seemed to be the umpteenth time, which made Bruce decide once and for all that the scenery back home couldn't be up to much.

Bruce sat on the ground, gazed down at the sea of grass that stretched away towards the horizon, and conjured up an image of a homestead. A garden, close to the water, a set of yards down the other side of the hill below them. Paddocks, Bruce could already picture ivops grazing contentedly down on the plain. Lost in his thoughts, he hardly registered it when Sue sat beside him and rested her head on his shoulder. He hung his arm loosely around her neck and for a while they sat in silence.

After a few minutes Bruce began to wonder what Sue was expecting from him. He suddenly sensed their relationship, whatever there was of one, had undergone a fundamental change. It was as if they had been totally oblivious to an entire courtship and formal marriage

ritual that had taken place in the space of a few minutes and suddenly here they were nervously contemplating the next step. Well it wasn't quite like that Bruce thought. It wasn't as if they had actually come out and said anything, either of them. Maybe all he felt was just good old-fashioned lust after all.

Sue waited with a strange expectancy and nervousness for Bruce's next move. She did not really know what she wanted, except for some strange reason she suddenly needed to be with him. Always and forever. Well as long as they were on Skid together and that was going to be forever. She could not face another moment facing the prospect of being alone whatever it took.

"You've heard all the stories, fantasies really, where a man and a woman are marooned together on an idyllic island somewhere in the south seas?" Bruce asked unexpectedly.

"Yes," Sue nodded warily. "I'd like to have had my choice of man though. Di Caprio, Pierce Brosnan, Brad Pitt, a hunk like that."

"Huh," grunted Bruce, a little hurt. "That's nice."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Sue gasped, remembering where she was and whom she was with. "I didn't mean it," she turned, squeezed the hand draped across her shoulder, and stared frankly into his eyes, "to sound that way. You know what I mean. I have fantasized about such things, you know, with certain men in mind. Just like men do, I imagine?"

"Yeah, me and Raquel Welch as she was about twenty years ago." Bruce held her gaze for a moment, and then looked away.

"I am sorry, Bruce." Sue realized to her surprise that she meant it.

"Though never in my wildest dreams did I ever think it would happen."

"So now it has, what do you think? Is it like you imagined?"

"No, not really, not at all. Ya know, apart from all the sexual fantasy stuff, what really used to interest me was the practical side of things, you know?" Bruce lied. "Do you know how hard it is to climb a coconut tree for instance? What about clothes and food? All that sort of stuff." His voice trailed away. If the truth were known, all he had really fantasized about was the lurid and erotic. Alone with a beautiful woman, she couldn't help but fall for him. For comfort and protection, if nothing else. The funny part about it was, that here he was alone with a good-looking woman and sex hadn't really entered his mind until a few seconds ago. If he was being honest with himself, sex on tap was all he really wanted from Sue.

Bruce knew he shouldn't say anything about that to Sue, she wouldn't appreciate it. Not yet, anyway. It was just as well, because Sue still sought from his impassive face some indication of his feelings towards her as he gazed into the distance.

Guiltily Bruce shook himself, as if that would dislodge the sudden erotic image of himself and Sue, all bare limbs and breasts, from his brain and stood up.

"Come on. Let's POR."

"POR?"

"Press on regardless." Sue sensed a sudden change in Bruce, as if he had changed another mental gear. She could almost see his brain moving off on some new tack, which she feared momentarily might not include her. She really had no desire to be cast off and forgotten like a piece of driftwood washed up on some foreign shore and felt prepared for almost anything to ensure he did not run off on her.

Bruce took her hand, tugged her to her feet, and strode quickly down the hill.

"Slow down a minute, please." Bruce was deaf to her plea and she had to skip to keep up. Sue broke Bruce's grip and circled his waist with her arm which caused him to frown, but he slowed nonetheless.

Hips and thighs touching, a warm, pleasant sensation overcame Bruce. He reveled in the closeness of her body, as he draped an arm across Sue's shoulder, not wanting the walk to ever stop. Lacking the confidence to tell her what he suddenly felt about her, what he wanted from her.

Surely she would soon notice something. What was she after? Sue leaned on him even more heavily, further slowing their pace. The ute was only meters away now. He wished it were a mile off so he had more time to think.

With her free hand, Sue flicked the hair from his forehead, and then as Bruce tensed, ran a finger down the center of his forehead, and onto his nose and chin. She paused, then the finger dropped to Bruce's bare chest, lingered for a moment, and then continued downwards almost casually caressing the flat plane of his lower belly before returning to twine itself in the hairs of his chest.

They stood beside the ute, which stood there like a full stop at the end of a sentence. Once the present spell was broken, Bruce knew the moment might never be repeated. Was she? Did she? There was only one way to find out.

"Here!" he said tenderly, swinging Sue around so that she was facing him, her backside resting on the bonnet of the ute.

Sue started to lean forward, eyes closed, willing that which she knew was coming, but still not sure she wanted it. She gasped as Bruce thrust his tongue between her lips and began to probe her mouth, not expecting such a direct challenge. She ignored the stale taste of cigarettes and beer on his breath, his hands on her body, and pushed against him, thrusting her own tongue into his mouth.

"No!" she decided at the last moment, half-heartedly struggling to escape Bruce's embrace. She had vowed never to have anything to do with anyone that smoked. What was she doing? Then hugging him tightly she relaxed and allowed Bruce to lower her to the ground, his face buried in her neck.

Afterwards as they silently lay side by side on the ground in a tangle of hastily discarded clothing, Bruce tried to work out what had just happened. One moment they were two individuals thrown together, not totally enjoying each other's company, and the next?

Was it merely a mutual need for comfort that had brought them together or had it been something far more profound? Whatever. But now what? The landscape had changed. Bruce carefully disentangled himself from Sue, who was apparently asleep or dozing, and went to sit by the river.

"Piss off, dog!" He slapped away Punch, who had arrived to investigate the irresistible odor of recent sex. "Ya dirty old goat." He looked over his shoulder, sensing another presence, prepared to give one of the dogs a whack.

"Do you mean me?" Sue touched his arm lightly, playfully.

"No, of course not." A flush spread across his face. "It's a nice spot here," he added meaning something far more romantic. However, Sue had the measure of him now, she knew which of his buttons to push. Under the rough, taciturn, exterior there lurked a pussycat that needed its belly tickled like everybody else.

"Could you build a decent house here, Bruce?"

"Yeah, not a problem. It'll take no time at all." He was glad to be on more practical ground, undaunted that he had never tackled anything that complex before.

"Here, you reckon?"

"Yes, any reason why not?" she squeezed his arm and pecked his cheek impulsively.

"Come on. Let's get back to town before anyone decides to check up on us."

"Can we have a barn?" Sue asked. "I've always thought it would be nice to live on a farm and have a barn full of hay, chickens and horses, a cow to milk, perhaps."

"Yeah." Bruce was not sure they'd need hay. A place to store tools and stuff, yes. Sue, he realized, saw farming or ranching as a romantic pastime where cowboys rode around on horses and the woman baked biscuits or something all day, while all the boring monotonous work that was involved in farming was done by magic.

She burred on about the house they would build, that Bruce would build. A place to sleep and wash. A comfortable place to have a quiet evening beer and to watch television summed up

Bruce's requirements. Left to his own devices he might have constructed a box surrounded by a porch where he could sit, have a beer, and leave his boots on.

He was beginning to realize what he might have let himself in for. There was no chance of holding Sue at arm's length now, and he wasn't sure he even wanted to. It also occurred to him that she seemed intent on organizing him. It was an amazing change in circumstance, domestic bliss finally, a universe away from home. At least, he grinned to himself, he wouldn't have to worry about cooking and cleaning for himself any longer.

"You'd better come up with a house plan, we'll never agree otherwise. I'll be happy just as long as there's somewhere to have a beer while the suns going down."

Sue smiled with a secret satisfaction. She had not really wanted to distance herself from Bruce, and now she knew just what she had to do to keep him firmly under control. When in doubt feminine wiles would win out, though she was beginning to realize she had not acted entirely from self-interest. There had been real passion between them and for all his apparent deficiencies she found she was beginning to see him in a new light. Was Bruce the partner she had been vainly waiting all her adult life to find or was it just Skid? What would mom say about that?

Sue who had eventually nodded off to sleep, relieving Bruce of her incessant chatter, woke with a jolt as the ute came to a stop back at the house in Sietnuoc. She gave Bruce a smile which sent his heart pounding and climbed out. Loner that he was, Bruce realized that even he needed some one who at least halfway understood where he was coming from occasionally. Or did he? It was something neither of them would probably ever know.

For the moment he didn't give stuff, wishing only that Sue was a little less demonstrative. Her openness unsettled him, and the way she talked for the sake of hearing her own voice still irritated him. Still, he thought he could probably live with that.

When to Sue's disappointment, Bruce flopped down in front of the television and began to watch one of the interminable Stim games, Sue realized she might have a bigger job on her hands than she had thought.

The change in the nature of their relationship did not make him suddenly more sensitive to her needs or desires, or change over night, the habits of a lifetime.

"I'm going to bed," Sue said provocatively walking past Bruce to his bedroom. Bruce was a bit slow on the uptake. Instead he scabbled around for his book. Fruitlessly, as it happened.

"Hey Leaf!" he bellowed. "Where's my book?" Leaf silently materialized from somewhere or other, with the book.

Grasping the book tentatively Bruce began speaking at it self-consciously, looking up to make sure nobody was watching him over his shoulder ready with a smart comment.

"I've given Sue's book a list of things, can you organize to have all the stuff picked up?" He neglected to say from where, and where the material was destined, but the book replied: "As you wish, sir."

"I also want to build a dwelling and other buildings where we stopped today. Please deliver all the necessary materials to the site." Despite the lack of detail given, the book didn't seem to require any further clarification. This, if Bruce had stopped to consider it, would have given him a clue as to how the book collected and analyzed much of its data and followed instructions. Its speech function was just to make the offworlders feel better.

As he finished talking to the book, Bruce became aware that Leaf was still standing silently beside him.

"Yeah what?" For the first time Bruce could recall, Leaf smiled at him. In some ways it was a quite attractive smile, though at second glance it was more of a leer. Still, the change in her expression was a welcome one, for she usually seemed so sullen.

In passing Bruce wondered if Skidian women were physically similar to the women of earth. He wondered how he could find out, and then remembered that if he really wanted, Leaf was probably his to do with as he wished.

No, he decided. Well, not right now, anyway. Perhaps one day when Sue wasn't about.

"Go away, will you please?" Her presence was discomforting, like a teacher leaning over the shoulder of a child struggling futilely with some new mathematical concept.

Leaf responded by running the tip of her tongue around her lips in a parody of a lascivious leer. Not the sort of behavior Bruce expected from the usually pompous Skidians and he burst out laughing.

"What are you up to, Leaf?" Then to his horror, her sickly smile still fixed, but maybe slipping now, Leaf sank slowly to the floor. First sitting, then reclining full length on her back, then pulling up her robe so that the lower part of her body was exposed. He goggled at her long slender legs and the wild thicket of black hair that grew where they met.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he hissed, panicking that Sue might suddenly appear at the doorway. "Get up! Come on, get up!" He pulled Leaf to her feet.

"You'd better go," he said huskily before he decided otherwise. "What the hell's got into you?"

A farm in the stars

Leaf waited for Bruce's wrath to fall about her, aware she had failed in her quest for greater understanding of the offworlders, somehow deeply offending Bruce in the process. She both feared and yearned for the ultimate punishment that would now surely be her fate. However, to her surprise Bruce merely seemed to be ordering her from his presence.

Confused by the whole situation, she followed the direction of the pointing finger wondering how she had failed.

Leaf's main role was to be a part of the ongoing assessment program of the offworlders. To monitor how successfully they coped with the sophisticated Skidian society which involved some potentially distasteful activities, besides just having to live in close proximity with them.

Earlier in the day Leaf had met with Sideshow, who ordered her to breed with the male offworlder. Because their genetic material was remarkably compatible, viable progeny should result from a successful mating. Like Mulgoon before them, this discovery had been a disquieting one for the researchers, for it meant the offworlders had sprung from the same ancestral stock as themselves. The coincidence of two similar populations evolving, separated by hundreds of light-years was inconceivable. They were the same species, somehow separated by space and time.

The Skidian researchers theorized that some of their forebears must have traveled across the universe to populate the offworlders home planet. There were no records of such a thing happening and none of the Skidian researchers could think of a reason why anyone from Skid would want to do such a thing. Nevertheless, they must have. The possibility that Skid might have been populated from there was unthinkable. An identity crisis, which rivaled the impact of impending famine, was developing among what passed for a Skidian intelligentsia. Were Skidians really what they had always imagined themselves to be? And if they were not, who were they?

A major puzzle was also developing over the offworlders' reproductive behavior. Despite evidence suggesting they indulged in multiple sexual acts, the female, especially, showed none of the scars of having borne offspring. To the contrary, there were traces of a hormone in her bloodstream that would render normal conception impossible. It meant that offworlders coupled merely and often for pleasure, unlike the Skidians who mated perhaps once or twice in a lifetime for the expressed purpose of producing offspring under strict clinical conditions.

It had been theorized that the offworlders possibly had other means of producing offspring. How else could the large and burgeoning population of their planet be explained?

Sideshow had repeatedly analyzed various data, programming Leaf with the appropriate information to enable her to 'seduce' Bruce. However, despite her precise instructions, Leaf's first attempt had been a dismal failure. She was not, however, embarrassed by this failure,

quite the opposite, she felt as if she had gained a new insight into some of the mysteries of the universe.

She had experienced in those few minutes a whole new and thrilling range of emotions which she was at a loss to explain but which excited her nonetheless. What had caused the moist, exciting sensation between her legs, and her heart to start thumping in her chest? Now those strange and exciting emotions were replaced by a feeling of vast emptiness. Why was Bruce's response so negative towards her? Had Sideshow missed something vitally important in her study of the offworlder's reproductive behavior? Leaf decided she must have, for her own behavior had been above reproach or criticism.

Food on the table

"What do you think Sue?" Bruce asked over breakfast the next morning, "I don't think we're going to achieve anything by sitting around here. Let's go out to the house site today, if we have to we can sleep rough for a while."

Bruce had already discovered that the mighty Skidian industrial complex had not been idle overnight. A variety of useful materials and tools that would enable them to live in the wild while he set about building a roof over their heads had appeared as if by magic in the living room. Waking in the pre-dawn light and feeling a little uncomfortable about finding another body in his bed, Bruce had stumbled into the living room and fallen over a pile of junk on the floor.

A more thorough inspection with the light turned on revealed an amazing pile of equipment. He now had a decent knife for example, a rifle that as far as he could work out fired projectiles that would kill, a roll of canvas from which to make a shelter if necessary and a few other odds and ends.

	"I don't see any reason why not," she said after a moment. Sleeping or living rough did not really appeal to her. On the other hand she did not want to lose sight of, or her tenuous physical connection with Bruce. If he went off by himself, there was no telling when he might bother, if ever, to return.
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Bruce decided to leave most of the pile of equipment where it was for the moment, intending to collect it later. They'd probably return that night or tomorrow anyway, he couldn't see Sue taking to the idea of living under canvas or in some kind of rough shack without any amenities while he built them a house.

He grabbed the rifle, made sure that he had plenty of bullets, and shoved the butcher's knife in its sheath, into the waistband of his trousers, and was ready to leave.

"What's that?" Bruce saw it first as they approached the spot by the river where they had picnicked the previous day and stopped to let the dogs off for a run.

"That's funny," Sue said as the outline of a building emerged from behind the trees.

"What? That some other bugger has built right slap bang where I wanted to?"

They've got the whole bloody planet to do it on and they do it right here."

"No Bruce, I've seen it or a house very like it before."

"Eh?"

"Oh, I know now." Sue was suddenly subdued. "It's exactly like a show home I looked at. Uuh. The day before I got lost in the forest." Her voice trailed off into an awed whisper. "But how did it come to be sitting here?"

Bruce's gaze fell on the book sitting on the dashboard. "I wonder."

"What?"

"Well, hazarding a guess I'd say the house was intended for us. I told my book to consult

with you about the design and what not. Did it?"

"No."

"Which means?"

"That we've got to be a bit careful what we think about."

"Yeah." Bruce stopped in front of the house and got out of the Ute. A bit late for that!

"Anybody there?" He pushed open the front door and walked inside. Beyond the door was a short hallway with several rooms opening off it, including what appeared to be a kitchen.

"This place is almost exactly like that show home I told you about," Sue said, hanging onto Bruce's arm. Not sure whether to be horrified or delighted with the house.

"Looks ok to me." He didn't notice her shudder, and would not have understood if he had.

Bruce made his way around the house, leaving Sue alone in the lounge with her thoughts. She was almost sure she did not want to stay in the house at all. Bruce turned taps on and off, tasted the water, discovered how synthofood was delivered to the more isolated homes of Skid, and checked to see the fridge and stove worked. The Skidians had even supplied a microwave and a toaster.

"Hey, look at this, Sue!" Bruce shouted, opening cupboard doors to discover cutlery, frying pans, pots, and other utensils. "All the gear, everything that opens and shuts!" He waved about the kitchen. "Pity we can't use most of it. This, for example." He picked up an omelet dish. Eggs were unknown on Skid.

Sue was much less enthusiastic. The house felt less like a potential home than a prison. She walked to the lounge windows, looked down at the river, and saw another building, half hidden by some trees down there.

"Hey, what's that?" Bruce wandered up to her, wrapping his arms about her waist and resting his chin upon her shoulder.

"Dunno. Who cares?" But after a dismissive glance he looked more closely, recognizing the outlines of a barn that had stood for longer than he could recall on his father's farm.

"Let's go down and have a look, shall we?"

"Nah, I'm off to get something decent to eat. Wanna come?"

"Off to the supermarket are you? Don't forget to get some bread and milk!"

"In a manner of speaking," he answered, unfazed by her sarcasm.

"What do you mean?"

"Come and find out."

"Look I'm in no mood to play silly games." Sue freed herself from his embrace, annoyed at his flippancy and his continual failure to explain himself, especially as she felt that her mind had been invaded by the Skidians almost as if she had been raped. She thought that the least Bruce could do was be a bit sensitive at a time like this. Nevertheless, he seemed totally unfazed by the implications of the house and everything else suddenly materializing just because they happened to think about them.

"I'm going hunting. Satisfied?" He grinned mischievously. Sue sighed in exasperation. When Bruce was up, he was really up. She tried to assess his mood and took it to be somewhere between plodding along with no apparent concerns to acute depression, which was hardly surprising, given their present predicament.

On the other hand Sue considered herself particularly well adjusted, thanks to the efforts of her therapist. However she was wide of the mark in mistaking Bruce's individualistic streak for emotional problems that needed specialist attention. She stared at him until he became uncomfortable and looked away. It was so difficult to work out what was going on behind the depths of those impassive hazel eyes.

"You make everything sound so easy, Bruce," she said at last.

"What's the problem? I've got a gun, I see a herd of ivops, so I shoot one and see what the meat tastes like. Ok?"

"How do you know it's ok to eat?"

"I'll toss a bit to the dogs and if they don't roll over and die we should be alright." Mind you, Bruce told himself, there were many things the dogs probably found quite tasty that he wouldn't touch with a forty-foot pole let alone consider eating. "Are you coming, then?"

"I suppose so," Sue replied doubtfully. She found the idea of killing something and then eating it slightly repugnant, it was enough to make her seriously consider becoming a vegetarian or existing on synthofood alone.

"Right. Let's get ready then." Bruce walked over to the ute, pulled the rifle out from behind the seat, found the box of ammunition, and filled the rifle's magazine. Then he looked around for a likely target to test his aim on.

Bruce pulled the rifle to his shoulder and peered through the sight at a lone tree about a hundred meters away. Bang! The rifle butt kicked into his shoulder and he worked the bolt quickly and fired again. Bang!

Can and Punch made a beeline for the underside of the ute, whining each time he fired. Cop on the other hand almost leapt out of his skin in anticipation. He made little whining doggy noises and began to drool. As far as Cop was concerned, shooting usually meant fresh meat. Like his master Cop was not all that fussed with the tucker they had had to eat lately and was looking forward to the change of diet. That guns occasionally meant the death of a dog, which was why Can and Punch hid from Bruce, did not worry Cop. None of them was due for the chop as far as he was aware.

The first shot missed the tree completely but the second caused a few chips to fly from the target area satisfying Bruce that the weapon was accurate. Not that he was a particularly good shot, and not that he would admit this even to himself. Bang! Click, rattle. Bang! He emptied the magazine and then went down to the tree to check out his aim, with Cop at his heels. Bruce was rapt to find three holes fairly close together in the general area he'd aimed at, and several gouges just behind the tree where several other bullets had ploughed into the ground. Not bad!

"Want a shot?"

"No, thanks. Guns frighten me."

"Ok. Here. Get up, you two." Can and Punch crept out from under the ute, shying away from Bruce and his rifle. As if their lives depended on it they leapt onto the back of the vehicle and cowered behind the cab.

"They're scared of you carrying that thing. I bet you have shot dogs before. Right?"

"Nah. They're just wimps. You should see them when we get a thunderstorm. See Cop's not worried. Anyhow, you can talk, you had your fingers in your ears."

"Are we walking?" Sue changed the subject to avoid further ridicule, attracted by the chance to stretch her legs more than anything else.

"Nah. We'll go in this." He patted the ute.

"I thought when you went hunting you had to track your quarry like Daniel Boone or somebody."

"Huh?"

"Sneak up on them."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course."

"Really?" Bruce asked incredulously. Sue nodded, less assured than she had been initially.

"Geez Wayne!" Bruce laughed. "You've seen the ivops. We'll be able to drive right up to them. So close I'll just about be able to stick the muzzle up to one's ear and blow its bloody head off. Anyhow, how would we get the meat back here? Carry it on our shoulders?"

The expedition was starting to look more dubious to Sue, but she climbed into the ute anyway.

On the fringes of the immense herd of ivops, that spread almost as far as the eye could see in either direction, a few of the beasts looked up from their grazing as the red thing came to a stop and disgorged two creatures that stood on their hind legs and three smaller four-legged ones. None of the ivops flinched as Bruce raised his rifle and fired. This sort of noise came from the sky from time to time, so was not a novelty. Besides the grazing was too good around here to move on unnecessarily. One or two of the ivops started as one of their number collapsed close to the new creatures, but none of the remaining beasts associated the arrival of the strange creatures with the death of the ivop. While some of the ivops would soon learn differently, for now the herd moved off completely unconcerned by the incident.

As the young ivop, about the size of a small cow, hit the ground, Bruce handed the rifle to Sue while he ran forward with his knife and expertly slit its throat lengthways from chin to breast. Then reversing the knife he stabbed downwards at where he thought its heart should be. A bright red spray of blood greeted this thrust and Bruce stood clear of this fountain and the ivop's kicking legs, almost disappointed. He'd half expected the blood to be of a different color, something really exotic.

Can and Punch overcame their fear of guns and crept out from their hiding place under the ute to join Cop, who was licking at the pool of blood forming by the ivop's head. Waiting for the ivop to stop kicking, Bruce took the gun from Sue, who was beginning to look a little bilious, and touched up his knife with the steel he took from the small pouch on the knife's sheath.

"Why do they kick like that?"

"Just nerves." He gave the carcass an experimental prod with his foot as it gave a last desultory jerk and ceased moving altogether. Bruce stood alongside the carcass, facing toward its tail and pulled the left rear leg towards him, holding it between his knees. Carefully he made a long incision from behind the hock to a point above the tail. Then reversing the knife he sliced the skin away from the limb until it was bare. With a deft turn of the wrist he severed the hock and cut the strip of skin that held the lower leg to the rest of the hide, tossing it to the dogs to fight over. With a grunt he stepped over the carcass and repeated the process with the other rear leg. Only this time the incision went below the tail, meeting the first just above the udder.

"Hey, noticed something? There's no flies, eh?" He commented as he decapitated the beast and pushed its head under the front left quarter to prop it up. "At home they'd be buzzing about at the first hint of blood." Once the front and rear legs had been opened up, Bruce paused to touch up the knife on the steel and then slashed a strip of skin from the dead animal's belly from the neck of the carcass down to where his two earlier cuts had met above the udder. Then he began to knife the skin off the rest of the carcass.

The whole operation took about twenty minutes and left the bare carcass lying on its skin with only a few flecks of dirt and bits of grass marring its marbled surface. Pushing the carcass onto its side Bruce began to gut it.

"Hmm. Let's have a look here." He slashed between the last rib and the hips, dragging out the offal and piling it on the ground. "Nothing particularly unusual here." He was still hoping to discover something exotic about the ivops.

"What's this?" Sue prodded the lungs with her bare toe, quickly withdrawing it from the still warm organ.

"Heart." Bruce pointed with his knife. "Lungs where you put your toe. Liver." He turned over the mass of entrails. "Kidneys."

"This. Is it pregnant?"

"No, that's its rumen. The main stomach, if you like." Bruce slit the organ open. "Let's see what it had for breakfast. Are you keen on tripe?"

"I just love tripe. Which part's that?"

"You're looking at it. See?" Bruce pulled back the flaps of the cut he had made; exposing

the rumens folded interior and its contents of partly digested vegetation.

"Interesting, eh?" Bruce pulled out a few pieces of the mushy stuff, sniffed at it, and then tossed it away, wiping his hands on his shorts. Sue turned away, covered her mouth with her hand and dry retched.

"Perhaps not, then." Bruce chuckled as he cut the heart and liver into large chunks and tossed them to where the dogs were taking turns at ripping the ivop's head to shreds. Swiftly he sliced the choice cuts of meat from the rump and shoulder, throwing them into the chilly bin until he reckoned there was enough for both of them for a week or so. He then threw two quarters onto the back of the ute for dog tucker.

"How do you like your steak, Sue? Rare? Medium? Well done?" She gagged at the prospect, turned away once more, and vomited into the grass.

"Well, I'm going to enjoy the stuff anyway. Well-cooked, with eggs and chips." Chance would be a fine thing. Still, he almost drooled at the thought of proper meat to eat. He got in the ute, rolled a smoke, and waited for Sue to compose herself.

Climbing in beside him, Sue wondered how Bruce could stand having all that blood and guts sticking to his arms. The cloying smell of death upset her stomach further and she held her head out of the window all the way back to the house.

Bruce took a good look at the dogs who'd devoured the meat left on the back of the ute when they got back to the house. They seemed to be ok.

"Take this inside, will you Sue?" He handed her the chilly bin full of bloody meat which had picked up a few more pieces of dirt and grass from somewhere.

"But it's dirty, " Sue declared looking for a good reason to go hungry. " We can't eat that!"

"No worries. It'll brush off." He lifted the remains of the carcass off the back of the ute, broke it up with the axe he'd brought with them from town, and threw the lot into the freezer by the back door.

Inside the house Bruce found the chilly bin full of meat in the kitchen, with Sue conspicuously absent. At least she could have started to cook it!

He worked his way through the cupboards, searching for plates and a frying pan. Finding some plates, he dumped enough meat on them for a meal, and put the rest into the fridge, kicking the chilly bin carelessly into a corner. He put the frying pan on one of the hot plates and turned it on high, poured a little water into the bottom of the pan, then threw in the meat. Scrabbling around in one of the drawers, he found a fork to turn the meat over as it cooked, blissfully ignoring the globules of fatty water splattering everywhere.

"I hope you will clean up the mess when you have finished," Sue said, looking over his shoulder and hoping he was not going to suggest she eat any.

"You sound just like my mother," he grunted, none too fondly. "I'll clean it up later," he continued, having no intention of doing so.

"Grab the eating gear will you and set the table. This looks about done." Bruce speared the pieces of meat with his fork and dropped them onto the plate. He popped the last chunk of meat into his mouth, suspiciously giving it a couple of chews before gulping it down. It tasted a bit like venison. Definitely feral. But ok, an indescribable improvement on synthofood however it tasted.

He took the plate of meat out to the veranda where Sue waited unenthusiastically.

"Here we are!" He set the plate on the table. "Real tucker at last. Could do with some onions and spuds though," he added wistfully. From somewhere Sue had tracked down a shaker of salt, a couple of glasses and a long necked bottle which Bruce picked up and sniffed.

"Where's the beer? What's this?" He took a sip from the bottle. "Wine! Where on earth did you get this from?"

"At the local liquor store, silly!" Sue grinned facetiously. "Where do you think?"

"Oh," he muttered sheepishly, momentarily lost for words. This sheila was catching on in

a hurry.

"Well, pour some into a glass then, bright eyes, and wrap your molars around this," he said unceremoniously dumping an unappetizing lump of meat onto her plate.

"You're sure it's ok?" Bruce responded by nonchalantly pouring himself a glass of wine and chasing a piece of meat down with a healthy swig. He smacked his lips contentedly.

"Try a bit. It's good." He took another gulp of wine, slurping noisily.

Sue stabbed a small chunk with her fork. "Go on," he encouraged, thinking she might refuse to eat it.

"Ok." Sue put the fork into her mouth, pulled the meat off with her teeth, and prepared to die. She tried not to recall the sight of the bloody carcass on the ground and the way her stomach had churned at the thought of eating some of it. A few moments later, pleasantly surprised that she had not at least been sick, she tried to size up the meat's flavor. "It's a bit tough isn't it?"

"Well, it's not exactly the grain-fed, prime beef, you're probably used to."

"Definitely more interesting than synthofood."

"That's for sure." Bruce took another piece for himself and another swig of wine. "Quite a nice drop this. A little dry for my taste though." Bruce refilled his glass and held it up with the air of a connoisseur. After polishing off the meat that Sue couldn't eat, he rolled himself his first post meal cigarette and contemplated the view across the plain for several few minutes.

"We've got company," said Bruce, noting a dark shape in the sky growing larger and larger.

"Where?"

"Over there. Look." He pointed at the aircraft whose shiny fuselage reflected the last rays of the sun.

"I still can't see it." Bruce sighed and pointed to a grove of trees on the plain. "See that clump of trees?"

"Yes, but."

"Look up and to the left of them."

"I've got it now. Wonder who it is?"

"Dunno, but I reckon we'll find out soon enough." He relit the stub of his smoke and watched the aircraft land on the grassy slope below the house.

The door flopped open and Cyprus popped out, looking as if he did not really want to be there. He glanced around worriedly and then scuttled quickly up to the house, closely followed by Leaf and a drone.

Neither Bruce nor Sue felt sufficiently hospitable to rise and greet the Skidians, and waited for Cyprus to climb the veranda steps.

"Greetings, friends," he gasped as if he had run a long way to get there. "I hope I find you well?" He asked without a hint of concern once he had regained his breath.

"Sure," Bruce answered curtly. "What can we do you for?" Cyprus frowned, uncertain as to how he should respond.

"Please, could you speak more clearly. I do not understand." Cyprus demanded suspecting correctly that Bruce was making a joke at his expense.

"Sorry." Bruce tried to sound suitably chastened. "How are you?"

"Very well. How are you?"

"Not bad. All the better for a decent feed, mate."

"Feed? What is this feed?" Cyprus craned his neck so he could look about the veranda, past the offworlders and into their new quarters. He sought some strange offworld device used for who knew what.

"Yes, knocked off an ivop and we've just eaten some of it."

"I beg your pardon?" Cyprus sounded shocked, as if he could not believe such a sacrilege had been committed.

"That is good?" Cyprus asked at length, reinforcing Bruce's impression that it might not be.

"Would you like some, Cyprus?" Sue asked.

"Ah." Cyprus did not sound too keen to test the unknown today. He had not decided what the offworlders had been doing yet.

"Later perhaps. But first I wish to make sure that everything is satisfactory here." Bruce followed Leaf's entrance into the house with his eyes, both a little angry that Cyprus had brought her there and a little excited as he imagined her backside wiggling beneath her robe.

"The house is wonderful, isn't it Bruce?" Sue said quickly. Her new feeling of security threatened as she caught the direction of Bruce's gaze and the flicker of interest she saw in his face.

"Yeah, couldn't be better," he replied, not really caring as long as it had four walls, a roof and a decent loo.

Sue wished Leaf had not turned up. Maybe I can get rid of her somehow, she thought.

"I haven't checked out the other shed yet, but I'm sure that everything's fine down there as well."

"Good." Cyprus nodded, accepting undeserved praise for a job well done.

"I'll need some help out here soon with some of the work," said Bruce, as if the thought had just occurred to him. "I imagine you already have people prepared who are interested in learning the food production systems that you wish me to set up?"

"Oh yes, most certainly. This work is well in hand." Cyprus lied easily; betraying the fact that neither he nor anybody else had given any thought to the matter of who would learn all the offworlders had to teach. Do not concern me with the details, he could have added. What the offworlders required were a few drones and expert drone programmers, for it was beneath the dignity of any Skidian to assist the uncouth creature in whatever primitive scheme he might be planning. Besides how could they turn around and suddenly demand that Skidians had to learn to fend for themselves after generations of not having to do so, even if they knew how.

"Please tell me," Cyprus asked expressing his curiosity as to why the offworlders should be eating the flesh of an ivop.

Bruce jerked upright, spilling wine down his shirt. "What are you on about Cyprus? The ivops are a major source of readily accessible food for your people."

"Oh." Cyprus was nonplussed. Did Bruce think Skidians were as stupid as his own people? Advocating that Skidians eat ivops indeed! The very thought sickened him.

"What the hell?" A crash came from the direction of the kitchen accompanied by a scream. Sue leaped up from her chair and raced inside, closely followed by Bruce.

"Ahhh!" Leaf screamed again, amid a pile of pots and pans scattered across the kitchen floor. Bruce thought it a hell of a joke as Leaf shakily explained how she'd opened a cupboard to discover what was inside and had then been attacked by the objects that now lay around her. While Sue began to replace the pots, pans and other utensils in what she considered were their rightful places, Bruce drew Leaf to her feet.

"Don't worry, Leaf," he chuckled. "One of us will show you how to use this lot one day."

He left her in the kitchen tearfully cursing the luck that had thrown her into contact with these strange and uncivilized beings just when she thought she might have got rid of them. Bruce returned to the veranda, just in time to see Cyprus climbing aboard his aircraft. He dismissed him from his mind completely. The useless bugger wasn't worth worrying about.

He dropped into a chair, skewed it round so he could prop his feet up on the veranda rail and rolled another cigarette. What more could a man want? He asked himself. Many things immediately sprang to mind. Nevertheless, for all that, on this night Skid didn't really seem to be such a bad place.

"Where's Cyprus?" asked Sue, emerging from the kitchen to sit on Bruce's lap, wriggling her bottom about until she had made herself comfortable.

"You're a weight, woman!" Bruce grunted. "I dunno. He buggered off while we were inside."

"Good riddance." Sue pouted distastefully. She did not like the way Skidian men looked at her, and Cyprus was one of the worst. The latent contempt in his eyes beneath that polite veneer, the way she felt them strip away her clothing with their eyes, the strange lack of sexual interest in her. Rather, and more hurtful, she felt the Skidians were disgusted by her appearance.

"Funny though, don't you think? I mean, for him to take off like that without so much as a by your leave."

"Yeah, they're an odd bunch all right." Bruce flicked the cigarette butt over the rail. "And you know what? I couldn't give a stuff about them, given the attitude of the likes of Cyprus, even if they are getting hungry." He dropped his feet from the rail and stood with Sue in his arms.

"It's about time I carried you across the threshold, isn't it, dear?" Bruce placed a tender and lingering kiss on her lips.

"Oh, you're so cute sometimes, Bruce!" Sue giggled, as he carried her past an open-mouthed Leaf, in search of a bedroom.

A kitchen garden

Leaving Sue to sort out the house, Bruce wandered down to the eerily familiar barn like structure by the river. Inside he found a treasure trove of farm equipment which reminded him of an old farmer's shed containing odds and ends accumulated during a lifetime of collecting stuff that just might be useful one day. Though not necessarily right at the moment. In fact

Bruce picked through the piles spread across the floor, stacked in racks, on shelves. He delved through bins, pulling open drawers, and cupboards. A tractor was parked just inside the main door.

"How the hell does this thing go?" He wondered aloud, fiddling with a series of knobs to see if he could start it. Failing, he searched for a set of operating instructions and found a booklet stuffed into the toolbox hanging off the inside of the mudguard as if it was an afterthought. As if the Skidians had known that he would try to start the tractor before reading the operating instructions. The instructions were quite simple: a series of schematic diagrams and an easy-to-read guide for operation supplied by some kind of Skidian technician who obviously doubted Bruce's level of intelligence. Booklet in one hand, he followed the starting procedure and almost immediately a distinctive hum and a light on the dash indicated the motor was indeed running.

Tentatively he engaged what should have been a forward gear, released the clutch, and the tractor lurched forward. Satisfied he switched the engine off; there would be plenty of time to play on it later on.

On one side of the barn there was an implement bay containing a mower, a rotary hoe, and a plough. There were also some kind of harvester, a baler, and a front end loader just as there was back in the shed on his father's farm, along with several large bins filled with bags of seeds, some as large as a sugar bag, others just small, marked packets. Bruce tossed them aside. Gardening wasn't his thing, that would be Sue's department, whether or not she knew it yet. Hand tools adorned a workbench which ran the full length of the barn's rear wall; hammers, saws, spanners and pliers.

In a lean to outside the building he found wire and posts made of some kind of plastic and many other things besides, some useful and some not. Bruce was really amused by the discovery of three motorcycles parked in a partitioned bay with saddles slung over them. He tried to imagine the Skidians trying to work out how to fit a saddle on the bikes.

"What's so funny?" Bruce swung round to find that Sue had sneaked up on him again. Come to find out what he was up to.

"Look here, we've got stabling for horses, even saddles for them, and motorbikes parked where the horses should be!"

"It's like that up at the house, too. There is all sorts of cutlery in the drawers but nothing as simple as a potato peeler. An electric jug but no cord to plug it in with."

"You get that on the big jobs. No doubt we'll make out," he said, not sure he really felt so confident. He looked speculatively at the seed bins. "I wonder? Potatoes," he muttered, walking over to the bins and salivating at the idea of a few home comforts.

He began to fossick through the bins, his earlier distaste at the thought of gardening cast temporarily aside.

"Though it seems crazy to me, I'm beginning to see some things from the Skidian angle. We've obviously thought about or directly ordered or asked for all these things." Bruce paused and emphasized his point by waving his hands round the barn. "You have to admit they've done pretty well in a roundabout fashion to supply what we need. Because they do not understand what we are asking for, they miss what is obvious to us. You know how they can't put two and two together."

"So we can't expect perfection?"

"That's right, but in their own way they are trying. Here we are!" He lifted a large sack out of the bottom of the bin.

"Spuds."

"Spuds?"

"Potatoes."

"What else is in there?" The remaining contents of the bin were spread over the floor. Sorting through the strewn packages, Bruce discovered a range of earth-like vegetable staples, peas, carrots and onions, lettuce, radish and cabbage seed.

"Can you bake bread?" he asked, starting to rummage through another bin. Celery, cauliflower. Yuk! He thought.

"Lovely," Sue replied. "No, I can't. Why?"

"Well, in this one here seems to be a lot of cereal seeds. "Wheat, corn, and a few I cannot identify. Quite a range, eh? I wonder if any of this stuff will grow?" Bruce tipped some seeds into his hand. "They must have been in these packets since before Christ was a cowboy."

"What do you know about gardening, Bruce?"

"Enough to know I don't want any part of it. What about you?"

"I've always wanted a garden, even just a few boxes full of plants. Gardening is supposed to be therapeutic you know? But I've never had time to do any," she added as if she had always meant to give gardening a go.

"Well, now's your chance." He patted her shoulder patronizingly. "I now pronounce you Skid's chief horticulturist. At least you've got a start on the Skidians."

"Do you think there's any point in going back to town tonight?" He asked a few moments later.

"I thought we were going to stay here?"

"I just wish that bloody Leaf woman wasn't here," Bruce muttered darkly, wondering how he might be able to get her on her own without Sue finding out. Ever since she'd wiggled her butt at him earlier he couldn't shake the image of her long slim legs from his mind. He wondered what the rest of her body looked like.

"Bruce, you do surprise me. I thought you'd welcome a slave at your beck and call." Sue hid her relief, in the mistaken belief Bruce had no interest in Leaf.

"Look, I've never had any problems looking after myself in the past!" Bruce retorted. He picked up a bag of seeds and threw it as hard as he could at the wall of the barn and stomped off.

Sue found herself trembling in shock at Bruce's violent outburst and wondered whether he might just as easily have taken his anger out on her rather than the bag of seeds. Moody

bastard, she thought, wondering what raw nerve she had touched this time. Now what would she do? She suddenly realized how little she knew Bruce. Normally pleasant enough, if a little sarcastic at times, he had proven to be as unpredictable as a cornered wild animal in the past few minutes.

"Hey Sue!" His sudden call from the doorway startled her. She looked up to see him standing there with a nervous grin. "I'm sorry. I'm not mad at you. I'm just." he shrugged his shoulders, "well, you know, pissed off with this whole bloody place and it's getting to me. You know?"

"Yes, I know," she replied evenly, wondering if he were telling the truth. But what did I do wrong?

"Where do you think we should plant the garden?" Sue changed the subject, walking over to where he stood in the doorway.

"Over there, on the flat. The vegetables and stuff anyway." Bruce gestured vaguely towards the river.

"What if it floods here?"

"That's the least of our worries, I reckon. I don't think even the Skidians would have plonked a building here if it was in danger of being washed away the first time it rained." Then he decided that you could never be too sure about the Skidians' thinking.

"People at home do that sort of thing all the time when they should know better. Los Angeles is built on a fault line, or is it San Francisco?"

"Yeah, but that's in America. They do things different here."

"Are you trying to be funny or what? Because if you are it's not working!" Sue snapped. Then, in the hope that he was, she relaxed. "You're just winding me up aren't you?"

"Yes." Bruce grinned and grabbed her hand. "The soil will be better down here because of all the silt deposits from old floods. I reckon that's probably a good enough reason. Don't you?" Bruce sighed he hadn't intended to hurt her, the opportunity was just too good to miss. "C'mon, it'll be getting dark soon. And I'm hungry again," he said taking Sue by the hand and leading her towards the house.

While waiting for Leaf to provide what passed for an evening meal on Skid, they whiled the time away with a beer or two. Bruce stared vacantly out over the darkened plain, smoking, enjoying the solitude. Sue looked up at the multitude of stars spread across the heavens like so many twinkling lights.

"So different from home," she murmured. "The stars, I mean."

"What? Oh yeah. Less pollution I expect," Bruce grunted.

"No, they're different. Different stars from the ones we see at home."

"Well, we're a long way from earth, you know," he reminded her unnecessarily. "They're not likely to be familiar, are they?"

"Where do you think earth might be?"

"I dunno," Bruce replied wearily, turning to book that lay on the table and putting the question.

"The solar system in which your home planet is located is not visible from this region of Skid at this time." There was a slight pause in the discourse, as though the book needed time to search deeper into its memory for more information. "The planet is presently located at forty two degrees below the horizon."

"See anything there, Bruce?" she asked stupidly.

"Get a grip woman. We might be able to see it later."

"The planet is not visible from Skid without high definition telescopic assistance."

"I often used to fantasize about space, you know, Sue." Bruce said, starting to feel particularly philosophical after his second beer. "It's just so big. Goes on forever. Which, if you stop to think about it, is quite incredible. You realize just how insignificant we are, eh?" He

took a swallow from his glass while Sue waited expectantly for his next pearl of wisdom. "When you think about it, it's no wonder man invented religion to explain it eh?"

"Do you think the Skidians have any religion?" Sue asked. Religion had always been a part of her life, as much as eating and sleeping. Now she was beginning to question what faith she had ever had, for it seemed to have failed her.

"I don't think so. Maybe they've grown out of it or something, if that's the right way to look at it." Not wanting a dissertation from the book to contradict him, Bruce reached over and switched it off. "You know what they're like. They just are, and they don't have a need to explain 'it' any more. I reckon if the head honcho here said get religion, everybody would, even if only to appear to be doing the right thing." Bruce fell silent, lost the thread of his thought, and returned to his original theme.

"I always thought there must be some sort of life out here."

"You?" Sue declared in mock astonishment. "I thought you were more down to earth than that." She studied Bruce, who not for the first time had surprised her by revealing a new facet of his character.

"Look around you, Sue, and tell me I was wrong."

"So tell me are you a happy man at having your wildest dreams realized?"

"Shit yeah. I've always wanted to meet people from space. Though not under these circumstances, that's for sure." Bruce's replied sullenly.

"Look on the bright side, Bruce." Sue thought she could jolly Bruce out of the sullen mood which seemed to be settling on him, imagining she was coming to terms with her enforced stay on Skid. She was wrong on both counts. Sue only felt pumped up because Bruce appeared so deflated.

"Huh? Jeez, woman, where would you rather be? Here in this shit hole or at home doing whatever it is you do? Hey Leaf! Another beer!" Bruce suddenly felt like lashing out again. He restrained himself, but it disturbed him that he felt such an intense desire to wreck something.

"I bet in your wildest dreams you never imagined you'd have a space woman to be your slave."

"No, but I have thought about doing other things to a spacewoman," he said without thinking. Bruce, realizing he might have said the wrong thing, leaned across and grasped Sue's wrist. "It was a silly thing to say. I'm sorry." Sue sensed he was not being totally sincere, but she grasped at the lifeline he offered as Leaf arrived with their meal.

"Pretty horrible, eh?" Bruce probed the goey mess on his plate, trying to ease the tension. "Especially after today's dose of decent tucker. I reckon you should try and teach Leaf how to cook meat."

"You find her attractive, don't you? Leaf I mean. Or is she just a curiosity like me?" Bruce almost choked on a spoonful of synthofood and tried to pretend it had just gone down the wrong way, averting his eyes so Sue could not detect the guilt he was sure his face betrayed.

Sue was not so much jealous that Bruce might go ahead and fulfil his fantasy, as fearful that he might prefer Leaf to herself and leave her out in the cold. Sue decided she was prepared to sacrifice almost anything, even her dignity, as long as she could stay close to him.

Bruce supposed Leaf was attractive in a pale sort of way. However, he was more drawn to her by the fact she was now almost a forbidden fruit for him. He snuck a furtive look at Sue between chews.

"She's not really my cup of tea at all," Bruce lied lamely, "and I'm horribly disappointed." Sue would have to be well out of the way before he tried anything on with Leaf or she'd probably shoot him, he decided.

Sue woke next morning and panicked when she discovered the other half of the bed was empty. As she sat up she could hear someone banging things about in the kitchen.

What on earth would he be doing at this time of the morning? It was still dark! The sudden ugly prick of betrayal and despair that had swamped her disappeared almost as quickly as it

had begun.

Sue had gone to bed early the previous evening, expecting Bruce to follow quickly, believing that once they had made love everything would be all right. But Bruce had stumbled in much later and cursing in the dark, then lay stiffly on the bed as if he was afraid to touch her and when Sue at last decided to breach the gap between them, she found he had fallen asleep.

In the kitchen Bruce hummed, blissfully unaware of the noise he was making, and ignorant of Sue's fears that he would trade her in for a new model.

"There's a da de da de da, da, oh yeah. Oh yeah," he hummed, wondering how to make himself a hot drink while a few hunks of meat sizzled in the pan. After polishing off the hunks of meat and enjoying a smoke and a cup of hot water Bruce stepped out into the dawn, pausing to let the dogs off and wandered down the hill to the barn.

The sliding doors of the shed screeched excruciatingly as Bruce tugged them open. Enough to waken the dead he imagined, as he fumbled for a light switch so he could see what he was doing. As the sun peeped over the hill and the few Skidian birds began their morning chorus, Bruce drove the tractor out of the shed and dropped the rotary hoe into the ground.

By the time Sue put in an appearance to see what was going on he had worked up almost a hectare of ground and decided it was time for smoko. "What do you reckon? Pretty good, eh?" Bruce asked from the tractor seat rolling a smoke.

"It's pretty big, isn't it?" Sue had visualized a small garden filled with neat rows of plants. The very size of the plot made her feel inadequate.

Bruce regarded the plot of dirt proudly. "Nah. In a few months time we'll have heaps of ground worked over and about ten Skidians caring for it." He wasn't yet so cynical about the Skidians that he doubted this would happen. He jumped down, knelt to check the depth of the cultivated soil with his fingers, and decided he should have adjusted the settings on the hoe before he started.

Feeling particularly energetic and eager to get results as quickly as possible, he bounded off to the shed. Sue toddled along in his wake, wondering what had got into him this time and what he thought she should be doing. "Hurry up, woman!" He called over his shoulder as he disappeared into the shed. "We've got heaps to do."

This sudden change in Bruce left Sue bewildered. He normally seemed, well, so unexcitable. Now he was charging around like a small boy with a new bicycle. What had got to him now? She found him pouring half a sack of dried up potatoes into a large plastic bucket, which he topped up with various packets of seeds.

"Take these, will you?" Where? Sue wondered as he began to chop some skinny poles into short lengths with an axe.

"What are those for?"

"I'll show you in the minute." He replied impatiently and grabbing some tools led her struggling with the heavy bucket, back to the plot of cultivated soil.

"Slow down, Bruce," Sue pleaded, "and tell me what's going on. Surely we're not going to plant all this today?"

"Eh? Of course not, silly."

"Bruce," she insisted, "please explain what you're doing. Otherwise you will become horribly upset when I make a mistake. I've already told you I don't know anything about gardening."

"Ok, well it's like this." He pulled out his pouch of agbar and rolled himself a smoke. "I plan," he paused to light the cigarette and put into simple terms the grand design he'd conceived the night before, "to plant a few of these vegetables to get us started. That's if they'll grow, of course. With me so far?"

Sue nodded; resenting the patronizing attitude Bruce had adopted. Did he think that she was thick or something?

"So we plant a few seeds in here today. A lot of them should really be planted as seedlings

transplanted from boxes; we'll worry about that later. Ok?"

"So far." Boxes. Now what's he talking about?

"In a week or so we'll plant a few more, maybe as seedlings. That'll hopefully give us a continual supply of veggies once we start picking them." He took another drag on his cigarette, coughed as he inhaled some smoke down the wrong tube and looked at Sue for confirmation that she understood.

"I'm with you so far," she lied, still trying to work out how the vegetables would grow in boxes set in the ground. She vaguely recalled seeing something on the TV once about growing pumpkins or something in boxes so that they came out all nice and square, was that what he was on about?

"We'll use these to mark out the drills." Bruce clamped his smoke firmly between his lips and picked up one of the sticks he had cut and pushed it into the ground.

"What's a drill?"

"Chuck me a packet of seeds. Any one will do!" he snapped impatiently, as Sue deliberated about which to give him. "Hurry up!"

"There's no need to shout at me, Bruce. I can hear you," she snapped back, tossing a packet of seeds at him.

"Thanks." He tore open the packet and tipped some of the contents into his hand.

"We plant these in a shallow groove in the soil, which we make with the edge of this thing." Bruce said, deciding he would have made an excellent teacher.

Sue picked up the hoe, eyed it dubiously, and then dragged it along with the blade horizontal to the ground.

Well, then again, maybe not. "Oh, give it here," he said, grabbing the hoe and flipping it around with one hand and making a groove with the edge of the blade. "You make me tired just watching you." Sue watched as Bruce extended the groove to about two meters in length, then tossed the hoe aside and began to trickle seeds into the groove between his fingers. "Then we cover the drill when we've finished, like this, and tamp it down. So. Got it?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Let's get cracking then." Once the packets were empty and staked on a marker peg to identify what was in each row, Bruce dug a shallow trench into which he dropped the seed potatoes, one by one. He was just finishing when Leaf arrived on the scene.

One small step

	<p>"What can they be doing?"</p>	<p>With mounting confusion Leaf had observed the offworlder's activities from the safety of the house all morning. First Bruce had ridden around on a vehicle the like of which she had never seen, turning the ground upside down. Then with a rod which had some odd attachment on the end he had made lines in the ground and had appeared to drop something in them.</p>
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It interested Leaf that Sue appeared totally ignorant about whatever Bruce was trying to do, as he was continually stopping to show her what he wanted from her.

"Why did they make the lines on the ground and then erase them?" Leaf thought it would have been easier not to turn the ground over in the first place.

Eventually, overcome by her curiosity, Leaf decided to brave the journey from the accommodation quarters down to where the offworlders had turned the ground over.

Leaf began her journey, half expecting never to cover the distance. This short trip of a mere few hundred meters was further than Leaf, or any Skidian she had ever heard of for that matter, had traveled on foot across the wilderness in generations. That the offworlders obviously were not concerned about the situation gave her the confidence to continue when she was ready to scamper back to the sanctuary of the accommodation quarters.

As she got closer to the offworlders, Leaf realized no terrible monster was going to leap out and grab her. However, this did not stop her covering the last fifty meters at a trot to gain the relative safety of the offworlders' company.

"What are you doing?" Leaf asked after taking a few moments to recover her composure.

Bruce launched into a rambling and confusing explanation of his efforts of the past few hours which she did not begin to understand, especially since Bruce concluded by saying that he was making organic food. Leaf knew that was unlikely. Whatever Bruce was up to, it was not producing organic food.

"You'll see!" Bruce laughed rudely.

Leaf ignored him and inspected the contents of one of the bags which had been tipped onto the ground, fingering the tiny balls inside. How could this ever become food? Even Sue was obviously dubious about that. Bruce stood up, rubbed his hands together, and brushed off some of the dirt that clung to his skin and glanced around, apparently satisfied with his endeavors.

How could they let themselves become so filthy? Leaf wondered as Bruce rolled himself a cigarette. Leaf knew he did not follow the Skidian custom of sharing agbar. This was a pity, for she figured that using agbar herself might at least give her a chance to collect her thoughts. Leaf became even more confused when he told Sue to get something from the storage structure.

Sue wandered off with as much grace as she could muster, delivering a sharp comment to Bruce as she walked away. Leaf did not catch what she said, but was sure that if she had rebuked a Skidian male in such a manner, she would be quickly hustled off to be socially rehabilitated.

Sue returned several minutes later with three oddly assorted objects: a large container like the one at the male's feet, a slim finger-length object with a sharp point at one end, and another that defied description. This object consisted of a short handle, the length and width of her forearm. Attached to one end of the handle was a two-headed fitting. One of the heads was shaped like a ball cut in half, the other like two flattened, curled fingers, bent backwards towards the handle.

Bruce upended the large container at his feet, held his hand out for the other two objects, and then used them to make holes in the container, hitting the slim piece of steel with the double headed handle.

Leaf was perplexed, for he was destroying the utility of the container. It would never hold fluids again! Even more confusing was that this destructive behavior did not seem to be another example of his primitive instincts getting the better of him. Rather, his actions seemed to be premeditated, for he took great care in arranging the holes in a neat circular pattern.

"Here!" he said, thrusting the other container at her. "Take this down to the river." Leaf was astonished, for he seemed to be pointing to the moving water. "And fill it up." Her bewilderment was total. Did he mean to wash in it? Why the water from the river when the water in the accommodation quarters was specially shipped in from the synthoplant?

Doubtfully she took the container and walked down to the river, too confused to be afraid. After some experimentation she managed to fill the bucket by submerging it, hoping this was what Bruce wanted. She looked down at the bucket and almost dropped it when she saw that some hidden force had suddenly distorted its shape. Leaf almost let the bucket go a second time as something else hiding in the water tried to tug it out of her grasp. She jumped

backwards, pulling the bucket out of the water, spilling half of it in the process. She stared at the bucket expecting to find some live thing in it preparing to devour her. However, as far as she could tell it contained only water.

She trudged back to where the offworlders stood watching her, wondering how she should report the events of the morning to Sideshow when the truth would simply get her into trouble. Sideshow would never believe her observations, and would surely punish her for reporting them, dismissing them as wild fantasies.

Bruce took the bucket from her and peered inside at the water, dipping one of his fingers into the liquid and then sucking the finger to see how it tasted. Leaf watched him intently, expecting him to fall down dead at any moment, horrified that he could be so casual in handling such dangerous substances.

Bruce tipped about half the water into the bucket with the perforated base and then walked along one of the freshly sown rows. Why would Bruce want to wash the ground? Leaf wondered, and how would that help the buried particles grow into plants? An alternative food production system indeed! Primitives might have such systems and eat all sorts of disgusting material, but the Skidians could not. And would not.

"What I want you to do, Leaf, is to water these rows of seeds exactly like I have shown you, once a day." Leaf thought about disobeying this pointless instruction, but a part of her was intrigued, despite her skepticism. There was always an outside chance the offworlders had something useful to show them, however improbable that might seem.

Leaf trudged along, carefully washing the ground with water as instructed, while the offworlders collected their equipment. Incensed and increasingly bitter about being treated like a drone, she quite forgot to concern herself about the moving water when she went to refill her container. She dunked it into the water, half hoping, but still fearing that whatever was in there might devour her and relieve her of the shame of her new existence.

Suddenly the two offworlders sprinted towards the moving water, shedding their clothing as they ran, leaping into the water as if escaping something so terrible that it threatened certain death. Leaf had never seen such a sight; some unknown terror must have deranged them she thought. Or perhaps it was just stress; maybe their minds had snapped like a brittle bone.

Sideshow had warned her of the danger signals: using too much agbar, drinking too much alcohol, generally erratic behavior. But what was erratic for the offworlders? What was odd by Skidian standards might be conventional behavior for them.

Leaf watched the offworlders thrashing around in the water. She had seen archival footage showing subversives being thrown to the creatures that lived in the great salty waters and decided that some of their relatives must live here in the moving water.

Leaf swayed, started to feel lightheaded, and almost collapsed as she realized the offworlders were lost and that she had only just escaped their fate herself.

The thrashing and squeals that Leaf had associated with terrible death throes ceased. Replaced moments later by the sound of laughter, though it took Leaf a moment to recognize what it was, for she had rarely heard the sound of people laughing. Leaf was surprised by the sense of relief she felt as she realized that the offworlders were not in trouble after all.

Unfortunately they were probably still doomed, if they were not already suffering from a mental breakdown, they must now certainly succumb to one of the many pathogens surely present in the moving water.

Bruce stopped trying to drown Sue for a moment, when he saw Leaf watching them from the riverbank. "I wonder if the Skidians like swimming Sue?"

"Why don't you ask her?"

"Hey, Leaf!" he called. "Why don't you jump in?" Leaf did nothing to suggest she had heard him. Instead, tossing her head haughtily, she walked off towards the house, wondering how she was going to explain the imminent demise of the offworlders to Sideshow.

"Typical!" Bruce grunted. "She hasn't even finished yet."

Leaf watched the offworlders closely from her quarters. After some time they left the moving water, apparently unaffected by their experience. In the meantime she had contacted Sideshow to inform her of the offworlders' peculiar conduct and felt a little resentful at the cryptic reply she received.

'Immersion in water was a normal activity for the offworlders!' Well, Leaf pouted, if they had told me this previously, it would have saved a lot of unnecessary anxiety on my part!

An organic plant

Over the days that followed Leaf continued to wash the ground as she had been instructed, noting none of the changes the offworlder insisted would occur.

Meanwhile Bruce occupied himself by fencing off the garden, and then turned his attention to planning his model farm, deciding the first thing he required were some stock yards so he could work with the ivops.

This brought its own logistical problems. Offhand he couldn't remember the correct dimensions of some of the integral parts, the races for instance. Besides the ivops were generally a bit smaller than the average cattle beast The relevant data was stored somewhere in his head, a most unreliable of repositories, useless to him because he was unable to extract it.

His book, however, was in some ways more in tune with Bruce's thoughts than he was himself, and the information was soon forthcoming and a pile of material suddenly appeared on the ground where he'd marked the dimensions for the yards out.

Bruce reveled in the demanding physical exertion required to dig the large postholes, the technical skill required to swing the gates, and putting the rails up just so. Well initially, anyway.

While there were numerous holes to dig, it never occurred to Bruce to get the yards built, as if by magic, in the same fashion that that the house had been. So as he toiled, he became increasingly resentful at the attitude of the Skidians because no assistance was forthcoming from them. Not that he would have accepted any assistance in his present mood, even if were offered.

He stuck to his task until the last post was rammed firm, the last gate swung, and the last rail fastened home, for the satisfaction of sitting back and announcing that he'd created his very own monument. A monument that was essential to his plans to make the Skidians realize he was indispensable to them.

Sue had attempted to help early on, but gave up when she discovered what brutally hard work it was. It did not help that Bruce seemed to be more touchy than usual, and snapped at her when she got in the way or did something wrong.

"I'm sorry, Bruce," she said, having found that digging a five foot deep post hole was a bit beyond her. Which begged the question why Bruce was so intent on doing the work manually, for certainly it was not necessary. It seemed to her, correctly as it happened, that he was trying to prove to the Skidians that his presence was indispensable, to the extent of making his own life and that of the others around him miserable.

Then as if he were the celestial creator Bruce rested, rested for so long that Leaf approved because it showed he was becoming attuned to the laid back, casual, Skidian approach to life, not that Bruce would have appreciated this unflattering comparison. During these restful days he planned the size and form of his model farm, not that this was crucial given his the vastness of the resources available to him.

From Sue's perspective he did little more than sit around the house, making incomprehensible notes on numerous pieces of paper that he screwed up and dropped on the floor. He drank steadily and devoured the food that she supplied in a misplaced effort to keep him sober. Bruce's behavior perplexed Sue, for he suddenly seemed to have distanced himself

from her. It did not occur to her that he might simply be busy.

Sue spent many worried hours trying to analyze her own behavior and find a reason for his apparent withdrawal. While she whipped herself into a frenzy of self doubt, Bruce was reaching the conclusion that life would be a lot happier if he worked on the premise that everything he did should be for his own benefit. This brightened his outlook considerably. However, he soon found that thinking positively was one thing, maintaining such an attitude in an environment where all the signals were negative was quite another.

Several mornings after the yards were complete Leaf returned from washing the ground and informed Sue casually that something strange was happening in the garden.

"This is fantastic!" Sue exclaimed as she kneeled to examine some of the bright green shoots that had forced their way out of the soil in uneven rows. "These are plants. They're growing, Leaf!" She tugged at Leaf's arm and pointed them out.

Leaf nodded vaguely, wondering what Sue was so excited about. 'So what?' Sue dashed up the hill to the house and shook Bruce awake.

"What is it?" he asked, feigning sleepiness, nursing a low-level hangover as Sue told him about some of the vegetable seeds germinating.

"So what? I knew they would," Bruce grunted, feigning disinterest.

"Come and have a look," she insisted.

"Why on earth would I want to do that?" Bruce tugged the bed cover over his head and tried to hide. Sue pulled it away. "Oh, all right! I'm coming!" he growled and ambled down to the garden.

"These seeds have a remarkably good germination rate, for having been in packets for several thousand years," he commented, having nothing more to say. After a few moments he grunted, then walked off to check out another pile of equipment that had arrived overnight.

Amongst the additional plastic fence posts and other miscellaneous items, a multicolored box caught his eye. He picked up the box, held it to his ear, and shook it listening for rattles, turning it over in his hand, and searching for some clue as to its possible use. On the base of the box he found the operating instructions that revealed it to be an electric fence energizer. All he needed to do was hook it up to a fence. It must be a solar power job he reckoned, because apparently no power input was required. Bang a couple of steel poles into the ground for an earth, run a wire from the unit to a fence and hey presto, it ought to work.

He decided to test the equipment by electrifying the fence around the garden. Bruce knew he'd never hear the end of it if a mob of ivops blundered into the garden and he hadn't done anything to stop them.

Bruce found a hammer where Sue had dropped it carelessly on the ground days before in front of the shed. Then he found a nail and hammered it into the wall beside the main doors which he hung the power pack on.

While he busied himself setting up the electric fence Leaf was absorbed with washing the ground where the seedlings were haphazardly poking through the soil. She let her attention wander occasionally as she observed Bruce's peculiar behavior, wondering what he was up to this time. As usual there did not seem to be any discernable logic to his actions.

First he had dug a hole with a giant spoon by the garden, and then threaded the end of a metal string through the top of a long pole and placed the pole in the ground, so the metal string was three meters off the ground. Then he pushed the ground back into the hole and beat it with the end of his giant spoon. Then Bruce walked across the space between the wall around the garden and the storage area he called a shed, pulling the free end of the metal string and attached it to the wall. Walking back to the storage area he connected the metal string, which was now strung tautly above the ground, to the device he had earlier attached to the wall.

What was he doing? Leaf set her bucket down and went over to inspect the connection that Bruce had made from the metal string to the fence. She prodded the joint with a finger just as Bruce emerged from the shed.

"Hey!" Bruce yelled running towards her.

Bang! Leaf leapt backwards and sprawled untidily on the ground, feeling as if she would just received an almighty kick in the ribs. Shakily she pulled herself to her feet, glancing around fearfully for a glimpse of her attacker.

"You must be careful of these wires now, Leaf, because they're alive," Bruce explained un-helpfully.

While he appreciated the usefulness of electric fences to control stock, Bruce lived in fear of receiving electric shocks, an anxiety that dated from the days when his father thought the same and used him as an unwitting human electric fence tester. While he preferred to employ a suitable meter, Bruce thought a little more laterally than his father had, which was why the dogs were loose. However, as it turned out, he need not have been concerned. Thanks to an unwitting Leaf at least now he knew the electric fence worked.

Leaf reached out to steady herself on the fence before he could stop her. Kerthump! This time Leaf felt it even more severely. In a daze she followed Bruce's advice to get out of the enclosure and retire to her quarters for a rest. She regarded the gate with suspicion; fearful of being attacked again, until Bruce held it open for her. Either that part was not 'alive', she thought, or Bruce was immune from the attacks that Leaf decided must come from the metal string. However, how could such a material be alive?

To the total confusion of the Skidians who scrutinized his every move, suddenly Bruce began to drive posts into the ground at even spaces across the plain. Soon there were intersecting lines of these posts extending over the plain creating more or less regular shaped patterns who has utility completely baffled them.

Once Bruce had completed a line of posts some five hundred meters in length, he started another at right angles to the first, focusing on a preset mark so that this second line would eventually become another section of a square paddock.

Bruce relished the physical activity, ignoring his aching back and the sweat running into his eyes. Each post was this Skidian or that and Bruce took great delight in smashing them as hard and as he could, venting his anger and frustration at Skid and all things Skidian in the process.

He was enjoying himself so much that he didn't notice the aircraft land silently to one side of him.

"Greetings." Bruce snapped his head up and swung around, raising the hammer menacingly, then recognizing the voice; he let the hammer slip from his grasp.

"Oh. Hi, Cyprus, Toytoo." Bruce nodded at the third Skidian, trying to remember who he was. Ah yes. One of the headmen, wasn't he?

"What can I do you for?" Still coming to grips with the idiom of the offworlders, the three Skidians were momentarily confused.

"Bruce, let me introduce Inel, our esteemed ruler." Cyprus said regaining his composure.

"Giddyay!" Bruce automatically extended his hand, and then tried to withdraw it without being too obvious. Maybe they didn't shake hands here he thought. Inel grabbed the proffered hand, vigorously shaking it for much longer than Bruce thought necessary. Each time Bruce tried to withdraw his hand Inel pumped it more vigorously, until Bruce wondered if he would ever get it back.

"Greetings!" Inel grinned vacantly, making Bruce wonder whether brains were a prerequisite for the top job on Skid.

"Inel wishes to inspect your progress."

"Oh, that's nice, but I haven't really started yet." The Skidians seemed particularly patronizing today Bruce decided. He wasn't in the mood to let them get away with that.

"Everything is to your satisfaction, Bruce?" Cyprus asked.

"Mostly," replied Bruce. Before he could outline his many and varied complaints, Inel

said somewhat pompously.

"I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for the good work you are doing here on Skid."

What work? Bruce hadn't even begun yet, but all he could manage under the gaze of the great man was a muted; "Thank you."

"Could you explain for us what you are doing here?" To Bruce's surprise, Inel sounded almost interested. Whether it was just the politician in him or whether it was genuine curiosity, Bruce neither knew nor cared. He was delighted that at last some Skidian was showing some real interest in the work he was doing for them.

"Well," Bruce scratched his nose reflectively, wondering whether the Skidians would understand anything he said. "There are several sources of organic food that we can easily exploit. However, they will take some time to develop to the extent you will be able to feed many people."

"Please, Bruce." Toytoo shook his head almost in disbelief. "Since you know that our synthofood plants are almost inoperative, this cannot be so."

Well what do you expect? Bruce asked himself silently. Bloody miracles? As it dawned on him that they did. With a trace of exasperation in his voice, he asked, "Then what was the point of bringing me here then? Your problems simply can't be solved overnight."

"You are supposed to teach us about producing food in the fashion of our ancestors, Toytoo replied pedantically."

"To instruct us in the skills that have been lost over time," Cyprus added, "to produce food organically."

"Look mate," said Bruce, controlling his temper with great difficulty, "as I've already pointed out, there's heaps of food here. All you have to do is learn how to harvest it." Bruce waited for a reaction to show that they had understood. Three heads nodded without comprehension.

"There are the ivops which you can butcher, which will provide you with meat. You know what I mean?"

"Yes?"

"You can grow various crops, a bit like this grass here and you can probably harvest fish from the sea."

"The sea?"

"Yeah, you know, the sea." Oh, what had Leaf called it when he had asked her about fish? "Yes, the 'great salty waters.'"

"Oh? Really?" Cyprus asked incredulously.

"Yeah, really!" Bruce replied, hurrying on now that he had their attention. "I am going to develop a model farm here, a prototype plant if you like, that your people can visit and learn from before developing your own farms. Er organic plants."

"Very good. I am pleased with your progress," announced Inel so gravely, that Bruce almost laughed. Then he thought about crying. For that seemed about it, as far as the Skidians were concerned. They began to edge nervously towards their aircraft as if their duty was done and they could now depart the scene in satisfaction. Bruce decided from their collective reaction, or lack of it, that since an instant solution to their problem was not forthcoming, they had in fact lost interest.

Well, what did they expect? He raged, trying to think of a way to rekindle their flagging interest in what he was convinced was their only hope for survival, and for that matter, his own. If they dispensed with the model farm before he had even got it organized, then there probably wasn't much point in keeping him around.

"Let me show you what I mean," he said hurriedly, before they had got close enough to their aircraft to ignore him without being obvious about it. The Skidians stopped in their tracks and Inel nodded slightly.

Of all Skidians, only Inel recognized the real extent of the crisis facing his planet and his people and the constraints imposed by culture and tradition preventing them from saving themselves.

He was also well aware of the fact that Toytoo and his fellow traveler commoner upstart Cyprus, saw the development of the synthofood crisis as a possible way to wrest control of Skid away from him. Not only was he trying to ensure the survival of Skidian culture, he was also having to defend himself from the insidious attacks of Toytoo and his untrustworthy lieutenant Cyprus. Like all the other members of the senate they considered themselves somehow immune from the worst effects of the impending famine and believed that Skid would somehow continue as it had always been.

What they did not know was that unless an antidote was quickly found for the virus infecting the synthoplants they would run out of food in a few short months. This was why he had cultivated the creation of Committee 21 and programmed Myfair to arrange the trip to the offworld planet. A planet whose inhabitants still subsisted in the manner of the ancient Skidians, in the hope they could develop a solution to the synthofood crisis.

Inel alone had access to the ancient archives detailing how his ancestors had lived and outlining the philosophies of his ancestor who had established Skid as it was today.

A planet whose population were virtually slaves, incapable of fending for themselves, dependent on the state to provide all their comforts. That this uncouth specimen before him might just have the ability to save them, was a depressing indictment of Skidian culture Inel thought sadly.

Though given the attitude of those closest to him. Cyprus and Toytoo for example, and their misplaced complacency that the Skidian way was beyond reproach, Inel didn't hold out much hope that even the remarkable offworlder could save his people from disaster. They just did not have time to initiate the strategies Bruce would propose, to salvage more than a small portion of Skid's population. Still if they could just salvage a small part of the population then there was hope for the future.

"Ok, in this area here I will enclose some ivops. This area will be an organic, er, factory. Plant, if you like." Bruce hurried on, sensing a flicker of interest from Inel, if not from the others who had assumed studied poses of boredom. "Here a number of the ivops will be allowed to reproduce, while some of their number will be killed to provide meat for eating. A renewable resource, if you like." Bruce was pleased with his explanation thus far, but he was unprepared for the resultant indication of the Skidians' total ignorance in these matters.

"You will build your plant here then? It won't be very large."

"That would appear to be a sound idea," Inel added a little more knowledgeably. Unfortunately the proposed plants would result in the undoing of generations of social engineering on Skid by the devolution of people to small, self-reliant communities. Inel wondered whether it was too high a price to pay for saving some of his people. That would be the end of Skid as it had been at the peak of its power and influence and the continued dominion of high caste Skidians like himself.

"Let's go and kill an ivop." Bruce suggested hoping a practical demonstration might be illuminating.

The Skidians seemed almost as relieved as Bruce at this suggestion, vaguely understanding about killing things, if not that ivop meat could readily be eaten.

Bruce picked the hammer up from the grass at his feet and tossed it onto the ute. It landed with a clang that made the Skidians jump in surprise, a signal to the dogs that it was probably time to go.

"Get up!" The dogs wriggled out from under the ute where they had been lying in the shade and scrambled onto the deck. "Let's go then," Bruce said urging the reluctant Skidians.

"On your vehicle. But where do we ride?" Cyprus asked, noting that there was room only for Bruce and Inel in the cab.

"No worries. You can ride on the back, and the old boy can sit with me in the front."

"Hah!" Inel clapped his hands together with a satisfied grin. It would be pleasing to see the two upstarts taken down a peg or two by the offworlder. Although he was virtually Skid's dictator, he would never dare to speak to them in the fashion Bruce had.

"Do it," Inel commanded, as he maneuvered his not inconsiderable bulk onto the front seat of the ute. Bruce watched Toytoo and Cyprus climb awkwardly onto the deck and perch themselves on the wheel arches facing each other.

Inel remained silent throughout the short trip, holding his breath as best he could to shut out the loathsome stench emanating from Bruce. He would have pegged his nose between his fingers, but thought that would be too obviously rude and might upset the offworlder who was known to be touchy.

The last thing Inel wanted was to have his dignity challenged by an angry offworlder with Cyprus and Toytoo as witnesses. After a few minutes they came upon the massive herd of ivops, which still showed no sign of concern despite Bruce's having shot one of their number a week or so earlier.

"What is it that you intend to do?" Inel asked as the ute came to a stop. He knew that the final product would be some kind of organic material that they should be able to consume in the place of synthofood, but not how that product was arrived at, or what form it took.

"Watch carefully and I'll show you," Bruce replied, forgetting that he was talking with a head of state and had probably broken a thousand Skidian conventions on what was and what was not acceptable behavior. Not that he was worried unduly about that.

Despite his rudeness, which Inel recognized as simply an ignorance of Skidian custom, Inel found Bruce's presence quite refreshing and followed him intently. He regarded Cyprus and Toytoo, who had remained seated on the deck, with a jaundiced eye. Ever since their return from the offworlder's planet, they had become full of their own importance and Inel knew he would have to deal with them soon before they got too ambitious.

Bruce strapped his knife around his waist and took the rifle down from the special brackets he had made behind the front seat.

"That one over there," he said, bringing the rifle up to his shoulders and aiming at a medium sized ivop directly in front of the ute.

Bang!

Cyprus and Toytoo all but fell off their perches as the ivop hit the ground. Bruce dropped the rifle and ran over to the fallen ivop, drawing the knife as he did so. As Bruce slit the animal's throat, Inel grasped his own in sympathy, almost feeling the sharp blade cut his own throat as a jet of bright red blood spurted from the wound.

"Be careful in case it kicks," Bruce warned Inel as he approached for a closer look.

"You'll probably want to develop a machine to do this eventually," Bruce commented as he began to skin the carcass." In a plant where hundreds of animals could be processed at a time rather than out here in the open where things get a little messy. You can also use the skins for clothing if you want."

Inel wrinkled his nose. Not likely he thought, wondering how anybody could eat any part of the bloody mess before him. Bruce completed the evisceration of the carcass with a practiced ease that Inel thought would be difficult to emulate.

"Some of this stuff is edible." Bruce prodded the entrails with his knife, retrieving the kidneys, heart, and liver.

"Get lost, dog!" He kicked Cop out of the way as the dog tried to sneak one of the kidneys he had laid out carefully on the skin.

"Most of the carcass, except for the bones of course, can be eaten. For now, though, I'll just chop off the choicest cuts." Bruce cut chunks of meat from the carcass, while Inel tried to work out what was actually the edible material. As far as Inel was concerned, seeing the way it was produced had put him right off trying to consume any of it.

"Who would have ever thought it possible?" whispered Inel in awe, finding it difficult to believe his ancestors had obtained their food in such a fashion.

	Cyprus decided to take an interest in the proceedings, but after a moment he vomited noisily beside the ute.	The acrid whiff of vomit in the air and the sound of Cyprus's retching sparked a sympathy effort from Toytoo. Toytoo's composure was not helped by Can tucking into the manna from the gods that he had stumbled on while waiting for the boss to throw him something a little more substantial.
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"Are these skills that you have displayed difficult to learn?"

"Nah, not really. Once you've got the general idea, all it takes is practice. You could start feeding people right now by simply coming out here and slaughtering ivops, but you also need to ensure a constant supply of ivops which is why I'm developing this farm. Er, organic plant."

"Hmm. And you are sure we can consume this material?" Inel asked, miss-understanding a critical part of Bruce's explanation. His ancestors had after all eaten this material, however unappetizing it appeared in its present form.

"The meat? Yeah, sure."

"In this condition, what further preparation is required?"

"Well, if you have to you can eat it raw, though it's more common to cook it. Come back to the house and I'll show you." Now he had the full attention of the top Skidian, Bruce was going to take full advantage of the situation. He cut out a section of the hide and wrapped up what meat he wanted to take, dumping the load onto the back of the ute, while the Skidians regarded the carcass dubiously until they realized that he meant to go.

"Get out of it, you silly bugger," Bruce yelled at Punch. He had made the dogs run home so that they didn't get into the meat on the way back. Punch decided the best place to run was right in front of the ute. That was ok as far as things went. However, Punch was a runover dog in the making, if he stopped suddenly for some reason.

"Ya witless bloody animal!" Bruce yelled at him in exasperation after taking some evasive action. "Geez Wayne!" he muttered under his breath at the dog.

As if she had been forewarned about the immanent arrival of her leader, Leaf was waiting as Bruce pulled up to the house. Leaf greeted Inel respectfully and led the Skidians onto the verandah. Once the Skidians comfortably settled, Bruce went inside to have a wash. Once he'd showered, pulled on a Skidian robe that he thought might be more appropriate attire considering the status of their visitors than his usual shorts and singlet, he checked on the cook, and joined the Skidians outside at the table.

"Cheers!" He said, accepting a large glass of beer from Leaf and brought it to his lips. He became uncomfortably aware of how four sets of eyes bored into him as if he'd committed some great cultural sin. To cover his confusion and try to stop the hot red flush creeping up his face under his whiskers he rolled up a cigarette, and was relieved to see the Skidians relax visibly. Leaf came round and whispered in his ear.

"You must ask for permission to be seated in the presence of Inel." Bruce tried to ignore the warm tingle that began in his groin and moved up to settle in the pit of his stomach as he felt Leaf's breast pressing against his shoulder. Then he became angry.

This was his home and he'd do what he damn well pleased, Inel or no Inel. Leaf placed a restraining hand on Bruce's shoulder, sensing his unreasonable indignation at being educated

about some basic Skidian customs.

"If the others are taking agbar, your first action must be to join them in ceremony," she added. Bruce nodded, smiled at the Skidians, and lit his smoke. Bloody bastards, he thought, smoldering resentfully at their arrogance.

"Thanks Leaf," he managed to whisper with some courtesy. Why did the Skidians just assume he knew their customs? He ignored the sudden thought that if he were a little more open minded he would set about learning a few Skidian customs himself. Bruce dismissed the idea, they wanted him here; it was up to them to spell these things out.

Nevertheless Bruce gradually relaxed. The beer and the cigarette made him feel more mellow than he really wanted to be. On the other hand he'd had a fairly constructive day and someone else was cooking his dinner. What else could a man really want at the end of the day? Pity about the company though.

One by one the Skidians flicked their butts over the veranda and settled back in their chairs with audible sighs. As if Leaf had been waiting for this precise moment, she quietly announced that dinner was ready to serve. Inel acknowledged her with an imperious wave of his hand and pulled himself up to the table.

Not a word had passed between them since Bruce had joined the happy little party. He flicked his own butt away, took a last long swig of beer, feeling more like an outsider than a host.

A drone appeared, carrying several trays heaped with synthofood and meat on its shiny metallic arms. Bruce looked at the plate Leaf set down before him, wondering if the Skidians said grace or something before they ate.

"On Skid we believe nothing should get in the way of consuming food, so we do not stand on ceremony. Although it is customary for the host to begin to eat first, to show the food hasn't been poisoned." Cyprus, Bruce's self-appointed mentor, and cultural adviser added, "it is permitted to converse over a meal."

Bruce considered the chunks of burnt meat on his plate and how unappetizing they must appear to the Skidians. By now they must be wondering if these meager offerings were really a part of the solution to their impending famine. Oh well, he shrugged, not really giving a shit one way or the other.

He skewered a piece of meat with his fork, dipped it into a pile of synthofood and with a flourish he stuffed the forkful into his mouth. It was not that bad really.

The Skidians watched him without making a move towards their own meals. It belatedly occurred to Bruce they would be unfamiliar with solid food. At least, he grinned inwardly; they had the teeth for the job even if they didn't know how to use them. Big white horse-like, chompers.

Inel looked at Cyprus and then Toytoo. He personally did not intend to consume any of this organic food until it had been subjected to a battery of tests back in Sietnuoc and perhaps not even then. For the other two it was a different story, one of them had to show Bruce that a Skidian wasn't going to be outdone by a primitive from some backwater planet.

Inel pushed his plate away and spoke in a strange guttural dialect Bruce could not follow. Inconsiderate bastards, he thought. Bloody rude of them to speak as if he weren't there, as if he were some lower form of life. He glanced from one to the other, saw Cyprus's jaw drop, and heard him suddenly breathe in short, panicky gasps. What was going on was he sick?

Cyprus slowly composed himself and hesitantly speared a piece of meat with his fork, regarding it suspiciously as if it might suddenly reach out and bite him. Something about Cyprus's expression reminded Bruce of a dog contemplating a new and interesting morsel, trying to decide whether to eat it, roll in it, or do something else on it.

Cyprus held the charred chunk of meat up to his mouth. His nostrils twitched and flared, and all he wanted was to be somewhere else so he would not have to face this moment. Nevertheless, there was no avoiding it, Inel had spoken, and to defy him meant certain death.

Cyprus had been panic stricken when Inel commanded him to consume some of the organic material. Inel certainly was not about to endanger his own health unnecessarily. It also seemed to Cyprus that he had been chosen rather than Toytoo because he was expendable, which did nothing for his flagging confidence. He could not ignore Inel's direct command without avoiding the threat of immediate disinfection, which was most likely or even worse, permanent banishment to a social correction center away from his life in Sietnuoc.

Staring at the organic material that Bruce called meat, Cyprus with a sudden clarity of thought, realized that if this material proved incompatible with his digestive system then not only was he a dead man, but so was Skid. Or was it? Cyprus was becoming a little confused on this point. In ancient times, as far as any of them could discover, Skidians had consumed the very material that Cyprus noticed with a start was now moving of its own volition to his mouth. Could their digestive systems have altered that much over the intervening millennia?

Cyprus glanced over at Bruce who was eating both synthofood and organic food and showed no ill effects from either. Still, you could never be sure with these primitives he thought, forgetting that Bruce's internal anatomy was the same as his own.

The 'meat' as Cyprus as Bruce called the material, was perfectly safe for him to eat. Though no amount of intellectual justification could ease the tension of the moment when he had to put this knowledge to the test.

He used his almost redundant olfactory sensors to assess the meat, and was surprised by its aromatic nature. It might be a raw and unprocessed product, teeming with harmful microorganisms. But the smell, the smell conjured up all sorts of visions in his mind and his mouth began to feel moister than usual.

Then the meat was inside his mouth. It was hot and he was trying to suck it off the fork. Cyprus panicked momentarily and tried to pull the fork out of his mouth. However, in his panic his jaws had almost clamped firmly shut and the meat caught on his teeth and fell off into his mouth.

Now what? He moved the chunk of meat around his mouth with his tongue, trying to work out what to do next. He could not swallow a chunk of food this size, for he would surely choke. Cyprus glanced across at Bruce whose jaws seemed to be trying to crush something, and followed his example. Cyprus had always wondered what he had teeth for, and had considered, as had many other Skidians, whether he should have them extracted or not for cosmetic reasons. Now he was glad he had not.

He closed his eyes and assumed a grim expression while savoring the taste of the meat and the new and pleasurable sensations that flooded his brain. Even the memory of the bloody carcass on the ground and the thought of how unhygienic the meat must be, failed to spoil his enjoyment of this first mouthful of organic food.

Now he understood what food really was as the first mouthful made its way down his digestive tract. The meat had a flavor all of its own. If this was but one example of the offerings the offworlders had, then Cyprus looked forward to trying the others, even if they only tasted half as good as this first one.

"Excellent," he managed to remark between mouthfuls. Although his obvious enjoyment convinced neither Toytoo nor Inel to make a start on their own meals. Cyprus could be pretending, after all, to try to lure them to a fate similar to his own. It was not beyond the realms of possibility that he was stoically enduring extreme agony until he could lure them to their own ends.

When it became obvious to Inel that Cyprus was not likely to keel over on the spot, Inel decided it was time to depart. He curtly ordered Cyprus to remain behind, since he seemed to have some affinity with Bruce, as if eating the same food gave one man a greater feeling towards another.

He would remain to learn all there was to know about organic food production, so that the offworlders could be disposed of. This turn of events irked Cyprus. It was not enough that he

had to associate closely with the offworlders; he must also remain in the wilderness. The prospect of remaining in this isolated spot made him most uneasy for, as every Skidian knew, inexplicable dangers lurked in the wilderness. Why else did they all live in cities?

Cyprus wondered whether he would ever see Sietnuoc again. However, he lacked the imagination to be really concerned, and accepted the role that had been allocated to him with what little dignity he could muster.

On the job training

As far as Bruce was concerned, the sooner the Skidians were learning to run farms and process the ivops, and feeding themselves, the better off they'd be. There was no way he could feed Skids one billion plus population by himself, which is what the Skidians seemed to want. Rather he saw himself as an adviser, whose main aim should be to make himself redundant as quickly as possible.

He also had some definite ideas about teaching people things; he was a staunch believer in the value of hands-on experience, which Cyprus was about to discover.

Cyprus's general attitude didn't impress Bruce. God help the Skidians if they were all like this lazy bastard, he decided as he toiled away on the fence lines under the hot Skidian sun.

In keeping with his self-appointed role as would be leader of the entire organic movement and the traditions that had made Skid strong, Cyprus was content to let somebody else look after the basics. He did not follow how Bruce's effort was important to the development of the organic plant, or 'farm' as Bruce called it. Nor was he really interested. Bruce's explanation that the farm was vital to exploiting the ivop resource, that unless the ivops were properly managed the resource would soon be exhausted fell on deaf ears.

Cyprus knew this to be nonsense. Why not just kill the ivops and process them where they stood out in the wilderness? The ivops were plentiful now and always would be. If this resource were ever threatened, they would deal with it at the appropriate time and in the customary manner.

After several days of verbal wrangling with Cyprus and trying to get some work out of him by gentle digs that Cyprus steadfastly ignored, Bruce finally lost patience with him. He wasn't about to slog his guts out for Skid while Cyprus sat around, irritating him with his inane comments.

Bruce asked Cyprus to bring him some more posts from the back of the ute where the Skidian had perched himself, legs crossed, on the tailgate. Initially Cyprus just played dumb, pleading ignorance which was typical of Skidians when they wanted to avoid anything unwelcome. On Skid this was acceptable behavior and always worked because nobody was rude enough, unlike Bruce who was most persistent, to press the point beyond the first silent clamping of the jaws.

Bruce informed Cyprus bluntly that he, high and bloody mighty Cyprus, was here to learn and one of the things he was going to learn was how to work, whether he liked it or not. Cyprus continued to stare insolently at Bruce, which infuriated Bruce even further.

"Right, ya bastard!" Bruce reached over and pulled him off the tailgate. "You can get your fat arse off there for a start." Cyprus tried to catch his balance, but ended up in an untidy heap on the ground. Cyprus's eyes bulged, almost popping out of his head as he tried to pick himself up but Bruce held him down with a foot and handed him the hammer he had been using.

For a moment Cyprus could not believe what was happening, nobody handled a Skidian like this.

"Here." Bruce let Cyprus scramble to his feet, made him take the hammer, and pushed him over to the fence line. Cyprus was too stunned to do anything but comply as Bruce set him alight knocking the slim posts into the ground. After standing over Cyprus until he was satisfied he could be left alone for more than five minutes, Bruce walked off to where he had dumped several coils of wire.

Fifteen minutes later, trailing a wire behind him, Bruce came to where Cyprus was working. In typical Skidian fashion, Cyprus believed if he proved incapable of doing what he was told, he would be made to stop. However, Bruce was made of sterner stuff.

Cyprus had knocked in a few posts at irregular intervals and varying depths, which offended Bruce's sense of decorum. Muttering darkly, "He's just doing this to piss me off," Bruce corrected the faults that threatened to mar his rural art form and told Cyprus to get his shit together before he whacked him one.

Cyprus did not know what a whack was but suddenly fearing for his own safety he applied himself a little more diligently; it was a simple task after all. However before long his lack of physical stamina manifested itself, never before had he exerted himself so strenuously.

After all of fifteen minutes he needed to stop for a rest. Painful bubbles had appeared on the hand that grasped the hammer shaft, his limbs had become heavy and sore, and his robe was drenched from the moisture that sprung alarmingly like little streams from his skin. When Bruce wandered by on his way back running out another wire and saw Cyprus laying on the ground he harangued him verbally and physically, forcing him to continue.

Bruce thought Cyprus had got the idea, but when he turned after walking about fifty meters he saw the Skidian had already stopped again. Bruce stomped back and revived him with a few well-placed kicks.

"Get up, you useless bastard." Cyprus whimpered at the unaccustomed pain as his muscles tightened and cramped. To his surprise he found he could still stand and when Bruce thrust the hammer at him, he grasped it limply in hands that had become a bloody mess as the blisters burst, and started to hammer in another post.

Somehow Cyprus managed to struggle through the rest of the day and those that followed. He resented the way Bruce had bullied him so obscenely, and vowed he would get his revenge somehow. Each afternoon Cyprus collapsed in his quarters once the day's work was completed to Bruce's satisfaction, almost too tired to contemplate a wash or food, and cursed the day he had ever set eyes on Bruce.

With his body aching and still exhausted from the previous day, Cyprus faced each morning with a hollow feeling of dread as if he wanted to be sick. So intense was this feeling that for the first few days he could barely eat.

"Not again," he groaned each morning, as Bruce turfed him out of bed before dawn. Then he had to sit at the table and watch Bruce while he devoured his morning meal, drank his coffee, and smoked, which made him feel more nauseous than ever. A small offering of synthofood in the middle of the day and again in the evening was all Cyprus could manage for days. He could not even bring himself to take agbar in the presence of another. Not that Bruce ever thought of sharing his agbar with anyone.

Despite his growing hatred for Bruce, Cyprus was grudgingly beginning to respect his abilities. How did he manage to be so physically active and show such little fatigue? And unlike any Skidian he had ever known, including Inel, Bruce was able to dominate by sheer force of character, just as he had dominated the Stim event. No longer could Cyprus patronize Bruce as a primitive being, not in his presence anyway.

He began to wonder if all the males of his planet had similar characteristics. If they did then the universe better look out when they eventually managed to get off their planet and started to roam through space.

After a few days, Cyprus also noticed to his horror a gradual change in the color of his skin. He had quickly abandoned his usual robes for Bruce's style of dress. A singlet and shorts, the robes were far too clumsy and hot to be wearing outside in the heat of the day, so for the first time in his life his skin was exposed to the sun. Soon he would be as dark as Sue he thought with distaste, as his normally pallid skin became red and hot and then turned the same color as ivop meat when it was cooked.

At first he thought the change in his skin color might have something to do with the

ever-increasing quantities of the meat he was eating. Its dark color might be somehow changing the pigmentation of his skin. He almost worried himself to death over this dramatic transformation. If the meat could do this to him, what else might it do?

"You're getting quite a sun tan there, Cyprus," Bruce said one day, easing his mind. Being burnt by the sun was not something he had thought of. Was that dangerous he wondered?

By the fourth day of Bruce's brutal regime Cyprus was becoming aware of other changes, too. Though he was still stiff and sore, his veins pulsed with a new sense of vigor, and he sensed that his body was strengthening. However, it was a relieved Cyprus who greeted the arrival of the three 'trainees' promised by Inel. Cyprus was now able to assume a position more in keeping with the dignity he thought he deserved, as he began to instruct the new arrivals in the duties he had so recently learned himself.

Having established himself in a supervisory role and assuming that Cyprus would be motivated enough to do what he was told, Bruce realized he had to find something for himself to do until all the fencing was finished before he went nuts.

Bruce turned his hand to tidying things up and doing those little jobs that seemed to escape everybody else's attention. That used up half a day. Consequently it didn't take long for Bruce to get on everybody's nerves. In the manner of a man suddenly retired from an active working life, he poked his nose in where it was not appreciated, in effect doing nothing particularly useful and busying himself by getting in everybody's way.

But only Sue dared tell him in no uncertain terms to get lost.

After being told by Sue that his intrusions into her space were becoming intolerable Bruce wandered off with the dogs for an aimless walk across the plain. He was gone most of a day and half the night until his absence began to worry Sue. Had he taken her irritable snap to heart? Sometimes he seemed bloody minded enough to simply disappear altogether. Cyprus seemed to think so, and was prepared to ensure she was blamed for the loss of a semi precious resource.

Punch, Cop, and Can were delighted to be finally out and about. They were getting fat and sassy, Bruce noted as he sent them on practice casts across the plain. At times the dogs would trot along happily behind Bruce, then one or two, or all three of them, would scamper off to sniff out some intriguing odor that could only appeal to a dog, piles of dried dung, or the odd desiccated carcass.

Bruce started to really look around the country he was passing across for the first time. Among other things he noted that the sward he walked through seemed to comprise only one or two species of grass, and there were no obvious weeds, which he thought was rather odd. There didn't seem to be many weeds in the garden either. There might be none, he realized, because most of the 'weeds' were in fact vegetable plants that had sprung into life from carelessly scattered seeds.

It was almost as if the entire landscape had been purged of all that didn't have some sort of productive use and the productive species were somehow invigorated.

When it began to get dark he realized he must have been walking aimlessly for hours and was starting to get a little peckish. He had to think for a moment which direction the house but when he turned around, there it was shining like a lighthouse beacon.

When he arrived back at the house Bruce was surprised by his reception, the relief on the faces of both Cyprus and Sue, and the way Sue scolded him.

"You might have told me you were going to be late. I've had your dinner ready for hours." She sounded just like his mother again. Perish the thought.

"It's probably burnt now." Sue had worried herself to the point of distraction that Bruce might have taken her irritable snap to heart, his total lack of concern at the worry he had caused didn't help her mood.

Bruce just ignored Sue, oblivious of the turmoil he had caused, and waited for someone to

bring him something to eat and drink.

Bruce headed off with the dogs in tow the next morning in the direction of where Cyprus and his team should be working. Trainees. Huh! He thought. They were worse than useless, spending most of their time lolling about, smoking, and, for all he knew, telling dirty stories. Even after lowering his expectations to almost zero, they didn't seem to achieve very much.

It was long past the time when he should have checked on their progress. In a way he didn't really blame them for their attitude, for like himself they were here against their will. Not that they were probably aware of Skid's increasingly desperate plight. Bruce wouldn't be surprised about that either, just as he wouldn't be surprised if they did know and couldn't give a damn one way or the other. So what? He continued thinking somewhat irrationally.

Still they were here to work and they had no choice in the matter, just as he himself had no choice he raged, angrily surveying their efforts to date once he got to the fence line they were supposed to be working on.

In the days that had passed since their arrival, they had not done as much as Bruce had done by himself in a day.

"Useless bastards!" he growled with a twinge of guilt, knowing he should have kept a better eye on them. "Cyprus, you useless!"

Cyprus obviously enjoyed his supervisory role, strutting about and giving pointless orders to show the world who was in charge. Nevertheless, he lacked control over his team, due, Bruce was sure, to his reluctance to lead by example. He did not know this was not the Skidian way, when a Skidian was in the company of Skidians who were lower on the social scale, they did the work. Not he. They organized the meals, agbar, or whatever, while their peers sat around and with a minimum of input, let them get on with it in their own inimitable fashion. The problem was that the 'trainees,' all scions of the aristocracy, were not sufficiently subordinate to Cyprus for him to have any authority over them.

Time, he thought, to teach them a lesson they won't forget in a hurry.

Bruce strode purposefully towards the four Skidians, coming up on them totally unawares as they lolled comfortably in the shade of a handy tree.

"What the bloody hell's going on?" He bellowed. The dogs, recognizing a tone of voice that heralded trouble for somebody slunk into hiding under the ute as four heads swiveled in surprise towards the source of this unwelcome and unintelligible outburst.

After a moment or two of silence Cyprus rose shamefacedly to his feet. He knew enough about Bruce to expect a tantrum of the sort his companions had never witnessed.

"No excuses, Cyprus!" Bruce exploded, before Cyprus could get a word in to defend himself. "I knew I couldn't rely on you useless shits to do anything." He glowered menacingly at the three younger Skidians, who with the cockiness born of ignorance and youth pretended that he was not there.

Who did this primitive creature think he was? They were Skidians and were not going to be ordered about by someone from one of the universe's more primitive regions. They grinned and nudged one another. What could he do if they kept on ignoring him?

"Get up on your feet," Cyprus demanded. However, none of them bothered moving. Cyprus shrugged his shoulders sheepishly and the anger that Bruce had affected until then welled up in his throat. Bruce reached over to the nearest Skidian, grabbed a handful of his hair, and dragged his luckless victim to his feet.

"Wha?" Oridor screamed, partly in outrage at such treatment and partly in pain as some of his hair was ripped from his scalp. His two companions remained motionless stunned into inaction by this unheard of act of physical violence.

"Get a bloody move on," Bruce hissed, pulling Oridor towards him, neatly stepping aside, and then releasing his grip so that Oridor stumbled and fell in a tangle of arms and legs. Bruce gave him a kick up his exposed backside for good measure.

"You there, hurry up man!" With an alacrity which surprised all of them, Iamot and Laeol,

closely followed by Oridor, scrambling to get out of Bruce's range, busied themselves on the fence line, doing little more than getting in one another's way in their panic.

"Bruce," Cyprus coughed, about to inform Bruce on some of the finer points of Skidian etiquette. Seeing the look in Bruce's eyes he thought better of it and joined the others on the fence instead. Bruce picked up one of the plastic fence posts from the back of the ute and sat on the tailgate, swishing the rod viciously through the air.

From time to time one of the Skidians would nervously look up from his work, twisting his head around surreptitiously to see if Bruce was watching, with not a word passing between them.

While Bruce was around the Skidians worked reasonably well, even Cyprus pitched in and gave the others the benefit of his limited experience. Actually, Bruce was quite impressed with the speed in which Cyprus had picked up the essentials of the job. Not that it would ever occur to Bruce to tell him this.

However after a while Bruce got bored and frustrated watching the Skidians, their feeble attempts at completing what he considered were simple tasks made him tired just watching them.

"Right!" he said, deciding to leave them to it. "I'm off now. When I come back I want to see the wires up and strained on this stretch of fence and the posts in across the back of the paddock. Ok Cyprus?"

Cyprus seemed about to speak, but in the end he just nodded feeling totally humiliated by Bruce.

"If not, then." Bruce slashed the rod through the air above Laeol's head and the Skidians redoubled their efforts, only succeeding in getting in each other's way even more. Bruce shook his head sadly as he watched them. Useless, he thought. He didn't expect much to get done, but at least he'd given them a reasonable target. Five minutes after he left, they would be sitting under the tree, telling dirty stories or whatever else Skidian men talked about. I suppose, he thought, I should stick around and supervise them properly. But he couldn't be stuffed. Bruce strolled back towards the house wondering what he was going to do for the rest of the day.

"Hey, I'm hungry!" Bruce yelled as he entered the house, fishing to see what sort of reaction he could get. Fishing. Bruce was sick of fish too. In fact he was just about sick of everything at the moment, and decided he'd better find something to spice up his life with. He propped his feet up on the railing around the verandah and rolled himself a smoke.

"How about a beer, eh?" he called, wondering why Leaf hadn't responded by now. Bloody useless Skidians. Bruce slouched in the chair and closed his eyes. Bang! Crash! Bruce didn't bother opening his eyes. Leaf was in the kitchen again. Then he sensed, rather than saw, a figure standing above him.

"What do you want?" Bruce flinched as he heard a plate being slammed down on the table beside his arm.

"There's the last of the meat. Cold. You'd better go and get some more, big white hunter." Sue scowled derisively as Bruce opened his eyes, "and I don't approve of your drinking this early in the day. It's only lunchtime."

"Who asked you?" Bruce sat up and appraised the small chunk of cold meat on the plate without a lot of excitement. "Yes mum, no mum, three bags full mum!" He muttered sardonically.

"Wait!" Sue grabbed his arm as he attempted to stab the meat with his fork. "We've got something else."

"Like what?" He didn't appreciate being mucked about by Sue, when she was in one of these teasing moods that she seemed to think were fun. "Don't stuff me around, I'm not in the mood. Ok?"

"Leaf!" Leaf appeared carrying a large bowl.

"Surprise!" Sue exclaimed happily. "Vegetables!"

"Where?" Bruce asked, making a grab for the bowl.

"Not so fast kiddo," Sue said, pushing him back down into his seat.

"Geez, woman!" Bruce hated the way she made such a big fuss over everything. Fuming silently he controlled his temper, not wanting to upset her. Bloody Americans.

"What have you got in there?" he asked as sweetly as he could manage. Bloody woman!

"These," said Sue, reaching into the bowl and withdrew a small purplish fruit. "I don't know if they're ok. They are a bit bitter."

"Radishes. Beauty!"

"Carrots, cabbage and lettuce. We've made a bit of a salad with them." Sue shoveled some of the salad onto Bruce's plate with a large spoon and then sat beside him.

"I thought it would be ages before we would be eating this stuff," Bruce remarked. Shit it grows quickly, he thought. They would be able to feed the people of Skid a hell of a lot quicker than he had ever thought possible. Why it was only... Nah, it couldn't have been. Could it? They'd only planted the stuff a week or so ago. So that's why Sue had wanted him out of the garden. Bruce grinned; feeling amazingly happy at the effort Sue had gone to, to surprise him like this. He kissed her on the cheek.

"Great!" Bruce said after a few mouthfuls, cramming the salad into his mouth with his fingers. "Pity there's no mayonnaise and stuff, cheese and the like," he added ungratefully.

"Aren't you ever satisfied?" She cuffed him playfully.

"Nah, not really. Hey, I reckon this calls for a celebration." He said after polishing off the last of the salad. "I can't wait for things like the peas and potatoes to be ready, so we can have a decent feed. You know once we have decent food a man could almost get used to this place." Bruce told Sue wiping bits of salad from his whiskers.

"What? You must be kidding!" Sue was startled by how this comment conflicted with everything Bruce had said previously about Skid, and how it jarred with her own feelings.

"Why not? The weathers ok, the tucker's getting better, we've got good job prospects." Bruce chuckled. "Shit, we might as well get used to the idea that we're going to be here forever."

"Don't remind me, please Bruce." No, Sue promised herself. No.

Bruce gazed at the low hills in the distance; they were no more than a ridge really. A sight that reminded him of home every time he looked in that direction. Then wished he hadn't. Rather, he wished that he could simply wake up from this nightmare he was living. He wished that he could go to bed, wrap himself into a warm cocoon, and hide from the world. Or Skid. However, he was old enough to realize things like that didn't happen. For better or worse he was stuck here whether he liked it or not.

"Nah, well anyway," he continued after the moments contemplation, here're the boys back for lunch.

The 'boys' were by now making their way back to the house in the ute for whatever they had for lunch.

Iamot, Laeol, and Oridor leapt off the back quickly and scuttled away to their quarters as soon as it came to a stop outside the house, anxious to avoid Bruce. Cyprus who sat majestically behind the steering wheel, climbed out ponderously, and approached the house, prepared to admonish Bruce for his unacceptable behavior a little earlier in the day.

It infuriated Cyprus since the offworlders had been brought to Skid in order to show Skidians how to produce food organically that here they were instead, not only spending their time drinking and using agbar, but they broke every other moral code that Cyprus could think of as well. It was not fair!

Cyprus felt betrayed by his own leader, by his own colleagues. Why was he left to do all the work? Work of such importance that it was certainly beyond his comprehension to understand why he was doing it in the first place. What the tasks he had been set had to do with producing the organic food that Bruce insisted abounded in the wilderness was still unclear to

him. Cyprus still could not understand why they could not simply harvest ivops as the offworlders presently did to satisfy their needs.

Cyprus was about to inform Bruce in no uncertain terms; as best he was able in the roundabout Skidian way, what he thought of the situation. However, Bruce beat him to the draw and Cyprus found himself unable to articulate the strong statement of dissatisfaction he had planned to deliver to the offworlders concerning their behavior.

"Sit down, mate!" Bruce welcomed Cyprus onto the verandah with unaccustomed warmth, and offered him some agbar. "Hey Leaf! A beer for Cyprus."

Cyprus used the agbar in the conventional fashion, in silence up the nose. By the time he had finished, having quaffed a few mouthfuls of beer, he had quite forgotten what had so upset him.

Despite the confrontation with his Skidian workforce the only way Bruce could get any work out of them was by standing them all the time. This was a largely unsuccessful maneuver as far as motivation went, because as soon as he turned his back they stopped what they were doing and settled down for a sleep.

"What a pack of bloody useless goons!" He yelled at them to no effect, resigning himself to the fact that if he wanted to get anything done he'd just have to do it himself. So much for assuming a supervisory role he thought.

He threw himself into the fencing work, but his presence had a strange effect on his erstwhile workforce. Rather than stimulating them to greater effort, it merely reduced their output even more, as if they'd expected all along that Bruce, rather than they, should be putting in the most effort. It soon became obvious that Iamot, Laeol, and Oridor didn't even know why they were there.

As far as Bruce was concerned the Skidians were absolutely useless, and showed little concern for their own futures. Even Cyprus, who should have known better, showed a decreasing interest in what might ensure him a full belly in the future.

Bruce felt that once he had shown he had no easy solution to their crisis, the Skidians lost interest in the whole project, which irked him for he couldn't believe they could be so short sighted in their time of need. What most frustrated Bruce most, was that what he considered important clearly clashed with Skidian perceptions of the situation.

He focused his energy on completing the first stage of his development program, impatient to move on to the next -- stocking his model farm. It was becoming an obsession with him, perhaps as an attempt to justify his existence, that the project succeed. Not that anyone on Skid, apart from himself, was in a position to make a qualified judgement. Once he was finished the Skidians could then simply clone farms all round the planet using this initial one as a template, probably almost overnight.

Bruce was tempted to tell the Skidians to simply start bowling ivops over where they stood to supply themselves with food. But he had a sneaking suspicion that if he did that then the Skidians would simply keep bowling the ivops over until there were none left. He thought it was a much more sensible idea to try to introduce them to the idea of farming and utilizing a resource rather than squandering it in one foul swoop.

Finally, despite the best efforts of his workforce, Bruce was able to sip a well-earned beer as he looked contentedly down at the plain below the house on the forty paddocks that constituted the first stage of his model farm.

Ready to start mustering ivops from the plain to stock the farm, Bruce magnanimously gave his Skidian workforce a few days off to go to town and do whatever Skidians did when they got some spare time. Hitching a lift on a freighter that had just disgorged its load at the farm all four male Skidians made a beeline for Sietnuoc.

Cyprus carried a report extolling his efforts on Skid's behalf in the wilderness and some samples for further analysis. Cyprus had been sampling the organic food that the offworlders had produced to date. However, nothing, short of force feeding, could persuade his three

compatriots to try any of the food produced on the farm despite Bruce's efforts.

Bruce saw these Skidians as the cutting edge of a campaign to cultivate a general acceptance of organic food among Skid's populace, and their reluctance frustrated him. He was still astounded with the lack of support he got from Cyprus, who seemed to regard the organic food as a secret he was loath to share with anyone.

However, despite Bruce's best efforts, Cyprus was not much more enlightened about the production of organic food now than he had been before they had started.

As far as Cyprus was concerned, and rightfully so, the small garden seemed inadequate to supply the needs of Skid, judging by how far the material went towards feeding the offworlders themselves. What he failed to understand was that the small garden at Bruce's farm was merely an example of what could be done if the Skid's industrial might was brought to bear on the problem. This apparent evidence of an obvious lack of progress in the inconclusive report from Cyprus was disquieting news for the members of Committee 21 who had staked much on the organic plants.

Strategic stockpiles of synthofood were being steadily depleted as efforts were made to keep the population fed and ignorant of the crisis going on around them. Production from the synplants had plateaued at 13 percent of Skid's own needs, quite apart from the requirements of the other planets that relied on Skid for food. Worse, rumors of the impending crisis were beginning to leak to the general populace and the first uneasy stirring of unrest, the likes of which were unheard of on Skid for generations, were becoming apparent. An air of uneasiness hung over the cities like dark threatening storm clouds as Skidians began to sense something terrible was about to happen, while the establishment sought to divert attention away from the increasing deficiencies in the lives of the average Skidian.

Watching his people and their reaction to the now obvious shortages, Inel alone realized how slender had been the thread by which he and all his predecessors had held sway on Skid. It had not been their total domination of Skid in every aspect of life at all. The cultural programming, the control of the media, and education, all the suppressive traits of a totalitarian regime. It had simply been their ability to provide the necessities of life. Soon the isolated cases of disobedience and destruction of property as Skidians sought to vent their anger at suddenly finding that the comfortable lives they had taken for granted were suddenly endangered, would grow beyond the ability of the Skidian security forces to control.

While Inel did not feel personally threatened, the members of Committee 21 certainly did because of the apparent lack of substantial progress in the great 'organic' experiment, as it was being hailed. Especially when the results of a trial in which Mulgoon and Sideshow had tried to exist on the organic material that Bruce had used to explain growth to Sideshow became public knowledge in the senate. Never mind that the information available from Cyprus' latest reports now showed up grave deficiencies in their experimental procedure.

Inel remained apparently unruffled by the situation. So tranquil did he appear that rumors began to surface that he was incapable of leading Skid through its present crisis and should be removed. Inel's composure was prompted by an inability to react to the situation, some said, not because he was firmly in control.

Inel knew if Skidians were saved from the specter of starvation by the offworlders then everything else he, they held, dear would change as well. Was the probable success of the offworlders plans worth the destruction of Skid, as he knew it? He was not sure and decided that he must have more time to consider the situation.

It wasn't simply about deciding if his people would survive the present crisis, the likely structure of the resulting society he had taken a solemn oath to preserve at all costs was just as, if not more important to him. It would be more acceptable to save just a few Skidians and preserve the exquisite nature of Skidian culture than save most of the population and lose any control over its future development. Once Skidians were forced to think and act for themselves as a result of instituting the offworlders food production schemes, that would signal the end of Skid, as he and his ancestors had known it.

Neither Iamot nor Laeol returned to the farm with Cyprus at the completion of their few days off in the big smoke.

"Par for the course," Bruce murmured without surprise, he'd half expected none of them to return. "Just one more example of how eager these people are to help themselves," he muttered into his beer, shaking his head like an old man with a low opinion of modern youth.

When asked why the other two Skidians had not returned, Cyprus merely shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know," he said, meaning he did not care to explain to an outsider, and Bruce could not get any more out of him on the subject.

Sue, of course, saw the situation in another light. "I can't blame them, really. They are only slaves after all, directed where to go and what to do by their master. As far as they're concerned there's nothing important happening here, though their leaders might see things differently."

"Meaning?"

"Well, you can't blame the workers for a lack of interest if their bosses don't give them some positive vibes, you know?"

Bruce didn't have any sympathy with Sue's bleeding heart liberal attitude. He'd been brought up to believe that decent people worked hard and those who didn't were bludging parasites who expected others to look after them and pay their way. The Skidians were simply a pack of bludgers and their rulers something worse because they condoned the bludging. Bruce descended into one of his 'I don't give a shit' moods. If the Skidians weren't going to get their act together, then he wasn't about to go out of his way to exert himself on their behalf.

Playing cowboys

Sue stirred irritably, wondering why Bruce was getting out of bed far earlier than usual the morning after Cyprus and Oridor had returned to the farm.

"Come on, wakey wakey," he said, shaking her shoulders firmly.

"It's too early!" she moaned into her pillow. Sue peered at the clock by the bed. "It's only four thirty!"

"We need an early start," Bruce replied, relishing the prospect himself.

Out in the predawn darkness as the first rays of sunshine hit the hills alive with straggling lines of sheep or cattle harried by a good team of dogs. To feel his booted feet swish through dewy grass and the fresh clean smell of the open air was his personal nirvana. Bruce tipped Sue out of bed, leaving her to disentangle herself from the bed covers, and went to rouse the Skidians.

By the time he had eaten, drunk a cup of syncoffee and almost finished a second, let the dogs off for a run, and had a couple of smokes, the others had dragged themselves into the kitchen, complaining sleepily about being torn from their beds at this ungodly hour.

"Ready?" Bruce demanded as the Skidians and Sue did their best to dawdle.

"Oh, come off it Bruce! It's still dark outside!" Sue snarled.

"So what? I want to round a bunch of ivops up and get them moving before it gets too hot.

"Who do you think you're kidding?" Sue muttered under her breath. None of them were too keen on venturing out into the night, but the thought of incurring Bruce's anger was a more frightening prospect, so Bruce was eventually able to hustle them out outside into the darkness.

Half an hour later they came across the herd of ivops that seemed to migrate slowly back and forward in the vicinity of the farm, their eyes gleaming in the darkness like distant stars.

Bruce stopped the ute and looked around, relishing the unmistakable aroma associated with cattle on the move. The dusty, acrid, odor of bruised grass, urine, and fresh ivop dung.

The ivops appeared unconcerned by the nocturnal visitors as Bruce tried to clear a path through them, intending to break off a small section of the vast herd, and drive it back to the farm. However, as he bumped a gap through the animals in the ute, nudging them out of the way, it immediately closed behind him.

"Well, that's not going to work," Bruce muttered. A change of tactics was obviously needed. Bruce had chained the dogs to the back of the ute to stop them taking off on their own and had already taken a stick to Punch to stop him barking. It did not stop all three dogs from whining expectantly however, and trying to shake themselves free in their eagerness to join the fray.

"Here, way out!" One by one the dogs leaped down as he unchained them, barking madly as they charged at the mass of much larger animals. Cop made straight for the heels of an ivop, nipping at them and avoiding the kicks as the animal tried to dispatch this new pest into orbit. Can was a more spectacular performer, leaping up to bite the rumps of the ivops and hanging on until the unfortunate animal began to move. Punch just barked loudly and mechanically, like a wind up toy.

"That'll do, Can. Shut up Punch! Get in." Amidst the barking and shouting from the dogs and Bruce, Sue and the Skidians looked on nervously. They were unsure what to do and were disinclined to get in the way and bring down the sort of wrath on themselves that Bruce seemed to be dishing out to his dogs and the ivops.

Eventually a group of ivops slowly broke away from the main herd and began to drift in the general direction of the farm. The dogs, sensing victory, redoubled their efforts, with Cop acting like a general, directing operations from the rear alongside Bruce. The other dogs moved to the flanks of the breakaway herd to try to ensure they headed in the right direction. But however hard they worked the ivops steadfastly refused to move at a pace any faster than a very slow walk.

Cyprus and Oridor kept well out of Bruce's way in order not to draw attention to themselves. They were more worried about what Bruce might do to them if they got in his way than any potential dangers lurking in the wilderness. Or the ivops they cautiously trailed, once Bruce called in his dogs and stopped to make sure none of the main herd tried to join the small breakaway group.

Suddenly the breakaway group stopped en mass, almost as if an order had gone out to resist any further forward movement.

The efforts of Oridor nor Cyprus failed to get the stationary ivops moving. Bruce had told them to yell and scream at the animals or hit them with a stick if the ivops stopped or deviated from their course. When both those options failed, they stood back, confused as to what to do next.

A little way behind them Bruce had seen what was happening and was yelling and whistling

unintelligible commands (that is, unintelligible to any but Bruce and the dogs) to the dogs in an attempt to regain the lost momentum and get the mob on the move again.

"Pheep, pheep, phееееep, pheep! Get in here, you bastards, get into them! Get back Punch, you bloody idiot." Punch and Can barked maniacally, Cop nipped, Bruce ranted and raved, and Sue cowered in the ute, curling up into a tight ball in her seat, worried that Bruce might suddenly turn and swat her just for being there.

The ivops stood docilely like very tame cattle, except for the way they lowered their heads and stabbed tiredly at the dogs with their single horns. Most of them had resumed grazing as though nothing unusual was happening. Worst of all the main herd had begun to creep slowly towards their compatriots as if they wanted to make the herd whole again and were curious about the strange events of the last half hour or so.

The gap slowly closed between the two mobs of animals, and unless the mob that Bruce was trying to push along began moving again, all the work they had done so far would be wasted. Bruce stopped the ute, cursing the Skidians for their ignorance in forgetting to add a horn to the list of essentials they had provided and reached behind the seat for the rifle. Perhaps if he let off a few shots the ivops might be persuaded to move on. However before he could lift the rifle off its rack, the ivops in front of him began to move again as suddenly as they had come to a standstill.

Oridor and Cyprus, now directing the ivops towards the race up the center of the farm, were feeling pretty pleased with their efforts. However, from his position at the rear of the mob Bruce, hearing the Skidians' excited yells, wondered what they thought they were doing, standing five hundred meters away from the ivops and waving their arms about. Despite the efforts of the Skidians, Bruce noticed the ivops drifted towards the farm almost as if they were attracted there like bees to a honey pot.

As the last ivop entered the race, Bruce stopped the ute, got out, rolled up a cigarette and watched the ivops wander towards the holding pens beside the yards. Occasionally one of them would stop to examine the fences on either side of the race, sniffing closely or taking a tentative lick at the wires and getting an electric shock for their trouble. Some stopped in their tracks to try and establish with more certainty what had hit them, while others turned, snorting and bellowing in fear and pain, and chased after their companions.

Oridor and Cyprus stood proudly by the gate to the big holding pens, looking as if they had just completed some Herculean task and deserved an appropriate reward. Bruce ignored them as he cast an expert eye over the ivops; the dogs had done most of the work.

"Let's go and have smoko while they settle down eh?"

	"What?" Sue and the Skidians stared at Bruce as if he had suddenly started speaking a new language of his own.
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"I wish you'd learn to speak English as she is meant to be spoken proper eh. Let's go have a cup of tea. Get in Punch or I'll kill you!" He yelled at the dog who had slipped through the railing and was busy bailing up an ivop cow in a corner of the yard.

Punch gave Bruce a look which said, 'Well this is what I'm supposed to be doing, isn't it?' Then just to show everyone who was really in control, Punch barked once more before loping back to the fence. Bruce aimed a kick at the dog, missing by a large margin as Punch slunk away with his tail between his legs and joined the other two dogs splashing about in a trough.

Sue watched Bruce's face as he dealt with Punch and said somewhat uneasily, "Do you have to be so hard on them, Bruce?"

"Whaddaya mean?" he retorted defensively. Bruce reckoned he was pretty good with his dogs.

"The way you treat them, the poor animals. I mean, it's a wonder they stay with you at

all."

"Just wait until they really annoy me. Then you'll see something," he muttered. Sue was not sure she wanted to be around to see that, his temper for the last few hours had been bad enough. The dogs seemed so well behaved too.

"Sometimes they just get too smart for their own good, or they need a bit of straightening out occasionally, like kids." Bruce played absently with Can's ears, while the other two dogs sat attentively behind him as he squatted, looking around from time to time to see what was going on. "They've got to be reminded of who's the boss."

"How do you do that?"

"Oh, chain them up to something so they can't move, and give them a good whack."

"You wouldn't do that, would you?"

"Oh, only once a month or so." Bruce decided there were some things that Sue didn't need to know.

Sue, who had been standing beside him, now fidgeted uneasily. Once again realizing how little she knew about this man whom fate had thrown her together with. Behind his usually impassive face, now mostly covered by a thick beard, there were hidden and sometimes murky depths to his character. Sue shivered as she wondered it would be long before some darker side to his character was revealed.

"Let's go up to the house and that drink," Bruce suggested. He didn't like the way the conversation was headed.

Afterwards Bruce shepherded a grumbling and most unwilling work force back to the yards. Cyprus believing the days work complete, could not understand why Bruce was so insistent that it was not. Surely they had done enough for the day? The four of them climbed into the holding pens and accompanied by the barking dogs and Bruce's whippy stick slicing through the air chased the ivops into the yards.

Cyprus and Oridor, who had seen the stick in action at close quarters, and Sue, who had just decided Bruce's temper wasn't really to be trusted, kept a wary eye on both him and the ivops.

Their tentativeness seemed to incense Bruce. He thrashed the ivops with his stick when they tried to run past him, and then most disconcertingly so, he started screaming at them.

"Hit the bloody thing, Cyprus! Why do you think you've got a stick in your hand?" he demanded as a group of ivops turned and ran past Cyprus who stood on the outer edge of a line that the four of them had formed across the holding pen.

"Get back! Bruce yelled, and the dogs took off to round up the escaped ivop.

"Don't let them turn on you like that!" Not quite understanding what they were doing, Sue and the Skidians walked on tenterhooks, not wanting to incur the wrath of Bruce. It had all sounded so easy when Bruce was telling them what he wanted over 'morning tea'.

At least the cowboys had horses, Sue thought; this was not how they did it in the movies.

"Hit it Sue! Hit the bloody thing!" Sue stumbled and screamed as she saw a huge old bull looking menacingly at her as he made a break for the rear of the holding pen.

"Hit the bastard! Shit!" Bruce shouted disgustedly, throwing his stick at the offending beast as it ran past him.

Deciding that discretion was the better part of valor Sue dropped her stick and ran for the fence. If she knew anything about bulls it was that they were dangerous, and she was not giving this one half a chance to hurt her.

"There's no need to yell," she whined petulantly, clambering up the rails, realizing that the bull had taken off faster than she had, in the opposite direction.

"Look, just whack them with your stick. They're more scared of you than you are of them." Bruce was almost beside himself with frustration. Neither Sue nor the Skidians had any idea at all, and the ivops, sensing their lack of commitment and confidence, treated them with

total disdain.

"Here!" Bruce said, handing her the stick she had dropped.

"But it's all dirty!" Sue dropped the muck-covered stick like a hot potato. "Look out!" Bruce turned and saw the bull ambling towards the gate that the last of its mates were meandering through with the three dogs in close attendance. Confused and upset by the noise and the strange things that were happening, all the bull wanted was to rejoin his companions.

"That'll do! That will do Punch! Get over here!"

Sue saw only a mad bull intent on doing her a mischief, and wasted no time in clambering to the top rail of the yard fence, closely followed by Oridor and Cyprus. They were not happy about the situation either and had been looking for some excuse to escape ever since they had returned from the house.

Cyprus from his perch on the fence thought Bruce must be crazy to walk around ivops armed with nothing more than a flimsy length of syntimber in his hand. The beasts could be dangerous if they got as angry, as this one obviously was, and could seriously hurt a person with the pointed protuberance that jutted from their noses.

Cyprus blanched as he conjured up a vision of an ivop thrusting its horn into his body and flinging him into the air.

"Good bloody riddance!" Bruce picked up his stick and smacked the bull on the nose as it went past with an outraged bellow, the disobedient dogs still yapping at its heels. He locked the gate behind it in time to look up and see Sue and the two Skidians slinking off towards the house.

"Where the hell do you think you're off to?" However, they continued as if they hadn't heard him. "Come back here or I'll bloody well kill ya. Shit!" Bruce rolled himself a smoke as Sue, Cyprus, and Oridor slunk back and climbed onto the fence, perching there like sparrows on a power line.

Then Bruce walked quietly through the pens shutting the gates between each pen full of ivops so that they didn't smother or pile up in the corners, or worse, push through the rails and escape back onto the plain.

"Get out," he roared at Cop who was trying to create a disturbance behind him. Cop minced over to the rails and slipped between them. Bruce scratched his nose thoughtfully; running an eye over the ivops in the pen in which he stood while Sue, Oridor and Cyprus waited expectantly for Bruce to let fly at them.

Oridor coughed beside Sue as the dust raised by the ivops irritated his throat. He did not appreciate the pungent combination of dung, urine, and sweat either, or the frightful noise the ivops made.

"Right." There was no sign of Bruce's earlier contempt or anger now. "We'll sort out the cows, the females and younger calves into here." He motioned with his half-smoked cigarette at one of the two large empty pens, one of which opened directly back into one of the holding pens.

"That's a cow!" Bruce pointed to an animal with a large udder so his helpers knew exactly what he meant. "Cyprus, you can be first. Stand in the gateway here and let nothing through unless I say." Cyprus climbed reluctantly off the fence, frightened by the animals, but even more scared by what Bruce might do to him if he did not.

The reasoning behind separating the animals from each other was a mystery to Cyprus, and he wondered why Bruce bothered. After all, in the wilderness they were together, so what was the sense in doing more than was necessary with them? Why Bruce was purposely endangering all of them?

"Wake up, Cyprus." Cyprus tried to concentrate on what Bruce was trying to do, as Bruce prodded an ivop towards the open doorway where he had taken up station.

"Stand back and let it through," Bruce said. Cyprus stood aside and the ivop ambled past,

showing no interest in him at all. Cyprus's confidence blossomed, like most of the things the offworlders did, nothing difficult or dangerous about it at all. He relaxed, knowing that whatever the offworlders could do, he could do much better.

"Bugger off, dog!" Bruce threatened Cop with his stick as he slipped back into the yard to lend a hand. Sue, Oridor, and Cyprus gave each other significant glances and prepared for the worst. But Bruce seemed unflustered and continued to move quietly among the beasts, tapping one of them nose, prodding another in the backside with his stick, and guiding them in the general direction of the gate.

"Stand back and let it through," he'd call to Cyprus, or. "Stop it!" Until Cyprus developed what he felt was an almost telepathic understanding of what Bruce required, and managed to act without being told. After a while Cyprus noticed that some of the larger animals had different organs hanging between their legs. Ah! Cyprus belatedly realized that Bruce was segregating the males from the females, and he approved of this. Buoyed by this profound new insight, his confidence grew even further.

"Stop that one!" Bruce said as a bull got past him. Cyprus stepped in front of the ivop and waved his stick at it, a gesture which in his limited experience should have stopped the animal in its tracks. Nevertheless, this beast would not be deterred from its chosen course.

"Hit the bloody thing, Cyprus!" Cyprus waved his stick at the bull, then lost his newfound confidence, and jumped back up onto the fence out of its way.

"Bugger ya, Cyprus!" Bruce cut the bull off himself, forcing it back with a series of sharp clouts to its nose. The bull snorted angrily, half charged him, then retreated against the onslaught.

"Ya toey old bastard!" Bruce looked up at where Cyprus cowered on the fence. "Cyprus, you've got a bloody stick. Just whack them if they go the wrong way." Bruce didn't know how many times he'd told them this and it still hadn't sunk in.

Cyprus's budding confidence had dissipated completely, and nothing Bruce could do or say, short of dragging him down, would move him from the rails. Bruce threw his stick across the pen in disgust.

"Shit!" he yelled, more amused than angry. "You're a bloody old woman, Cyprus!" Then he turned away so the others couldn't see him laughing at the expression on Cyprus's face.

"There's no need to be sexist about it, Bruce," Sue said about to remonstrate with him.

"Well, you get down here then, if you think you're so bloody smart!" Sue hesitated for a moment, then slipped down off the railing, and picked up the stick that Cyprus had dropped in his hasty escape. She was not going to let Bruce get away with that!

Meanwhile Cyprus took this chance to beat a hasty retreat towards the house, closely followed by Oridor. Bruce spat on the ground. Oh well, he thought, the two of them should be able to handle the job if Sue didn't go all sulky on him.

"Can you pick out the cows ok?" Bruce asked reasonably.

"The ones with the big tits, you mean?"

"Yeah, that's right. We want them in this yard here, ok?" Bruce herded a couple of ivop cows towards the gate which Sue let through without any problem.

"Good," he grunted reluctantly. "They won't hurt you if you show them who's boss." This wasn't exactly true but Bruce decided Sue didn't need to know that.

Gradually the number of beasts to be sorted dwindled. Cows there, heifers there, the few bulls back out into the holding pen, the younger calves back with their mothers, the bigger calves in another pen.

"Right, we're just about finished. We'll just put these ones in a paddock for the night and call it a day, eh?" Bruce said at last with a yawn. While this sort of work wasn't particularly physical, it had been a long day and had required not a little concentration. Which was probably why Bruce decided cynically that the Skidians couldn't handle it.

"I'm bugged!" Bruce said for Sue's benefit, "What about you?" She nodded. "All I want is a beer, a feed and to flop into bed. And not necessarily in that order," he declared. "It's harder work than it looks, eh." He ruffled her hair. Sue shrugged numbly, too tired to care either way.

"The dogs are pretty stuffed too, getting fat and lazy." As if on cue, all three of them came over, panting in expectation of a friendly word and pat. Uncharacteristically, thought Sue, Bruce responded by giving each of them a few hearty slaps and a kind word. Trying to impress me, she decided.

"They love you, don't they?" Sue recognized blind devotion when she saw it. "Even though you're so horrible to them at times."

"Oh, I wouldn't say so," he replied, letting Punch take a liberty because he was still really a pup and didn't know any better. Punch jumped up, placed his paws on Bruce's chest, and tried to lick his face.

"We have a symbiotic relationship, buzz off Punch," he continued. "In return for me harnessing their natural hunting instincts to chase sheep and cattle around, they get looked after and fed."

"Oh, are you sure?"

"Yeah, of course. You ask Punch here."

"Rubbish. What are we going to do with these?" Sue indicated the few ivops left in the yards, to change the subject.

"Aw, tomorrow we'll sort out the bull calves and deknackerise them."

"What do you mean?"

"Castrate the younger ones. Turn them into steers to raise for meat, Bull meat's ok but it's a bit tough."

"How do you do that?" Sue asked, balking when Bruce told her. "You're not serious, of course? That sounds so cruel."

"Nah, not really. It doesn't hurt them much if you get them young enough."

"I don't believe you." Bruce pressed his thighs together, imagining the feel of cold steel against his own genitals. "Yeah, perhaps, but it's a real bastard having lots of young bulls running round the place ripping into anything and everything, calves popping out all over the place, fences wrecked. They're just a bloody menace."

"But cutting them out sounds so brutal. Surely there's got to be a better way."

"We sometimes put rubber rings on them to restrict the blood flow. The balls drop off in a few weeks, which, personally, I reckon is even worse."

"How horrible." The sudden reappearance of Cyprus put an end to the conversation as he sheepishly asked whether there was anything he could do to help out."

"Bit late for that, isn't it?" Bruce demanded angrily, wanting to punch Cyprus in the neck. He had probably been watching from the house until they looked finished before he offered his services. "We're finished for the day now."

He was about to add something particularly vitriolic when Sue sweetly intervened and defused the situation.

"Why don't you come to dinner Cyprus?" Sue asked, she and Leaf had some new organic foods for him to try out.

Tonight of all nights Bruce didn't want to have to spend in the company of a Skidian, but Sue led him off before he could make an issue out of it.

"It will be a pleasure," Cyprus replied to the retreating backs of the offworlders. Perhaps he would finally be able to discover how the ivops could be a renewable resource. Inel had been most insistent that he get this point clarified as soon as possible. Was it possible that the ivops reproduced in some hitherto unknown fashion? After noting the presence of what appeared to be many juvenile ivops and the obvious lack of technicians needed to ensure the success of the

reproductive process, Cyprus now thought they must be able to. How else could the presence of these immature ivops be explained?

The birds and the bees

	<p>"You're pulling my leg of course mate." Bruce managed to gasp between gusts of laughter as Cyprus broached the question of ivop reproduction after dinner. A hilarity which stunned the Skidian considering the delicacy of the subject.</p>
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"No." Cyprus shook his head solemnly, wondering if he had made himself clear. You never knew where you were with the offworlders. He squirmed uncomfortably in his seat, wishing he had not broached the subject at all.

"You're not joking? Tell me then," Bruce asked earnestly, "how do Skidians reproduce? I mean, you'd do it pretty well like us, wouldn't you?"

With not a little embarrassment, for it was not a subject commonly discussed on Skid, and because Cyprus could not speak from personal experience, he explained the process clinically, like a prudish father teaching his precocious son the facts of life.

"Well, that's basically how the ivops do it, mate," Bruce explained. "I'll keep my eyes open and if I see it happening I'll point it out for you."

"Do you mean to say the ivops do it in public, where they can be seen?" Cyprus's discomfort was acutely increased by this offer.

Cyprus sounded so scandalized, Bruce thought he must have missed something vitally important again. "They're only animals, man. It's a perfectly natural activity for them." This casual comment horrified Cyprus even further, and Bruce continued to make matters even worse. "You do it, don't you? I bet Leaf sneaks down to your room every night you old stoat."

"Yes, Leaf often comes down for fellowship." Cyprus continued proudly, "But we Skidians only procreate once or twice in a lifetime, and then only in carefully supervised surroundings, with the attendance of physicians to ensure success. For these ivops to do it whenever they like is, I think, disgusting." Bruce's jaw dropped in astonishment.

"Really?" He chuckled.

"This is true," Cyprus replied piously, wondering what Bruce thought was so funny. But then, he did have some strange customs, apparently Bruce and Sue actually shared the same bed! Cyprus had not seen any real evidence of this, for Inel had censored that information, and it had not occurred to him to ask. Nor did it occur to Cyprus that Bruce might find some of his own habits and customs just as odd, to say the least.

Cyprus knew all he wanted to know and did not wish to discuss his own prospects for procreation. He was scheduled to undertake his reproductive duties sometime in the next few months and could not see this was any of Bruce's business. Sex was rarely discussed on Skid, not because it was taboo but mostly because it was irrelevant to everyday life.

"Doesn't sex give you pleasure? On earth we have sex, as much for pleasure, as an affirmation of relationships, as to produce children."

"Does this mean you have many offspring, on your planet?"

"Not that I know of. I think you've missed my point," Bruce wondered how bright these people were, sometimes. "Children generally result only when you want them to. Contraception and all that. You know?"

No wonder their planet is overpopulated thought Cyprus. "This immoral practice must place a great strain on your planet's resources, causing much distress."

"Nah. Well, yeah. But not for the obvious reasons. We've experienced a massive

population explosion on earth because food production techniques and especially medical care have improved, which means people live longer than they used to and more of their offspring survive. The earth's birthrate has actually decreased over recent times."

"Why don't you disinfect useless, unproductive members of your society?" Cyprus asked, employing the Skidian euphemism.

"Most cultures on earth would consider that immoral." Bruce answered without thinking, and then wondered if restricting aid to starving people just because their government was Marxist or something wasn't euthanasia by another name.

Cyprus pondered this statement. "Then the obvious course of action would be to withdraw medical support from those areas that cannot care for themselves."

"Ah, but that would be contrary to the customs and beliefs of my people. Where I come from, life is prolonged for as long as possible, no matter what the cost."

How inefficient, Cyprus thought. What a waste of resources! "Your population grows and people suffer because you try to keep your people alive for as long as possible. That is crazy. It would never happen here on Skid."

"It probably did in the past, mate." Bruce was tired of Cyprus and his smug, holier than thou attitude. He didn't need to be reminded that all was not well on his home planet, especially by one who didn't take his own planet's problems too seriously.

"What's the chance of playing some more rugby, er, Stim soon? Maybe once a week or so?" Bruce asked changing the subject. He had recognized that Stim was a passion on Skid, almost to the point of being a religion, which he could readily understand.

Bruce had enjoyed watching the games, but recently the attraction had palled a little. Each game appeared to have been choreographed by the same coach. The players didn't look as if they enjoyed it either, which was the whole idea of playing in the first place wasn't it? Besides he wanted to play, not watch.

"The officials from the Murd club were impressed by your performance," Cyprus lied, relieved to be discussing something he was more comfortable with. "Although they felt you were a little too aggressive in your approach." That much was true.

"Aggressive?" Bruce was a little taken aback.

"However I'm sure they will be pleased to allow you to play as often as you would like." Even if it took a direct command from Inel to ensure they agreed, Cyprus thought. Anything to keep him quiet.

Then Bruce shifted mental gears at a pace that left Cyprus struggling to keep up with him again. "You know, we might be able to use a Stim team or two to introduce our organic food to more people on Skid."

"How so?" Cyprus was confused now. Far from being an unintelligent primitive, Bruce was able to reason at a much greater pace than any Skidian he had ever met. Cyprus deeply resented that any individual could be so unconsciously superior to himself, especially since the offworlders had always been regarded as stupid and primitive.

"Well, at home after a game we usually get together with the opposition for a drink or two. Could we not invite my team, and the opposition, out here after a game? How's that for an idea?" Bruce suggested enthusiastically. "We can have a barbecue."

"Barbecue?" Cyprus mentally examined the word, trying to perceive its meaning.

"Barbecuing is a form of cooking, more a social activity where I come from."

Social activity? That sounded a bit ominous to Cyprus, considering the previous topic of conversation. Another immoral offworld practice?

Bruce set his mind at rest by explaining barbecues more explicitly. "Meat is cooked on a metal hot plate over an open flame and eaten with raw veggies."

"Veggies?" Cyprus had missed the point again, which was not unusual. He could not associate components of the meal he had just finished with the term veggies.

"The guests generally have a few drinks, and talk while they cook and eat. Sound ok?" Bruce forgot to add that barbecues were about the only occasions in the society he came from where men traditionally handled the cooking.

Cyprus considered the unusual proposition. "I will have to clear it with Inel, of course. Perhaps it would be more diplomatic of you to invite the high council to your first barbecue."

"Well, um, leave it for a few weeks and maybe we could organize a tour around the farm at the same time. Make a day of it eh?" The idea began to grow on Bruce. "I can explain to your leaders what's going on here and what I hope to achieve."

Not if I can help it, thought Cyprus. If any credit was due, he intended to be the major recipient of it. "I will put this proposal to Inel in my next report. I'm sure he will be agreeable." Cyprus hesitated, wondering whether he should impart the next piece of information to Bruce. Surely it would do no harm to praise him as he would praise an untitled youngster for some minor success. Select tit bits of attention to ensure continuing loyalty and hard work, in much the same way that Cyprus had observed Bruce treating his four legged companions and to a lesser extent Sue.

"Once the food you offered Inel was carefully analyzed, Inel quite enjoyed partaking of it."

"Really?" Whoopee! Bruce thought. If the stupid old bugger hadn't realized he could eat ivop meat and veggies yet, there was less hope for Skid than Bruce already thought there was.

"What's good?" demanded Sue, emerging from the house wearing a grin that would not have disgraced a cheshire cat.

"Oh, it seems your veggies have been deemed fit for local consumption by the head honcho. Though for the life of me I can't see how!" Bruce added facetiously. Sue's teeth flashed as her grin widened. "So now Cyprus here wants you to organize a tasting session so the big shots can sample your wares."

"You're pulling my leg."

"No, for sure. I suggested a barbecue would be a good idea." Cyprus watched Bruce in admiration as he manipulated his female companion.

"No worries," said Sue. Sue had taken to using many of Bruce's expressions and mannerisms, Cyprus noted, and wondered why this would be so. Her own natural speech patterns were much more easily understood and gentler on the Skidian ear.

"Don't worry, mate, I can see right through you. I'll help you on one condition," she added craftily.

"Aw yeah? What?"

"Tell you later." Sue gave Bruce a wanton look that even Cyprus could not fail to recognize. He suddenly felt uncomfortable and invented an excuse to depart the embarrassing scene.

"I must leave you now." It did not cross his mind to thank his hosts for the meal they had provided him. Thank you was an unnecessary courtesy since all food was collectively owned, and supplied through a communal dispensing system. It really made little difference whose tap the food was poured from. That the offworlders had actually produced most of the meal's ingredients themselves made no difference to Cyprus.

As Cyprus left, Sue lowered herself onto Bruce's lap and took a sip from his beer before pecking him on the cheek. "I gather you want me to prepare a barbecue?"

"I'll look after the meat," he protested.

"Big deal."

"Have to build one too. A barbecue, I mean. And butcher an ivop especially for the occasion." Bruce added, growing a little defensive.

"Bigger deal buddy, but I'll do it for you." She tweaked his nose playfully. By now it was pretty obvious to Bruce that Sue wanted something from him. She was in that coy mood that

irritated him so much. Why couldn't she just come out and ask him?

"What do you want?" Bruce reached for his beer, put the glass to his lips, and just about choked on his suds when she told him.

"You don't mind, do you? I don't," Sue assured him. "Honestly."

"How did you get onto that subject?"

"I don't know really." It had not occurred to Sue to dig deeply into the motivation behind the request she had received from Leaf earlier in the evening.

"Leaf just asked out of the blue why we slept together."

"And you explained everything?"

"No. Well, not at first anyway."

"Well I'm not sure I want to do it. These Skidians have some pretty weird ideas about sex."

"I thought you'd enjoy it, Bruce. Not shy are you?"

"Of course not, but I'm not an exhibitionist, either," he retorted. To tell the truth, Sue's immorality shocked him. He did have some scruples, even if she didn't. That was the strange thing about most Americans he'd met, Bruce thought. On one hand they appeared to be of upstanding moral character, almost to the point of prudishness, then they would suggest something totally outrageous without batting an eyelid.

He didn't quite know whether he should feel affronted by being manipulated in this way, or embarrassed because surely the Skidians would be watching, collecting data. Wired for sound. That was almost funny. If the boot were on the other foot and he were a medical man in some institution down on earth, he'd certainly be interested in sussing out how the Skidians made babies.

"Ok," he said at last, trying to sound as ungracious as possible. "You certainly know how to stick it to a man. I'll do it as long as I don't see her and she doesn't laugh."

"Thanks, Bruce," said Sue, hugging him. "I knew you wouldn't mind."

Bruce thought about Leaf for a moment. He'd come to regard her almost as part of the furniture, a non-person. Then he remembered that night a few weeks, might have even been a few months ago now, when Leaf had clumsily offered herself to him. That's what it was all about. Sue might believe that she was manipulating him, but in reality Leaf herself or somebody in the background was really pulling the strings.

"Why the sudden change of heart, Bruce?" Sue asked suspiciously catching him off guard as he remembered that despite being a Skidian, he actually found Leaf quite attractive.

"Well, to tell you the truth, Sue, Cyprus and I were having a man to man talk along similar lines. You know, these Skidians really do have some strange ideas about sex and stuff, they think we are odd! You know?"

"So Leaf's been telling me."

"Yeah. Anyway, I thought I might have been a little hypocritical because I offered him you for the night."

"Bruce! I don't believe even you could do such a thing!" Sue said, both shocked and hurt.

"He declined my offer and decided that a Stim game on the TV would be far more interesting." Bruce shouted after Sue as she jumped up and ran inside.

Bruce chased after her and by the time he had reached the bedroom he was half carrying her to the bed. As they wrestled playfully a sudden thought flitted through Bruce's mind. She didn't mean tonight, did she? But he was really too busy to care.

Bruce didn't know how long she had been there when he felt her eyes boring into the back of his head. He sat up, turned round and found Leaf watching from the side of the bed.

"Hello," he said, as casually as possible as Leaf's eyes flicked towards Sue, who nodded her head slightly as if to say, 'Ok.'

Not knowing what to do, and feeling more than a little self-conscious, Bruce collapsed to

the bed and rolled over on his back. Before he knew what was happening Sue had rolled over and pinned him to the bed. Not that he put up much of a struggle, as he watched Leaf shed her loose robe and lay down stiffly beside him.

"What the hell?" Bruce made a weak effort to push Sue off and shoo Leaf away at the same time. Sue leant over and gave him a quick, wet, but passionate kiss.

"Shh, Bruce," she whispered into his ear. "Look, the girl's so frustrated and."

"So?"

"Make love to her."

"What?" Here he was presented with the means to experience one of his wildest fantasies and Bruce was so stunned he didn't know what to do with himself. What was this little game that Sue was playing? Almost against his will, Bruce felt himself become excited at the prospect and he reached out a hand and caressed Leaf's flank.

Leaf stiffened at his initial touch and then relaxed with a long deep sigh. As Bruce began to explore her body with his fingers and then his mouth, not an easy job with someone sitting on you. Leaf's breathing started to come quicker and her hips began to rock gently up and down. She began to gasp, excited beyond her wildest dreams, by a whole new series of emotions and almost frightening sensations that filled her mind.

She began to writhe uncontrollably, wanting the caresses to last forever, so intense was the pleasure they gave her. No wonder Sue smiled when she talked of what Bruce did to her in their bed.

Leaf sobbed as Bruce suddenly removed his hands from her body. She groped for his hands, to pull him back. However, her hands encountered something else. Something pulsing with heat and life. She gasped and wondered what it could be as Bruce covered her body with his own.

Report Number Thirteen B

As instructed, I have continued to encourage the male offworlder in the hopes that he could be persuaded to mate with me. However, apart from the first attempt, I am not convinced that my approaches were correctly interpreted by the male offworlder.

When it became obvious that this approach would continue to fail, I began discreet inquiries with Sue, learning something from her of offworld sexual practices and preferences. Comparing these observations with our own secret archival material I changed my experimental approach. (App. 1)

Earlier reports have noted how their sexual activity is as much motivated by a search for pleasure and a measure of comfort, as a biological reproductive function. I felt this factor might work in my favor. When I intimated to Sue that I had little knowledge of sexual practice and wished to learn from the offworlders, Sue became most helpful for a reason that I cannot understand. For it appears that the offworlders are generally monogamous.

She allowed me to observe their couplings on several occasions (App. 2) and then to partake in the act (App. 3) My observations of the act are outlined in appendix three.

I would at this stage have to state that never having experienced a sexual act with a fellow Skidian male I have nothing to compare the performance of Bruce with. In addition, I must further state that I have found my present situation and recent events most distasteful. Hence I implore you not to request me to repeat this activity and I again respectfully request to be relieved of my duties here.

The report was not accurate in all respects, for Leaf had discovered something that most Skidians would never experience, but that did not matter to Inel who took the report from Sideshow and read it with interest.

"This report is not explicit enough," he said. "Order her to remain and to provide more

detailed information." Skid's present sexual practices and mores dated from the days when Skid had a population problem and instituted draconian measures to control it. The measures had become a part of Skidian culture and there had never been any pressure to change them.

Inel though, was more than a little interested, and found the report and the accompanying tapes most stimulating. Unknown to the majority of Skidians who were ignorant of most of the roles and activities of their rulers, the hierarchy of Skid enjoyed, among other things, active sex lives. A perk of the job, so to speak, another throwback to ancient times when a leader was expected to produce more than one potential heir. Just in case one or two of them, or more, which was often the case, met with a fatal accident.

It was not only in modern times that the leaders of Skid considered themselves above the laws that the rest of the planet lived by, that by tradition they also respected. But then, these double standards were not unknown elsewhere in the universe.

While Inel was interested in the sex lives of the offworlders, he found Sue most unattractive and wondered how the male could tolerate her. What he needed was a good Skidian courtesan. Why hadn't anybody else thought of that? A decent courtesan would have discovered in a few hours what it had taken a team of researchers weeks to discover about the offworlders. But then the simple things were never easy to achieve on Skid.

Bruce woke the next morning wondering if the previous night had been anything more than another dream. He looked over and saw that Leaf had gone and Sue was asleep beside him. He stared up at the ceiling, trying to work out why Sue had done what she had. She didn't strike him as the sort of woman who would pimp for a lover under any normal circumstances. But then, Bruce thought sadly, circumstances weren't normal, were they?

Their relationship wasn't about love, lust even, though he had come to care for Sue in a way. It was more about a need for company, human company, and he began to feel guilty about having taken Sue for granted for so long. Did Sue feel used, he wondered, or was he the one that had been used?

With these uncomfortable thoughts running through his head, Bruce slipped quietly from the bed trying not to top wake Sue, declaring in a fit of good intentions (he also vowed at least once a week to give up smoking and getting drunk) to treat her a bit more tenderly in the future. She wasn't just the handiest thing around to warm his bed. But now she wasn't the only one, and that had been mostly her own doing. So how was he supposed to handle Leaf now? Was Sue now about to share him with Leaf?

After a lazy breakfast, putting off the time when he would have to start the day's work, he went and called on Oridor and Cyprus. He half expected to find Leaf there and signs of reproach on their faces. However, she wasn't, and there were none, so Bruce tried to set his guilty feelings aside until the passage of time lessened their impact.

Bruce detailed Oridor to march around the farm's boundaries to see if the ivops had managed to knock over any fences during the night. A task that would probably take him all day, because Oridor seemed to move at about the same pace as the sluggish ivops, while he and Cyprus worked in the yards.

They sorted the young ivops that had been left in the holding yard into two groups. Rather, Bruce drafted the ivops while Cyprus watched, keeping well out of the way. Cyprus's previous confidence in dealing with the ivops had dissipated and he was not about to get into a pen, even with the little ones.

Bruce released the bigger calves back onto the plain, not fancying the thought of wrestling with them and drove the smaller bull calves into a pen behind the head bail. He set Cyprus up on the head bail and drove the first bawling calf into the race which he managed to catch by the neck before it flew out the gap. Bruce lashed the animal's hind legs to the lowest rails of the drafting race with a piece of rope and got Cyprus to hold its tail out of the way, he didn't want it

whacking him in the face while he operated.

After drawing his knife and testing its keenness by shaving some hairs from the back of his hand, Bruce reached between the animal's legs and pulled its scrotum towards him. He made an incision at the bottom of the sac, pushed one of the testicles out, and with a quick slash of the knife it fell off into the race. **Shit! I should save these for dinner, Bruce thought. Mountain oysters!** He repeated the operation with the second testicle, amazed that the animal barely moved and the lack of blood, as if it was as dead in that area as the Skidians apparently were.

Then he realized Cyprus had lost his grip on the tail because it swatted him in the face.

"Cyprus?" Bruce looked around to see what Cyprus thought he was doing, the useless shit. At the first slash of the knife Cyprus had turned as white as a sheet beneath his tan and fainted.

Bruce untied the rope restraining the ivop's legs, climbed over the rail, and released the head bail. The ivop gave the bail one desultory kick and then walked placidly out into the yard, apparently unaffected by the amateur surgery. Bruce tried to bring Cyprus around with a nudge to the ribs. "Hired help isn't what it used to be," he grunted mercilessly when Cyprus didn't stir and carried on by himself.

Cyprus revived slowly and took, to Bruce's disgust, no further part in the morning's work. He made feeble excuses about an upset tummy and soon made himself scarce. Skidians weren't used to the sight of blood, and the very hint of it was enough to make them panic.

"Ya useless twit!" Bruce called after his retreating figure, and immediately felt a whole lot better.

An unhappy Life

Apart from Bruce's odd forays into town to play Stim, Bruce and Sue become strangely isolated out at the farm. This didn't worry Bruce much, although he was heard to murmur it was typical of the Skidians not to take an interest in what was good for them. For Sue it was different matter, she did not seem as content keeping her own company, as Bruce was keeping his.

The farm ticked over nicely; it was not as if a whole lot of effort was required in running it. Bruce as he had intended had become more or less surplus to requirements. This would have been an ideal state of affairs if he headed a training program full of eager Skidians, but such an institution had never eventuated. Cyprus turned out to be the only permanent recruit.

Maybe they have solved their food production problems; Bruce thought one day and asked Cyprus about it.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" Bruce wasn't surprised when Cyprus merely shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know." He replied.

With that sort of attitude, Bruce realized he was never going to be able to do much for the Skidians. They didn't seem to be able to comprehend that they needed to build the abattoirs to process the ivops or the machinery to cultivate the vast plains and harvest the crops. Bruce could show them how but they had to do it. He felt that if he could cope with that failure, he could then start working out how he was going to keep himself occupied in a constructive manner and enjoy himself for the rest of his life on Skid.

The rapid departure from the scene of Oridor further reinforced Bruce's poor impression of Skidians. Then Cyprus also began to spend more time away in town (Bruce's derogatory term for any built-up area of more than ten or so buildings) than he spent at the farm.

"Well, stuff the Skidians!" He decided for the umpteenth time. I'm quite happy pottering about here, minding my own business, he told himself untruthfully. For deep down he knew he was important to Skid's future and he resented the fact the Skidians didn't realize it.

Despite the odd frustrated bad-tempered flare up. Flare ups that either sent him to the bottle or got him so bitter and twisted that he would not talk for days on end, Bruce thought he was fairly happy with his lot.

Sue amateurishly tried to analyze his behavior and counsel him, using such terms and theories as she had picked up from her own encounter groups and visits to her analyst. Her cliché-ridden approach was enough to clamp Bruce's jaws firmly shut.

Do you want to tell me about it indeed! Bruce suspected Sue didn't really know what she was talking about, despite the ease with which she articulated the psychobabble. He also figured that having someone more or less as screwed up as yourself try and solve your problems wasn't such a good idea either.

Sue wished that she had met Bruce on earth so that she could assess the changes in his behavior and more importantly get some advice from that one fountain of wisdom that had never failed her, her mom. A vain hope, of course, for had they lived in the same country instead of a world apart, or even the same town, given their different backgrounds it was unlikely their paths would ever have crossed.

Concluding she would never break through to Bruce's inner soul, to develop in him the sort of openness and honesty that she took for granted, Sue gave up on Bruce. She realized Bruce would still manage to function at some level whatever the crisis. For that was his strength: he would trundle along no matter what. Bruce might have worked himself up at times, reacting to the Skidian environment, but at least the manifestation of this anger also acted as a release for it.

Without realizing it, Sue, who believed she was so in touch with her own feelings, had bottled up her emotional response to being on Skid and all things Skidian, and began to feel rather distressed at times. She did not know whether she was physically ill or her nausea and tiredness was simply a reaction to stress. It was not as if she could go make an appointment with her doctor to get a checkup or visit her analyst.

Sue did not have any confidence in the Skidian medical establishment, who unbeknownst to her closely monitored her health status and had not decided to, or how to, intervene yet. The very idea of some Skidian quack doctor pawing her made her shudder. She might just as well have another beer

At one point Sue became so withdrawn that Bruce wondered whether she might be suffering some sort of mental breakdown. All she seemed to want to do was, make love with a fierceness and passion that almost frightened him, and sleep. More than once he had to use a headache or some other imagined weakness to avoid another sexual marathon, an embarrassing ploy, because usually it was him that couldn't get enough.

"Have you any idea how long we've been in this place, Sue? Feels like ages." They were sitting on the verandah after their evening meal, having a beer and staring up at the myriad stars that filled the sky. The remains of the meal had been cleared away by Leaf, who had distanced herself from them, Bruce suddenly realized, after her night of sexual exploration. When was that? Not long ago, for sure. Bruce seemed to think that it had been just the other day. But it could have been last week. Could it have been the one before? He tapped his glass and tried to count the months. It was at times like these he regretted never having got into the habit of keeping a diary.

"I worked it out the other day." Sue had in fact asked her book, which Bruce had not thought to do. "We've only been on Skid for five or six months."

"Is that all? Seems much longer, somehow. Like a lifetime."

"Time flies when you're having fun." Both of them could remember how at times the days just seemed to drag on forever. For an eternity. But it was not so bad now. Or was it? Sue seemed more like her old self for the moment.

"So we can be rightly proud of our efforts here then?" Bruce suggested after a moment's

consideration, really wondering whether they could be. There was always something else that could be done. For Bruce, finding the energy to do all that could be done was his major problem. "We have done a lot of work here, eh?" he added, as much to reassure himself as anything.

"Suppose so," she replied uncertainly.

"I feel as if as I've been here for bloody years." With that depressing thought he tossed his glass over the verandah railing and into the night, feeling the irrational urge to wreck something again. The sound of tinkling glass as it smashed in the darkness gave him a certain vicarious satisfaction.

Sue almost followed his example, but restrained herself. Years of middle class, conservative, indoctrination by her parents and peers prevented her from utilizing this useful emotional release.

Bruce called belligerently for another beer, which was delivered by drone. Leaf was keeping her distance! Bitch! Bruce thought, and through his beer-befuddled brain considered rooting her out of the hole she had withdrawn to and. He didn't know what.

Sue correctly identified Bruce's descent into a morose mood and prepared to join him getting drunk. She had been led to believe this was not a well-adjusted reaction to stress. Nevertheless, drinking to excess did provide a temporary respite from the depressing realities of Skid. Even if you paid for the indulgence with a hangover most of the next day.

Tonight though, before he really got going, Bruce seemed to take control of himself. Instead of drowning his sorrows he became animated and talkative, unusually so for someone generally so taciturn. He began telling stories, almost to himself at first, as if recounting a chapter of misadventures, until abruptly Sue began to laugh. The stories were about the sorts of situations that Bruce had got into, stories that certainly hadn't been very amusing at the time. However, from a distance, related to someone else, they were funny.

But the telling of them also made him a little sad, for he had never told most of them to anyone before, and he realized how many years he seemed to have lived in an emotional wasteland. Men weren't built to be alone, he'd finally discovered after years of believing himself to be a loner. He paused and reached unsteadily across the table for his pouch of agbar, as he began a new story.

He'd never felt he had it in him to be a good storyteller. He'd get the punch line confused when telling jokes, and people somehow always turned away halfway through, leaving his words hanging in mid air and him embarrassed. Then he'd stare uncomfortably at the ground or have another beer to hide his discomfort.

Suddenly, millions of miles from a home he would never see again, he realized he'd sold himself short as a social animal. Tonight with Sue as an attentive audience, he never missed the punch line, never failed to emphasize a climax articulately, and never wanted for an appreciative laugh. So why did he feel so sad?

A few days Cyprus reappeared at the farm after a protracted absence, only dallying long enough to deliver a message before disappearing as quickly as he had arrived.

Oddly enough Cyprus's message was the first direct communication Bruce had received from anyone on Skid. Usually they just seemed to expect him to know what was going on by telepathy or something so he didn't know whether to make anything of the fact that Cyprus had ventured out to the farm or not.

"Useless bugger!" Bruce grunted, just for practice as Cyprus re-boarded the aircraft that had flown him to the farm.

It looked as if the Skidians were good at talking and making generous promises, but when it came to action they were seriously impaired. Thinking about this one day, Bruce wondered how they could appear to be so technically sophisticated and yet so bloody useless at the same time. Somewhere along the line they must have got their act together. On the other hand if they

could channel even a small part of the energy and enthusiasm they reserved for watching games of Stim Bruce thought they could easily solve their present crisis one way or another. However, they couldn't or wouldn't, so it seemed to him that they were doomed.

Well, that was tough. He, Sue, and Leaf if she wanted, would survive out here ok and any other Skidian who made it this far. Though Bruce doubted many would venture out of the cities even if they realized there was food in the wilderness. Few would even be aware that the farm existed; though the likes of Inel and their hangers on might just decide to show up on their doorstep.

Bruce was sure that they could be provided for, although he didn't view the prospect with any relish. The great fat oafs would just sit around pretending to be important, expecting to be fed.

"In a week's time," merely a general Skidian term that meant sometime soon, "I will conduct a high powered delegation around the organic plant on a fact finding mission." Cyprus had pompously informed them. He also informed them that they were expected to provide an organic meal in the manner that Bruce had called a barbecue.

"Reading between the lines, it looks as if Cyprus reckons he's in charge of the place, don't you think Sue? Bruce suggested to her as they watched Cyprus disappear. "On the other hand, maybe the Skidians have come to their senses and are keen to expand their organic operations." Perhaps they were just a little slow off the mark, and he'd misread their intentions all along. Bruce's eyes watered a little as he thought all his silent pleas for recognition had been answered.

Social intercourse

Bruce poured himself another beer and promised himself not to drink too much more. With an afternoon's steady drinking behind him, Bruce was already feeling a totally indestructible. However, he was probably already too unsteady on his pins to do anything but stumble around in a disorderly fashion. In other words he was beset with delusions which were often the precursor to his getting totally drunk and making a total cock of himself.

True to her earlier promise, Sue with a little help from Leaf, had certainly organized a decent enough feed, Bruce decided, setting his beer glass over carefully down on top of the barbecue he'd built. Sure his beer was safe, he flipped over the meat charring on the grill using a fork he'd made out of a length of wire.

"Not quite burnt enough on that side," he told himself. He liked his meat well cooked, especially as the ivop steaks, despite having been marinated in an onion and Skidian wine combination for hours, weren't exactly tender.

Bowls of salads and stuff sat on the trestle table that Bruce had built using several doors he'd temporarily ripped out of the house, sharing pride of place with bowls of synthofood and potatoes cooked in foil on the barbecue.

Taking another swig from his glass, Bruce critically regarded the ivop steaks sizzling away. Beside him, still marinating in a bucket, were more than enough steaks to feed everyone several times over.

"About time to turn them," he said to himself again because he had nobody to talk to, a fact that was beginning to annoy him. Being ignored in your own home just wasn't polite. Bruce recharged his glass from the very large jug that he'd propped up in the bucket of meat to keep cool. He was feeling expansive now. Warm. Euphoric.

"Better slow down, man," he told himself, "taking another long swig, or you'll be properly pissed."

Toytoo, Cyprus, Yarad, slimmed down versions of Mulgoon and Sideshow, and another couple of dozen Skidians unknown to Bruce had formed a loose insular group around the beer dispenser. Off to one side of this group stood Inel and another portly gentleman, aloof from the

others, no doubt, by dint of their seniority.

Looking around, Bruce got the idea that every single one of them, perhaps barring Inel and Cyprus, looked singularly ill at ease. It was difficult for Bruce to decide whether this was because of the proximity of their seniors, the food arrayed before them, or the very fact of their being out in the wilderness, which Bruce knew unsettled them. It also occurred to him that the discomfort might also be caused by coming into close contact with Sue and himself, as if they were in danger of being contaminated by some contagious, incurable, disease. Even Cyprus, who was by now well used to organic food and being out in the wilderness, refrained from any contact with him.

Bruce turned over a piece of meat, burnt nicely on both sides now, took out his knife, sliced a piece off, and popped it into his mouth.

"Not bad."

With his eyes on the trestle table, noting the food Sue had prepared, Bruce felt a pang for the little extras that were missing. Tomato sauce and warm crisp bread smeared with butter, garlic bread preferably. I should be able to make tomato sauce with a little experimentation, Bruce thought. And he could milk a cow, er, an ivop. And soon they would be able to bake bread, of a sort. Skid was becoming more bearable every day. At least where food was concerned, Bruce knew he would never be entirely comfortable on Skid.

"How's the cook?" Sue asked emerging from the house with a tray full of food.

"Done. Give us a plate eh, and I'll chuck this lot on." Bruce took the plate, filled it with charred chunks of meat, and handed it back. "I'll just whack some more on. You might as well tell the others to dig in, eh?"

Sue drew Cyprus aside quietly. "It's ready. You can tell your friends to start now."

Cyprus took his responsibilities fairly seriously, and after getting his cue from Inel he made a long, rambling speech to his companions. Companions who now tentatively eyed the organic food arrayed before them. Those that had not attempted the organic material previously became noticeably nervous, shifting from one foot to the other and searching for an excuse not to partake in the feast.

Some of them stared at the food incredulously, as if to say, 'Are we really expected to consume some of this material?' As far as they were concerned, it was bad enough having to spend the best part of a day, any time at all actually, in the wilderness. Besides, the most important Stim event of the month was taking place right at that moment and they were missing it.

Nevertheless, they all took at least a small portion of the organic food. When all said and done, whatever they were there for, and for most of them that wasn't exactly clear, it was a distasteful exercise only performed at the direct command of Inel. And even then only under as much protest as good manners would allow.

The Skidians had no doubt been told they were visiting a new food plant, a successful but small-scale alternative to the failing synthofood plants. They might just as well have visited a brewery for all the good it did them.

Even after an intensive briefing and an updated situation report on the ability of Skid to feed itself, famine was a problem to tackle when it became a personal reality. Not a likely prospect, given that each of them still lived almost as well as they had always done. The unusual shortages that the general populace was beginning to experience had not struck them yet.

The party had realized something unusual was up when instead of heading for an industrial complex, their transport headed into the wilderness. Why would this be so? Several of them wondered.

"A new organic food plant in the wilderness," they were informed by Cyprus, who was used to reporting data and having it go in one ear of his audience and straight out the other.

Worse was to follow when it was realized that this was where the offworlders, who had been presented to the senate some months ago, had been quarantined.

The male was a most uncouth individual, who as well as being rude and arrogant, dressed in a fashion that could only be described as obscene, used far too much agbar. He also had the effrontery to presume to conduct the elite of Skidian society around the experimental unit where he had been isolated. It soon became obvious to all the Skidians, except Inel perhaps, that Bruce was in fact quite stupid. Cyprus was obviously the expert on the organic plant, and supplied them with the information that the offworlder was unable too.

His commentary was along the lines of: "The offworlder is unable to manage a bigger unit than this without assistance. Therefore, the productive potential of the organic system is limited." No one thought to ask the obvious questions. Why was this so? Was not the offworlder brought to Skid to instruct Skidians on organic food production so that Skidians could produce their own organic food? Where were the Skidian trainees, the drones? Cyprus had conveniently forgotten this minor detail and Inel alone kept his own counsel as native professions of ignorance and arrogance surged around him like waves hitting a beach, dulling his desire to act to save his people.

"The management of these organic plants is a simple matter. If needed, small groups of Skidians could establish their own units using the data we have already collected," Cyprus's commentary continued.

So why hadn't this been done?

Then Cyprus delivered what he considered to be his trump, a master stroke that would deliver him to the highest council of Skid despite his lowly birth.

"I would willingly supervise such a development program, given that I have extensive and relevant experience in this field."

What experience, one might ask? Inel marked his card for future reference. How could it be, as Cyprus maintained, that he could manage the organic plant, extract its full potential, and train other Skidians in the art of organic food production when the offworlder was apparently unable to do so? And what is more, why did not somebody point this simple fact out?

Did they fail to recognize the fact that the synthofood production levels had fallen to less than 15 percent of the required level needed to sustain all of Skid's inhabitants? Or were they merely waiting for some miracle to deliver them from their fate? How many tyrants and their minions had deluded themselves in such a fashion as the walls of their bunkers were breached? Who among them could see the salvation of all they knew in the shaggy, dirty, beasts that the offworlder had contained in the wilderness? Or in the material that sprang from the ground? Interesting novelties perhaps. But food sources for a starving society? Never! That was the problem, none of them had the imagination or vision to see how the offworlder's plans could be put into action.

The offworlder spoke of turning vast stretches of the wilderness upside down. He even had documents drawn up to explain his proposals. With co-operation he maintained he could feed many of Skid's inhabitants within several years, if not sooner. But even if this were possible, several years were far too long. Skid would have starved to death by then. Nobody thought to ask how soon at least a part of the population could be fed using the organic systems, or how he would undertake this task.

Inel wondered whether his people were really worth saving, the ones accompanying him today certainly were not.

Like Inel, Bruce brooded on the day's events, and the more he brooded, the darker his mood became. Despite his initial hopes when Cyprus had confirmed the visit, it was apparent to him that the Skidians still didn't appreciate his efforts on their behalf.

Bruce felt Cyprus was probably doing his best to convince his fellows of the value and practicalities of organic farming on Skid, even if he glorified his own part in the process. It was

painfully obvious that his efforts had been to no avail.

Inel gave Bruce some encouragement with nods and secretive smiles, but pointedly would not speak to him at all. The rest of the gathering asked nothing of Bruce, studiously ignoring him and conversing amongst themselves. Eventually he shrugged his shoulders and reached under the seat of the ute for the solace offered by the flagon of beer that he had stashed there in case of emergencies. Bruce had done his best to help, which had now obviously been shunned. So be it. Maybe he would have the last laugh.

Bruce looked forward with eager anticipation to the time when the Skidians would come on bended knee, begging for his help. He perked up at this idea, for then he would be in a position to dictate terms. Maybe a trip home was not out of the question. Nevertheless, the taste of disappointment and frustration was bitter in his mouth.

With great gusto Cyprus and Inel began to stack their plates with the organic food presented by the offworlders. Toytoo, Yarad, the remaining members of Committee 21, and Sideshow, less familiar with the organic food, followed their lead with less enthusiasm. The remaining Skidians took small helpings of meat and vegetables, giggling nervously at their daring.

Bruce watched them all with a jaundiced eye, amused a little at the comic contrast between Skidians who were used to solid food and those who were not. One of the uninitiated burst into a paroxysm of coughing and spluttering as he learned that it was impossible to swallow, breathe, chew, and talk at the same instant.

While his companions stood about laughing uneasily as they watched the unfortunate's face go beet red, Sue dealt with the problem by applying several sharp thumps to his back. The Skidian turned to remonstrate with the impertinent offworlder who had dealt him such an undignified blow. Then realizing that the choking sensation he had just been experiencing had disappeared and he could breathe again delivered a sickly smile instead.

Bruce checked the meat again. Looking good he decided, taking up a knife and cutting himself a mouth-sized piece, and washing it down with another large swig of beer. All his intentions of restraint had long since flowed away on a tide of alcohol and self-pity.

After giving the meat a few more desultory prods, Bruce piled the lot onto another plate, restocked the grill, gave the fire a few prods with the fork, and made his way unsteadily to the table. "Must be more pissed than I thought!" He told himself, louder than he had intended to, as he wove towards the table and eyed the food. Just like home, he thought wistfully, his scalp prickling and a lump rising in his throat.

Bugger it! The resentful bloody-mindedness that Bruce had kept under control now began to bubble up like a spring. He had striven hard to make a good impression on the Skidians all day, but now realized the effort had been to no avail.

"Look at them, Sue," he snarled, not quite slurring his words as he swayed beside her. "Useless sods, all of them. You know what they're going to do, eh?"

"No," Sue replied wearily.

"Well, it's pretty bloody obvious to me that none of them gives a shit, except maybe for Cyprus." He said unaware that his good friend Cyprus was actually recommending his demise as surplus to requirements.

"Yes, dear," Sue said in an effort to placate him.

"Just don't give a shit," he ranted. "Quite happy for us to do the work for them while they reap the benefits and take the credit for my effort." He scooped up a handful of coleslaw, shoved it into his mouth, and washed it down with another mouthful of beer.

"Do you know what Cyprus had the effrontery to say to me earlier?" Bruce knew it didn't matter that he shouldn't allow Cyprus's lack of tact to upset him. Nevertheless, he couldn't help himself now.

Sue tugged Bruce by the arm, trying to move him out of earshot.

"Keep your voice down!"

"Do you think I care? Know what that twit said?"

"No, but you're going to tell me anyway."

"Cyprus told me he would have no trouble at all running this place or setting up other farms, probably by using drones." Bruce spat. "We might as well sit back and leave them to it." Bruce's professional pride was wounded, especially as it had occurred to him the Skidians might just about be able to pull it off. "They couldn't organize a piss up in a brewery. Wouldn't have a bloody chance. Bastards deserve to starve, I reckon." Bruce thumped his hand on the table.

The conversation around Bruce ceased abruptly. All eyes swiveled toward him for a moment, then the Skidians returned to talking or eating as the case might be. The Skidians studiously ignored the offworlders, as if they were some lower form of life whose presence might have to be tolerated, but who could mostly be ignored.

"They treat us like we're some kind of lower form of life." He continued alarming even Sue with his behavior. He didn't seem to care whether the Skidians heard his criticism, and she tried to pull him away further out of earshot. "They think that they can do without me, without us. They're not bright enough to realize they can't. But they know they do. Get me?" Bruce was under the misapprehension he was making sense. "I reckon they don't want us around showing them what to do because our presence makes them look stupid." In essence this was true, although the Skidians would have expressed it differently.

"You're talking nonsense, Bruce!" snapped Sue in exasperation.

"You just don't understand, do you?"

"No!" she retorted. "I don't see why they couldn't look after the farm. It can't be too difficult." Bruce seemed to think that farming was some sort of mystical process only understood by a select few. What was so difficult? Even I know enough to run a farm, she thought. Besides nobody was indispensable, not even Bruce. Sue turned to Bruce, whose face in the few seconds she had taken her gaze off him had turned purple. A malevolent gleam shone from his bloodshot eyes. If looks could kill, Sue, realized suddenly alarmed; Bruce was quite capable of doing it. She began to tremble uncontrollably, afraid of what he might do next.

"Bloody yanks!" Bruce turned on her. "You think you know everything, arrogant bastards," he panted.

Sue hoped that he might get a grip on himself, but it was a forlorn hope.

"Well, let me tell you, my girl." The onslaught began in earnest this time. "Running a farm is not as easy as it looks. I guarantee that if I stopped working this place tomorrow, it would be a bloody shambles within a few weeks."

Sue was through with Bruce's surliness, she had tolerated his growing negativity long enough. Perhaps he had been negative from the start and now she had reached her limit.

"Bruce! You are just being childish. Even I could run this place. Why do you make such an issue about it?"

"You think so, do you? Right. You kill the next ivop, shift them around, do all the other little jobs round here. I'm not going to have anything more to do with this lot."

"Oh don't be silly, Bruce."

"Don't be silly, Bruce," he mimicked.

"You're making an exhibition of yourself. Grow up!"

Cyprus waddled over and stared down at Bruce in what he imagined was an imposing fashion. "Is anything wrong?" he asked after several moments.

"Nah, youse fullas have got everything under control by the looks of things," Bruce replied with a sarcasm that was wasted on Cyprus. "Everything." He took another long drink. "You don't need my help any longer, so I think I'll just piss off, ok?" Bruce knew he was being unreasonable, even pitiful. However, he had little control over his limbs any longer, even less

over his mouth. With a few beers inside him he was also stubborn, and not about to back down from the stance he had taken. In the morning he'd see the whole situation in a different light, and be sheepishly embarrassed by what memories remained of the night before. "Aw, bugger off, Cyprus. You wouldn't understand."

By this time Bruce had the attention of the whole gathering who had all noticed Cyprus's skilful attempts to restrain the increasingly obnoxious offworlder.

"Let me go, Sue!" Bruce brushed aside her feeble attempts to restrain him.

"These offworlders are so unstable," someone in the crowd said.

"We should have expected severe psychological problems with them. Their own planet is so primitive. Skid must have quite overwhelmed him."

"Yes," concurred the first speaker, just loud enough for Bruce to hear. "It's our own fault, of course. We should have kept them under closer supervision. They have some queer habits."

"Do you know?" Asked another.

"That's it!" Bruce booted the trestle table, and cursed when he realized his feet were bare. He hurled himself at the table, sweeping it clear of plates, glasses, and bowls and then stood back. Bruce glared at the Skidians, daring them to react.

Cyprus stepped forward, extending his arm with his palm raised in a conciliatory gesture. Bruce slapped the arm away and stormed off into the night, swearing in the darkness as he tripped over a drone approaching from the kitchen. His angry voice loud in the stunned, incredulous silence he left in his wake.

"Bugger ya!" Bruce picked up the drone and hurled it onto the barbecue where it struggled like a fly without wings on the grill. Then it began to sizzle, exploding seconds later in a shower of sparks.

The gathering stood transfixed as Bruce strode away, still swearing and muttering to himself. As everyone began to relax and recover from their shock, becoming capable of coherent thought, beginning to fear for their own safety, Bruce stumbled back into the light.

"What are you staring at?" Bruce demanded of the nearest Skidian, who shrank away from him. Bruce made for the beer dispenser, the Skidians melting away from him as he approached. He grabbed a full jug of beer and disappeared into the darkness once more.

"I told you so," a Skidian voice ventured, when it was clear he was not returning.

"We don't."

"Should be."

"Disposed of."

"Unstable." All at once the Skidians tried to make themselves heard over the nervous hubbub that erupted. The collective relief they felt at surviving a particularly nasty encounter quickly turned to outrage.

"An ill-conceived plan."

Bang! Something exploded on the barbecue and silenced the mob again as a shower of sparks and glowing shards of metal flew through the air. Those with rapid reflexes immediately sought shelter, while those less endowed were left standing in astonishment, their mouths gaping wide, trying to work out what was happening.

Only Inel remained aloof from the confusion, stepping back into the shadows, contemplating the scene and Bruce's inexplicable behavior.

"Shit!" Bruce tripped over some obstacle in the night and his expletive made everybody jump.

Inel tried to comprehend the little drama that had just been enacted. Bruce had performed in a disgusting and offensive manner. But why? While the others were dismissing the offworlder's behavior as those of some crude lower being, Inel took Sue's arm and guided her away, quietly.

Feeling his grip on her arm, she panicked, now concerned for her own safety as well as Bruce's. The thought that Bruce might disappear and leave her behind terrified her. She was well aware that Bruce was a survivor. He might not, despite all she had done to make herself indispensable to him, give her a second thought. Especially after she had indirectly aligned herself with the enemy in the last few minutes. She struggled to free herself from Inel's grip, as any woman might in the process of being dragged off into the night by a virtual stranger.

Inel brought a finger to his lips in an oddly human gesture, demanding silence and, even more strangely, reassuring her a little.

"Come!" he said. "I wish to understand what has occurred here." Then he hesitated, as if about to add something further.

"Down by the river!" Sue gasped. "That's where Bruce has probably gone, and I want to be sure he doesn't do anything silly."

"The moving water?" A note of apprehension crept into Inel's usually steady voice. Neither an encounter with the unpredictable offworlder, nor a visit to the moving water, the habitat of unimaginable creatures, held much attraction for him.

"Yes." Carefully in the darkness they made their way down the slope, Inel still clinging tightly to Sue's arm.

As they walked he evaluated the situation. Against his better judgement, and despite the apparent setbacks that had befallen their schemes, the influence of Committee 21 had been growing on Skid since their return with the offworlders. That their proposed enterprise was apparently failing did little to undermine their growing influence, almost to the point of threatening his own position.

He sensed a mood for change was flowing through the senate. But was it for the better? Or merely change for its own sake? Moreover, where might it lead? It seemed to Inel that by showing a hitherto unsuspected (and traditionally frowned on) ability to show a little initiative, Committee 21 had awakened a latent desire for change in Skidian society.

Inel realized better than anybody that if Skid were to survive this present crisis, or any future one, it would have to change its ways. However, could the complacent Skidian, unused to change and challenges, rise to confront the crisis that now beset him? He shook his head as he concentrated on this latest problem. Why were negative reports emanating from Committee 21 concerning the organic plant? Surely it was obvious Bruce could at least feed himself. So why not all Skidians? How true was the offworlder's assertion that in time sufficient organic material could be produced to feed Skid? There was not much point in working to safeguard his own position if he would soon be dead from starvation.

Inel found himself beset by the sorts of imponderables common to all leaders. Whose advice could he trust? Should he lead Skid down the path of change to stave off an impending disaster? Change that would lead into a new era of uncertainty? Or should he stick with the old tried ways of dealing with problems, hoping for some sort of miracle to deliver his people from the apocalypse? Grimly he wished he could see into the future.

Inel knew that was a futile idea. He along with his predecessors had always discouraged such initiative on the part of the populace. All thought and action, power and education had been reserved for the ruling elite; the vast majority of the population had swapped their historical slavery for a more sophisticated variety. Skidian society had been decaying for generations, for the simple reason that there was no challenge to its existence and the people, they simply had nothing to do. It had fed on itself until nothing remained of the industry and driving force that had created a great civilization.

Every Skidian, including Inel himself until recently, believed in the infallibility of Skidian culture to secure them through any crisis. Had he delayed the decision making too long? Inel hoped not. Thrusting these disturbing thoughts aside, he suddenly remembered to feel nervous at being out in the open.

"This is far enough," he said gruffly. His prime concern was to retain his power until forced to relinquish it, convinced that the offworlders or their influence, were now the key to his plans. He would use them without compunction, then discard them once they had outlived their usefulness. Which he hoped would be sooner rather than later.

"No, let's go a bit closer to the river," Sue said. "I want to make sure Bruce is ok."

At that moment an outcry came from the direction of the house as the remaining Skidians belatedly discovered the absence of the female offworlder and Inel. Despite being some distance away, and unable to discern clearly what was being said, Inel clearly heard the word 'kidnapped.'

His mind raced. Was somebody about to take advantage of his absence? With him out of the way the path was open for Toytoo or some another pretender to assume his position. He felt his heart begin to pound. Sweat suddenly blistered his forehead in a fashion first experienced when he was being initiated into the pleasures of the flesh as a young man. He had been apprehensive of the unknown then, too. What had been mere conjecture might become reality more quickly than he could ever have imagined.

He found himself unable to think. Instead, he became aware of the soft night sounds, noises he had never noticed before, and wondered at the sudden clarity of his senses. Not that he could identify the leaves rustling against each other in the breeze in the trees above his head, the soft plop as a fish leapt from the water, and the singing of the wires on the fence around the garden. The strange sounds all served to heighten his tension.

While feeling exposed and vulnerable away from the reassuring presence of other people and buildings, Inel realized with some irony that for the moment he was safer with the offworlders than he would be if he made his way back to the house and was among his own people.

"This'll do." Sue released herself from Inel's grip, sat on the bank, and dangled her feet in the river. From a little way downstream she heard the tinkle of water falling on water, followed by a ribald guffaw.

"Bruce, the mad bugger!" she muttered. At least he had not fallen in and drowned.

Inel started warily. "What was that?" He was relieved to observe that the female was not particularly perturbed. Not that he credited her with much intelligence.

"Nothing. Just Bruce." A match flared in the darkness as the two of them stared silently down the bank. For a few seconds Bruce's face was illuminated in the flame before the match scribed an arc through the air, spluttering and dying as it hit the water.

"What caused his objectionable behavior this evening?" Inel asked abruptly, wondering whether he could entrust his safety to the offworlders. He might require them to transport him to Sietnuoc independently of Toytoo and the others.

"His pride has been wounded."

"Pride?"

"Yes. Cyprus maintained he could run the far, the organic plant here. But Bruce feels this task is beyond Cyprus's capabilities." She decided against admitting to a similar opinion.

"Oh." The statement confused Inel.

"Do you understand? Bruce feels insulted because he knows Cyprus cannot do what he says."

"Impossible for Skidians to operate the organic plant?" Inel demanded defensively, in a tone that suggested to Sue she should choose her words carefully.

"Because none of your people has stayed here long enough to learn anything. One day in the future, perhaps, with the correct training."

Inel nodded in the darkness, knowing what Sue said was wrong. Sue did, however, reinforce his growing suspicion that the development of the organic plant should be persevered with and its operation expanded as rapidly as possible. Under Skidian control, of course, and

removed from the corrupting influence of the offworlders.

"So Cyprus maintains he can operate the organic plant. I still fail to understand how this affects your companion."

"Well, apart from being here against his will, which was a bad start" Inel's impatient grunt conveyed to Sue that this circumstance was insignificant beside the needs of Skid. "Bruce feels it's pointless to carry on with his work if no Skidian shows any desire to learn from him. On one hand he can see enormous potential for these plants, but on the other, nobody has shown the slightest bit of interest." She paused to let Inel comment, but since he appeared to have nothing to say, she continued: "In order for Bruce to best help you, you must prove to him that you and your people are trying to help solve your own problems."

"All this is most enlightening," Inel said, sensing Sue was questioning the capabilities of the Skidians. "But it doesn't explain his behavior this evening."

"It's simple really." She spoke in measured tones, as if to a child who was slow on the uptake. "Bruce's recent behavior is his way of coping with the stresses placed on him by the lack of support from you and your people."

Inel felt a burning rage building within him and he restrained himself with difficulty. He would not show this primitive female how deeply she had offended him. How dare she suggest Skidians were not capable of running the organic plants? How dare she criticize the treatment they had received? They were on Skid now, and Skidians were the most sophisticated and technologically advanced inhabitants of the universe, bar none. Nothing was beyond their capabilities. It had conveniently slipped his mind that their deficient technological expertise was now endangering them, and that any chance there may have been to save at least some of the people he led was almost gone. Just as many a past empire and dynasty had foundered on the arrogant complacency and warped vision of its emperors. Skid, too, past the peak of its powers, was also doomed.

Inel understood that Cyprus was sure he could operate this organic plant. It followed, then, that any Skidian, including himself, could do so. Cyprus's negative reports therefore had sinister connotations. His stewardship of Skid was certainly under threat, and his opponents had been given an unprecedented opportunity to act. They were probably poised to strike, in fact, while he sat in the darkness with this offworld female.

Something in the water

	<p>Cyprus led an unwilling search party out into the darkness, in what he hoped was a vain attempt to save their leader from the offworlders. He had been furnished with the necessary equipment and orders in the likely event they stumbled on Inel alive.</p>	<p>How opportune! Toytoo smiled, knowing he could not have planned Inel's end any better himself. With Inel out of the way he could simply return to Sietnuoc and assume his position in this moment of crisis and deal with any attempts to oppose him. Even Raele, the successor Inel had been grooming to replace him, would not be able to stand in his way.</p>
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Down by the river Inel glanced sideways at the offworld female who was staring moodily in the general direction of her companion. Both would have to be disposed of, permanently. And soon. A cold shiver ran up his spine and he trembled uncontrollably. Then a gust of wind rocked him, almost causing him to topple into the water.

Inel believed in portents. He had instinctively made many decisions on receiving the appropriate sign, none of which he regretted, even when information suggested that he should decide otherwise. So when he was sent a signal from the undefined powers that ruled the universe, he obeyed. This time the offworlders would not be sacrificed unnecessarily because of the misguided activities of others.

All memories of Skid would be erased from their minds and they would be returned to their own planet. Given the nature of the space time continuum that the Skidian interplanetary vessels exploited to journey across the universe at speeds far greater than the speed of light, it was also theoretically possible that they could be returned at the very point and time of their departure. As if they had never journeyed to Skid in the first place.

Inel's attention returned to the importance of returning to Sietnuoc to reconsolidate his position, and the practicalities of getting there. Back in the city he would begin the process of destroying Toytoo and his fellow conspirators. But how was he to return to Sietnuoc and at the same time avoid all contact with those he planned to destroy?

Sue stirred much to his irritation, destroying his concentration.

"Shouldn't we be getting back?"

The search party was stumbling around in the semi-darkness, just outside the pool of illumination created by turning on every light in the house. All but Cyprus were determined not to venture into the night in case some unimaginable fate should befall them. Even Cyprus was not confident enough to leave the lit area to the extent he could not regain it within moments.

Inel replied decisively: "No. You have given me much to consider, but I wish to avoid any contact with the others if possible."

Sue spent the next minutes of silence listening to Inel's heavy breathing, and trying to work out what she had said that was so important. She listened anxiously to the Skidians' half-hearted search for them, and felt relieved when it became apparent that none of them would come close to finding them.

Bruce was his only chance of getting to Sietnuoc undetected, Inel decided. However, he needed to hurry. It was possible that Toytoo, if not Cyprus he thought bitterly, could at that moment be summoning transport to return them Sietnuoc. All it would take would be an extraordinary meeting of the senate and Toytoo could announce his death and begin the process of taking over.

"Shit!" Something began to thrash around in the moving water. Inel stood quickly and backed away from the bank, petrified, lest. Well? What? Like other Skidians he was not imaginative enough to envisage what might be about to happen.

Sue jumped up and raced towards Bruce, who was pulling himself from the river.

"Bugger!"

"What were you doing, Bruce?"

"Beer fell into the water, didn't it?" he grunted unhappily.

Sue kicked the jug back in, holding tightly to Bruce so he did not go in after it.

"What did you do that for?" Bruce demanded angrily, trying to shrug Sue off. "You've had more than enough for one night."

"Plenty more where that came from!" Bruce tried to pull away from her, prepared to crawl to the house if necessary to get another beer.

"No!" Sue caught him around the waist and hung on, pressing her cheek against his chest and hoping they would not overbalance and tumble into the river before she decided what to do with him.

"All right then, we'll find something else to do!" Bruce chuckled, nuzzling Sue wetly on the shoulder. He would have gone further despite her protests, but Inel lumbered up and coughed discreetly to interrupt the unseemly scene he had found himself intruding on.

"Take me to Sietnuoc!" he commanded regally and without preamble, having decided there was no other way to get there.

"Aw yeah, and I'm sure the dogs would like a trip to town too."

"I'm serious, offworlder." Bruce's name had slipped his mind for the moment. "And yes, you must bring your four legged friends."

"Keep your shirt on, mate." The idea of a drive appealed to Bruce in his present mood. It wasn't exactly like driving for two or three hours into the big smoke for a hamburger, but the next best thing. Pity there wasn't anything on this planet like a greasy burger with onions, eggs, cheese, tomatoes, and a side order of chips. Bruce was suddenly felt revved up with no place to go.

"Are you sure that you're in a fit state to drive?" Sue asked.

"Yeah, no worries. What do you think I am? I've only had a couple of beers woman!"

"Quickly!" Inel urged them. "I don't want the others to realize I'm going," he said looking nervously over his shoulder.

"Ok, ok" Bruce replied dimly aware of the urgency in Inel's voice.

They walked towards the shed where Bruce had left the ute. They met nobody; the other Skidians were either stumbling around in the dark somewhere else, or they had not ventured this far yet.

"Don't forget your friends!" Inel hissed as Bruce opened the driver's side door and clawed his way in behind the wheel.

"Oh yeah, I forgot." Bruce practically fell out of the ute and made his way by an indirect route to the kennels, where he slipped to his knees fumbling for the door catches. The dogs' frenzied barking as soon as they heard the squeaky door of the ute opening had shattered any pretence at stealth.

"Shut up, ya bastards!"

Inel snorted impatiently as he watched Bruce stagger back to the ute. Then he started fearfully as the dogs jumped onto the deck. Had Toytoo's followers found them and were now closing in for the kill? He was sure his end had come when a dark form pressed its face against his own as he stood by the door.

Punch got only one free lick in at Inel's face before Bruce slurred, "Get out of it!" If all pretence at a quiet exit had failed when the dogs started barking, the cacophony seemed to attract little attention. Most of the Skidians had become used to the dogs' exuberant behavior.

"Right. Let's buzz off, then." Bruce dropped himself behind the wheel. He slapped Sue heartily on the knee and started the engine.

"Brrrrrr, brrrrrr!"

"Oh, shut up Bruce!"

"Ha!" Bruce engaged first gear, switched on the lights, and dropped the clutch while Inel was still struggling to squeeze his considerable bulk into the cab and close the door. He almost tumbled out as the ute's tail swung around, the rear wheels spinning madly and showering the shed with gravel. Bruce flung the steering wheel to the left, corrected the slide, and aimed the ute in the general direction of the central race that led directly towards Sietnuoc.

Struggling to stay upright in the swaying, accelerating vehicle, Inel clutched wildly for something to cling to, eventually finding the handle above the door and hanging on for dear life. Sue sank down between the shoulders of the two men, bracing herself for the inevitable collision, telling herself that she should have insisted on driving. At the same time she realized it would have been a fruitless exercise. Any attempt to wrest the keys off Bruce would have just led to another quarrel, which he would have inevitably won.

Bruce was beginning to enjoy himself, his only regret being the lack of noise the ute made, as if the scattering of gravel against the side of the shed wasn't enough. Where was the noise from a leaky exhaust manifold or muffler, the gratifying burble of a big six or eight under the hood?

They sped past the house, a great cloud of dust billowing in their wake like a temporary fog. Sue pressed her foot to the floor, trying to apply an imaginary foot brake as fence posts

and other solid objects whizzed by the side windows. As they ripped silently down the race, except for the dogs yapping away on the back, ivops grazing sleepily in their paddocks suddenly took fright and ran away into the darkness.

"We don't need to drive as fast as this thing will go, you know," Sue muttered, knowing her complaint would fall on deaf ears. Bruce eased his foot off the throttle, changed into top gear, and pressed his foot down even harder.

"Oh, we're not going fast yet!" He grinned mischievously, then slowed down as he approached the wheel tracks in the endless sea of knee-high grass from their previous trips to Sietnuoc.

Inel did not say a word until they entered the city; he was too busy concentrating on his next move. Hard work for a man who had, had almost his whole world cave in upon him during the last few hours. Once they entered the near empty streets of nighttime Sietnuoc, Inel, suddenly animated as if his battery were now fully charged, guided Bruce to a large, imposing structure which Bruce recognized as the senate building.

Once they had stopped Inel climbed out and trotted into the building as fast as dignity would allow.

"Now what?" Bruce asked himself as Sue stirred at his side. He got out and relieved himself against the front wheel of the ute while having a look round. Cop jumped off and placed his own signature on the decorative railings that protected a sickly looking tree.

"Come here!" Bruce called the dogs over, chaining them to the railing before they took off.

"Where are we?" Sue asked climbing sleepily out of the ute as Bruce rolled himself a cigarette and surveyed the building before him.

"Back at the senate I think. Inel's inside. Most hospitable of him to invite us in, eh? I reckon I'll go in and see what the story is." Bruce decided.

"Are you sure it will be ok?"

"Yeah, why not? He probably expects us, anyway." No Skidian Bruce had ever met was good at saying what he meant, preferring the oblique approach that Bruce could never fathom. Unconcernedly, his nonchalance fuelled by the alcohol still flowing through his veins which reduced whatever propriety he normally had, Bruce strolled towards the door Inel had disappeared through. Sue stood her ground, uncertain whether to follow, enter the building and possibly get into trouble, or stay outside by herself.

"Hurry up, woman!" Bruce called from the doorway. "We haven't got all bloody day!" Bruce had just decided he wanted to take his leave and get home to bed. He might even have to let Sue drive him home.

The end of Skid

Inel was consulting his chief adviser of long standing, a thoroughly mysterious figure, who had been his most trusted confidant for decades. By some quirk of history Noslow like all his predecessor's was a Celcion and had been recruited from Skid's former adversary in order to provide some form of impartial advice to Skid's ruler.

Since returning to his office in the senate building Inel had concerned himself initially with the containment of the situation at the offworlder's organic plant, ordering his personal security detachment to spare nobody.

That critical task set in motion, the renegades, as Inel thought of them, had not long to live. He now turned his attention to the offworlders and his commitment to the old gods, that only he knew existed, to return them to their planet of origin.

"Show them every courtesy. Keep them occupied until the behavioral experts...." He broke off as Bruce peered around the door.

"Oh, here you are, mate," he began, with more familiarity than Inel cared for "I've been looking all over this rabbit warren for you. We'll be off now."

"I don't understand."

"We'll be back off to the farm."

"Where? Oh no." At all costs they must not be allowed to leave now. "Please be my guest. There are some important issues I would like to discuss with you. Noslow here will make you comfortable until I am ready. Tomorrow morning, perhaps?"

"Oh yeah, ok then," Bruce replied wearily.

As Bruce retracted his head and allowed himself to be led off by Noslow, Inel shook his head in wonderment before returning to his communicator. The offworlder thinks he is doing me some sort of favor, he decided as he monitored the progress of his cleanup crew. These Skidians were incorruptible and loyal to him alone. In Inel's experience they were most difficult to deter from their task with the usual tales of woe, flattery, bribery, and the downright lies, that were a Skidians usual defense when called to task for any failure or indiscretion.

Inel watched their progress with a shudder, aware that he could so easily have been on the receiving end of such a team. However, clever as Toytoo and his cronies were, Inel doubted they had any idea such people existed. Raele led the crew. Inel smiled at the thought of his favorite son and anointed successor.

Noslow led Bruce and Sue into a plush suite where Inel was in the habit of entertaining his favorite courtesan.

"You will be comfortable here while you await for Inel's summons," Noslow said.

Noslow was stunned to see them here, believing them long dead, and angry that Inel had kept their continued existence from him. He had always been against the idea of utilizing organic material in an attempt to feed Skid's population, despite the looming famine. Inel had always followed his advice in the past, and he had believed he had in this case.

Noslow had understood that what there was of the organic experiment languished under the incapable hand of Cyprus, Toytoo, and the others.

"You know how to order what amenities you may require," he said, gesturing to the panel set discreetly into the wall adjacent to the door.

"Yeah!" Bruce yawned, too tired to care, as Noslow beat a hasty exit.

How he could use the sudden appearance of the offworlders to the benefit of his masters? After first believing their presence might mean disaster Noslow was now having second thoughts. That they were still alive could provide his people with an unexpected but valuable bonus when they assumed their rightful place in the universe.

Bruce tried to open the door after the quaint little man had left them, only to find it locked.

"Doesn't want us to go walkies," he remarked. Bruce flopped face forward onto the bed, hiding his head in the pillow for a moment before turning over and groaning. It had been a long day and he was still drunk. He opened his mouth as if to speak, yawned again instead, and was instantly asleep.

Sue smiled indulgently at him, leaned over to brush a stray lock of hair from his face, and then planted a kiss on his forehead. She looked about her for a few minutes, and then lay down beside him. After what seemed only a few moments, she to fell asleep.

Toytoo gazed upwards, searching for the aircraft he could hear overhead, marveling that it had arrived so quickly after his summons. Everything was working out better than he could ever have hoped. Not that he had planned anything. He had just taken advantage of some favorable events and everything seemed to click into place, fate was on his side.

Cyprus had been the only one of his team to venture out into the darkness and had reported that the offworlders had driven off in their vehicle after dumping Inel's body in the moving water. In stating he had seen this happen, Cyprus stretched the truth a little. He had certainly seen something tossed into the river and had assumed it was Inel. Inel was certainly nowhere to be found and the offworlders could be dealt with at leisure.

Toytoo smiled smugly, wondering what was taking the pilot so long to land. The aircraft would transport himself and his follower's back to Sietnuoc, back to an extraordinary meeting of the senate where Toytoo would promote himself as Skids savior in its hour of need. He was gratified that his followers, including Inel's former associate, anticipating their triumphant return to Sietnuoc, had gathered around him, though allowing him the space that befitted his new position of authority.

The pilot would have to be reprimanded severely for delaying his triumphant return to Sietnuoc. What was he doing? Surely he could see the landing area? Toytoo was suddenly assailed by a nagging doubt that he could not identify as the aircraft slowly descended. No, the pilot was merely being careful Toytoo decided impatiently.

Too late Toytoo noticed the markings; not that it would have made any difference. This wasn't the transport craft he had summoned from Sietnuoc, were his last thoughts as a blinding pulse of light flashed from the belly of the overhead craft searching him out as he stood transfixed like a rabbit caught in the glare of a car's headlights.

Microseconds later, Toytoo and all of his followers were dead, their bodies seared by a powerful laser, the air full of the stench of charred flesh and burning hair until it was dispersed by the light breeze wafting over the hill.

The aircraft landed and a single figure emerged, scanning the area for any surviving life forms. Apart from Leaf, who had emerged from the house and stood as if frozen to the spot amid the bodies which were being consumed by a large drone, no one had survived the operation.

Raele curtly ordered Leaf about her business, which was to remain at her post, and satisfied with his work he boarded the aircraft anticipating his reward for pushing the right button for once.

Back in Sietnuoc Inel sat at impassively at his desk. The threats to his wellbeing that had been posed by Committee 21 and Toytoo's followers had now been removed without a trace. Raele and his crew would be sent on the return mission to the offworlders' planet which would remove them from the reach of any enquiry over the disappearance of Toytoo and his followers for as long as necessary.

Once the offworlders had left Skid, Inel would move his entire administrative structure into the wilderness in order to encourage other Skidians to follow his lead. They would have to if any of them wished to live. Like Cyprus and Toytoo before him, he was supremely confident of his abilities to operate the offworlder's organic plant without their presence. Skidians did not require any help from outside sources in order to solve their problems. All they needed was information in a form that was comprehensible to them, the sort of data that the behavioral experts at the medical center should have obtained in about five minutes from the offworlders.

"How are the offworlders, Noslow?"

"Under sedation at present. The behavioral experts have completed their work."

"Good, good. Their transport is prepared?" Inel rubbed his hands, satisfied with his early morning's work.

"The crew is aboard and ready to depart." What Noslow did not add was that he would also be aboard the craft and would attempt to divert it to his home planet once it was in flight.

"Fine." Inel's thoughts moved on to other pressing matters. "Where are the latest reports from the synthofood plants?"

"Here, sir. As you can see, I have attached a summary including reports from other relevant sources. Production appears to have stabilized at 15 percent of requirements, and a scientific group at Nalgor reports they have found a promising antidote for the virus." Noslow was lying, of course. His reports were always positive though he knew better than anyone on Skid that the Skidian scientists were unlikely to find the antidote to the virus that had infected the synthofood plants. The virus he had planted all those long months ago on the orders of brother Pyro back on Celcious B.

The synthofood supply situation was now critical. While production appeared to have stabilized, almost all of the strategic synthofood reserve was now exhausted. Within a couple of months, if not weeks, the population, already beset by inexplicable shortages of many items, would starve to death. Noslow did not concern himself with this catastrophic prospect. His masters on Celcious B had promised to take good care of him well before that time came.

Soon now they would unveil their intentions. Besides, with a bit of luck he would soon be aboard the patrol craft, returning the offworlders home, and if he had anything to do with it, diverting them to Celcious. After his people landed on Skid, Inel, and the other so called leaders of Skid, self-styled rulers of the known universe would be dealt to in the same way in which Inel had just dealt to the members of Committee 21. The Celcions would then commandeer some of the interplanetary freight vessels that plied the route between Skid and Celcious B to carry their small army of conquest to Skid and re-establish their birthright as rightful inheritors of the universe.

The Skidians will rue the day they put my people into slavery, Noslow thought and deluded themselves that they could foster the development of an intellectual community on Celcious to help them rule without it eventually wheeling to snap at the hand that fed it. Noslow himself was a product of this delusion, destined since birth to be senior adviser to the ruler of Skid, fated to be the instrument of Skid's downfall.

However, Noslow's plans to leave Skid were foiled when Inel ordered Noslow to accompany him to the wilderness and the organic plant that the offworlders had established. Noslow decided this was an unfortunate move on Inel's part, but the time was not yet ripe for him to show his hand.

Epilogue

Message: Source Central Transport Operations. Due to unforeseen circumstances all interplanetary traffic will cease from 2810/TA until further notice. End.

Pyro glared angrily at the screen. There had been far too much of this sort of thing lately. Without the necessary transport their crusade was only half-complete and they were now ready to assume full control of Skid. Unfortunately they had to get there first, along with their invasion force that was now camped around one of the staging points waiting for transport to Skid.

Furiously Pyro depressed several keys, seeking clarification from the duty operator of the priority message that was still flashing on his screen. He waited impatiently for an answer for several minutes, and then his screen, connected to the Central Transport Operations network went blank.

Trying to keep at bay the growing panic that was rising in his throat like a live thing, Pyro

feverishly transmitted an encrypted message to Noslow, his most senior agent on Skid, in the hope he could allocate the necessary transport for them.

He had not long to wait for the reply, but it was one that none of his carefully planned schemes had allowed for.

Returned mail: User unknown

Tuesday, 10/09/99

Bruce slowly emerged from a dreamless stupor, disorientated for a moment until he recognized the oddly unfamiliar sight of his bedroom. Feeling almost too fragile to move, he groaned in the expectation of severe discomfort and clamping his eyes firmly shut tried to will himself back to sleep.

However, among other things that conspired to prevent him from dozing off, the dogs barked wildly outside. Had he forgotten to feed them again? It wouldn't be the first time.

"Shit!" he muttered, opening his eyes again slowly. Bruce carefully slipped out of the bed so he wouldn't wake.... Wake who? He wondered. Her name was on the tip of his tongue and he saw, rather felt his face pressed into a mass of long dark hair. But of course there was nobody else in the bed, just an elusive image in his mind and a name that he couldn't pin down.

"Must have been a great dream," he grunted.

His head throbbing mercilessly he stood unsteadily by the bed and stuck a hand out against the wall to prop himself up. A sledgehammer seemed to be knocking against the inside his skull and although it was spring, he felt unusually cold. As if he had been dumped nude in the middle of the Antarctic.

"Oh God!" he groaned, trying to recall how he had come to be in this state, and discovering to his horror that he couldn't remember. What had he done now? Everything since tea time the night before was a total blank.

"What's going on here? I didn't have anything to drink last night. There's no booze, or women, in the house."

Bruce was not a hundred percent about the beer, he could have sworn that he and a neighbor had polished everything off in the fridge a few nights before. He was certain there wasn't a woman around. He steadied himself against the wall; his stomach also feeling decidedly unsettled. Then he stumbled through to the kitchen expecting to find a heap of empty cans on the table or in the lounge.

Nothing.

"Must be crook then," he decided. Something he'd eaten.

"Those bloody oysters, I knew they were off," he muttered rubbing his stomach, wondering if he was going to vomit.

Bruce glanced at the clock over the fireplace. Five twenty-nine, 10.9.9... He automatically checked his wristwatch and found he did not have one anymore. "Geez, I must be going nuts." He was sure the previous day was the tenth. He checked his diary that lay open on the table. Sure enough, today must be Wednesday the eleventh, there was an entry dated the tenth. He switched on the radio and caught the beginning of the six-thirty news for Tuesday the tenth. Bruce shrugged his shoulders. He must have had a real binge and jumped a day in his diary, or maybe he was finally going nuts.

The streets of the once proud city were strewn with bodies, victims of the recent food riots, and fires raged through the now empty buildings. Those who still had the energy and the inclination tried to avoid the flames, but most were too weak. Anyway there was not, as far as most of them knew, anywhere else to go.

Within weeks of the offworlders' departure from Skid, the synthofood plants failed completely

and Skidians were rudely introduced to famine and to fending for themselves in the manner of their ancestors. Many Skidians, on learning of the developing catastrophe, simply willed themselves to death, unable to cope with the unthinkable, while others killed themselves more quickly, and violently to escape the painful and lingering death that awaited them. Others rioted in anger, fear, and desperation although they had no target for their waning energy. Their protests were futile.

Inel bravely attempted to operate the organic plant once the offworlders had departed, and to generate interest among his fellow Skidians in the potential of this form of food production. However, it was a case of too little, too late.

If only! Inel raged. If only he had listened and encouraged the offworlders in their work, taken the time to learn from them. Been brave enough to implement the wide ranging changes to Skidian society that would have saved more than the handful of Skidians that would now possibly subsist on the few organic plants they had hastily established in the wilderness outside Sietnuoc. Organic plants modeled on the offworlder's 'farm' as monument's to their collective folly.

Initially Inel had been confident he could save more than the small group he had gathered at the organic plants, encompassing many of the ideas advanced by Bruce. Unfortunately before he had a chance to test his theories Inel met his end, skewered, on the horn of a female ivop and jammed against the railing, as he tried to catch her calf in the yard.

"Bruce made it all look so easy," he spluttered, coughing blood all over his old friend and confidant Noslow, who held him in his arms as he lay dying.

Noslow nodded. This was not how it was supposed to be he wailed silently, oblivious of the female ivop who was charging across the yard at him with her head lowered.

Sue pulled off the road into the parking lot where many of her fellow travel agents had already gathered. She rested her head for a moment on the steering wheel, slightly nauseous all of a sudden, and cast her eye over the group. Most of them were suitably if a little excessively dressed in all the latest designer gear, as if it made them instant outdoors types. The clothing was brightly colored and there was a profusion of sunglasses and bum bags full of matches, cellphones, rescue flares, and first aid kits.

Everyone was shod in fashionable boots, wore a bright woolly hat and had the inevitable camera slung carelessly around the neck. The brief bout of nausea passed and Sue did not give it a second thought as she got out of the car. Bending over to pull the pack off the back set, she suddenly felt lightheaded and straightened up quickly, bumping her head on the roof.

"Bugger it!" She put a hand over her mouth and looked around to see if anyone had heard her use the obscenity. Then she stopped suddenly in her tracks, feeling as if she had been here before. Which could not be right, because she never had.

Sue shook her head. She had been feeling a little odd these past few days, imagining against all reason that she was experiencing something like morning sickness. That could not be right either, because she had been celibate for almost a year now. Celibate, if she discounted the intensely vivid dreams of her and a phantom lover she had been experiencing over the last few nights that is.

"Must do something about that," she said to herself as she wandered over to the group of tour operators in time to catch the final instructions of their guide before he led them off into the forest.

Is this the end of the most sophisticated and technologically advanced society ever in the known universe? Will the invasion force from Celcious B ever find its way to Skid and march triumphantly through the streets of the capital Sietnuoc? What will become of Bruce and Sue and will they ever find each other? How will they fare on their return home and what implications does this have for the world that they thought they knew of as home? What

becomes of Raele after he returns home and how does he and the other survivors cope with the destruction of his home planet?

Find out the answers to these questions and more in Return to Skid.