

The Cicada

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INGE MELDGAARD

A Novel

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To my sister Tove, with love.

‘Heaven’s gold is kindness of heart.’

Warwick Collins
The Rationalist
1993

This second edition of *The Cicada* is the result of several revisions since it was first published in 2009. I sincerely hope the reader will enjoy this substantially improved version and go on to read its sequels, *A Death In The Making* and *The Seed Gatherers*.

MAIN CHARACTERS

The Willsmere Scientists – Melbourne, Australia

Karla	Geneticist
Mik Theophanous	Botanist
Tamara Solanum	Agricultural Scientist
Søren Thorup	Zoologist, on temporary assignment from Greenland

The Other Scientists

Martha	Environmental Scientist, Lamington, Queensland, Australia
Meng Jarrah	Australian Palaeontologist employed by the Papuan and Myanmar Governments as a Research Coordinator
Zago	Federation Research Coordinator, based in Oslo, Norway
Sirinya	Federation Researcher, Serro do Cachimbo, Brazil
Eduardo Arreza	Federation Researcher, Serro do Cachimbo, Brazil
Owain	Brother to Gwennlian, Melbourne-based government Research Coordinator

The Peacekeepers

Chiu Liow Jones	Melbourne, Australia
Welcome	Criminologist and Psychologist, Melbourne, Australia
Freddi	Jamaican, on assignment in Myanmar, half-sister to Chiu Liow

The Federation Special Investigation Unit, based in Luzern, Switzerland

Rohan Maerz	FSIU Coordinator
Morag MacIain	FSIU Investigator

The Australian Information Technologists, Melbourne Central Computer Site

Lance Melrose Naylor	Senior Systems Technologist
Gwenllian	
Marika	
Thanh Fong Lau	

The Cats

Fliedermus	Companion to Mik Theophanous
Possum	ditto
Red Matilda	ditto
Shela	Companion to Freddi
Aurora	Companion to Rohan Maerz

Others

Kenjiro Kakura	Director of Wyvern Meridian
Mervyn Bradshaw	Sponsor of Bendigo Theatre Company
Erminio	Senior Research Assistant, Epsilon Pty Ltd Brazil

PROLOGUE

Despite the grim laws of nature and the effect of human arrogance taking its toll in famine, disease, war and environmental degradation, in the year 2050, the world's population reached ten billion, and by 2090, had risen to twelve billion. By 2135, with a population of fifteen billion, Earth was now in a state of crisis. Species extinctions increased exponentially and the planet's ecosystems were at breaking point.

The sick, the frail, the prematurely born and the disabled could no longer gain access to dwindling medical supplies and overextended facilities, so died in their hundreds of millions. Life expectancy dropped to a meagre fifty-six years in even the least affected countries – while women continued to give birth in agony and sorrow.

As the world's climate became increasingly unstable, and the wealthier nations began to feel the direst impacts, an awareness of the need for global government developed. The United Nations Assembly was transformed into the World Federation of Nations.

Economic and technological aid, together with political incentives, were offered to those countries unable, or unwilling, to introduce population control or effective resource conservation measures. Some resisted what they perceived as interference and closed their borders, nationalising foreign-owned industries in a vain attempt to exclude the outside world. Others saw themselves as powerful enough to defy both the Federation and the inevitable consequences of their actions, so declared war – and solved their population problems by losing.

By the middle of the twenty-third century, the world was finally at peace, but had lost most of its natural forests and other wild places. Humans now numbered a mere three billion.

Two hundred years later, a massive global effort is in place to restore Earth's devastated ecosystems, but the Federation is about to face an enemy who even they may be unable to defeat.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

As Karla walked along the riverbank, enjoying the sharp, clean scent of eucalypts and the unusual summer coolness of the early morning, a faint, blurred image began to form in her mind. When the image grew clearer, she broke into a run, her heart pounding. Two minutes later, she paused outside Willsmere's vast research complex, catching her breath and glancing at the security system's retina scanner. The gates silently opened and the young woman walked swiftly along the smooth, gravelled walkway. There was another agonising wait while a second retina scan was performed, allowing the massive wooden doors of the main building to finally swing open.

By the time Karla reached her laboratory, sunlight was pouring through the windows, all too clearly showing the ruins of what had been her life's work. The once beautifully presented plant specimens, painstakingly catalogued over the past ten years, were now a brown pulpy mass, mixed with shards of plastiglass from the nearby culture cabinets. An acrid smell of burning permeated the whole room. The cat, Fliedermus, was there, crouched inside an empty storage cupboard, tail lashing from side to side, eyes huge and ears flattened in rage.

Controlling herself, Karla spoke softly: 'I'm here; you're safe now. Where's Mik?' She crouched down to hold out a hand. 'Is he in the other lab?'

Fliedermus leapt to the floor, snarling, hackles raised. She hurled herself frantically against the closed door to the second laboratory, scratching the surface with her long, needle-sharp claws. Karla suddenly knew what she would find. When they entered the room, the cat's vivid imagery ceased and an icy calm replaced the fear in her mind. Even so, Karla's hand trembled as she cautiously lifted a curl of Mik's hair away from his forehead, revealing an ugly gash. A trickle of blood stained the sleeve of his loose white shirt. Fliedermus licked his cold hand and mewled piteously. Slumped over his keyboard, he didn't respond.

'Mik,' whispered Karla, her voice strained. 'Mik,' she called, more loudly this time, 'can you hear me?' He still didn't respond, so she pressed her fingers to his neck, feeling for a pulse, which, to her vast relief, was strong and steady. Placing her hand onto his computer's

identity pad, Karla asked for an ambulance, then spoke to the medtech who answered, giving brief details of the situation.

Shortly afterwards, the computer informed her that Willsmere's security system had authorised the approach of an ambulance, which was soon hovering on the grassy verge outside. However, by the time two cheerfully competent ambutechs strode in, Karla was beginning to feel dizzy, and even slightly faint from shock. Taking a few uncertain steps towards them, she hesitated, took a deep breath, and put a hand to her forehead. One of the women immediately took hold of her arm and helped her sit down. Meanwhile, the second ambutech examined Mik, and then together, the two women lifted him onto the hoverbed they had brought with them.

When they turned to speak to Karla, she pointed to the longhaired brown tabby crouching nearby, who was watching them all closely. 'That's Fliedermus, Mik's cat,' she said. 'While I was still outside the gates, I could sense her calling me...warning me of what had happened. She was in *my* lab when I arrived and this door was shut. She must have stayed in there all night.' Tears gathered in her eyes. 'I thought Mik had been killed!'

'Yes, we understand how you feel, Karla, but overall, your colleague seems fine,' said one of the ambutechs, with a reassuring smile. 'The cat may even have helped him. It'd be an idea for her to come along with our patient, if that's okay with you?'

Fliedermus answered for Karla by leaping lightly onto the hoverbed and curling the tip of her tail protectively around one of Mik's feet.

As the group moved slowly towards the main entrance, Karla's friend, Tamara, came running in, alarm drawn on her round, dimpled face.

'What the blazes is going on here? Why is there an ambulance? Is that Mik? What's happened to him? Karla, are you all right?'

Karla put an arm around Tamara's shoulders, saying, as calmly as she could manage, 'Someone's broken in and they've attacked him; Fliedermus warned me just before I arrived. Apparently he isn't seriously hurt, but the ambutechs are taking him to the nearest medcentre and want her to go as well. I think it's best if we leave them to it and take a look around. My lab's completely wrecked... Aside from that, I don't know if there's any other damage, or if anything's been taken.'

Angrily blinking away the sudden tears, Tamara made an effort to stop her hands from trembling, then gave Karla a quick hug and turned away to catch up with the ambutechs. She could see Mik's colour was improving and hesitantly touched his face, then stroked Fliedermus, who gently rubbed her head into Tamara's hand. Drawing back, she linked arms with Karla, who had followed her, and together they walked silently alongside the hoverbed until it reached the waiting ambulance. Once

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everyone was on board, it hummed softly and lifted off, rapidly disappearing from sight.

When Tamara placed her hand onto the identity pad of Karla's computer, it failed to respond to her voice, so she checked the power source to make sure it was still on. It was, although the screen was completely blank.

'Damned idiots!' she exclaimed. 'They must've completely wiped it, or there'd be *some* response! Why bother? There's nothing here that isn't on the network as well.' Tamara swore again, needing to release the anger that for the moment had replaced her earlier fear.

She and Karla had already discovered that all the hand readers from both laboratories were gone. It could only mean that someone had stupidly, senselessly – and possibly dangerously – tried to interfere with Willsmere's research. No one had done that for over a century. Not since 2337, when an obscure group made their final attempt to steal the frozen gene pool of their 'martyred' cult-creature, the Queensland cane toad.

'We'll have to notify the peacekeepers,' she concluded.

'Yes, and Zago,' agreed Karla, running a hand through her already tousled hair, 'she'll need to know what's happened, though before we do, we'd better check the other computers.' She stretched her arms and flexed her broad, strong shoulders, trying to ease the tension in them. 'Sorry, but I need to clear my head. I want to take a quick walk outside. Could you call the peacekeepers? I expect they'll only want the basics to begin with... I won't be long.'

Tamara noticed that Karla's normally healthy countenance was pale and drawn. 'Sure,' she replied, smiling bravely, but with a catch in her voice. 'Hopefully I'll have some coffee ready by the time you're back.'

Making an effort to remain calm, she identified herself to the other computer in the laboratory, then instructed it to run a full operational diagnostic. After following the same procedure for Mik's and then her own, all three computers reported their systems to be normal. Her own asked if she wanted anything else done.

'Yes,' she replied, 'please contact the nearest peacekeepers.'

The screen soon displayed a cheerful dark-complexioned face, topped by an unruly mop of straight black hair. The peacekeeper identified himself as Chiu Liow Jones, while the routine message "Identity Confirmed" appeared at the bottom of the screen, together with the date: the fourteenth of November 2450.

'Thank the Sun we've got building scanners linked to this machine,' thought Tamara. 'At least I can show them what's happened.' She stuttered a few times, and then in an artificially cool voice, said, 'My name is Tamara Solanum. I'm a research scientist and someone has

assaulted my colleague, Researcher Mik Theophanous, and vandalised our laboratory here at Willsmere. If you wish to verify this report, you can request a scan of Room WL1201.'

The cheerfulness on the peacekeeper's face became a touch less so, and Chiu Liow Jones allowed a hint of surprise to enter his otherwise steady voice. 'That's unusual, and yes, I will scan. Thank you.'

As she waited, Tamara reverted to a childhood habit of twisting a curl around a forefinger, then mentally rapped herself over the knuckles, knowing how distracting it could be to others.

Finally, the peacekeeper said, 'I'll be with you in about ten minutes. Please make sure any witnesses are available.'

Karla returned at that moment, looking a little more like her usual confident self. Tamara stood up, saying, 'You weren't long. I haven't even made the coffee yet.'

'What did they say? I don't imagine they'd get many reports like this.'

'No, I don't suppose they would. A peacekeeper by the name of Chiu Liow Jones should be here any minute.' Tamara busied herself at the room's small servery, glad of the distraction, and handed Karla one of the filled cups. 'We might as well go out front and wait.'

They had barely seated themselves on the steps leading to the building when a Melbourne Peacekeeping Force patrol car arrived. It skimmed over the tops of the massive river redgums surrounding Willsmere before settling on the blue-green lawn. A tall figure wearing a dark blue uniform extricated itself from the driver's seat and strode towards them.

Producing an ID card, and without any further preliminaries, yet with a friendly smile, the peacekeeper said, 'Please, tell me what happened from the time you arrived until now.'

Slightly intimidated, despite his amiable manner, Karla introduced herself and held out a hand, which he briefly shook. Given the circumstances, she managed to relate her experiences in a remarkably concise fashion. Tamara listened carefully, while at the same time closely observing the peacekeeper's face. His expression remained blandly cheerful, although a small telltale quirk of the mouth showed his keen interest. Once Karla's account of the morning's events was finished and recorded, Peacekeeper Chiu Liow Jones asked to be shown the centre. They began with Karla's laboratory, which she shared with Søren Thorup, a zoologist.

'What was in the hand readers?' asked Chiu Liow, after Karla told him what the empty storage cupboard previously contained.

'A couple had copies of certain aspects of our recent efforts to produce new food crops using our own unique genetic engineering techniques. I work together with Søren Thorup, who's here on temporary assignment from Greenland. We're trying to create new environmentally sustainable

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and resource-efficient food sources, in the form of plants that have the same type of complete protein normally found only in animals. This type of work's been around for centuries, but for various reasons, until fairly recently, very little succeeded.' Karla kept her voice as steady as she could, although the idea of someone else now having access to some of their more critical work, particularly before it had been thoroughly tested, was unsettling, to say the least.

'How remarkably interesting,' said Chiu Liow, raising an eyebrow. 'Your work is obviously important to both Australia and the Federation. Did the hand readers contain anything else?'

'Yes, one held an earlier version of a knowledge base I've worked on for almost ten years. I'm mapping the DNA of around five hundred newly discovered plant and fungus species. The current knowledge base is linked to an enhanced intelligent decision-making system which models new genetic combinations...and all this has been erased from my computer. There was also a great deal of test data and software we'd developed. Søren's other work, with previously unidentified insects and arachnids, is kept in here too, but *his* computer seems fine.'

'What would happen if something was completely lost?' asked Chiu Liow, frowning.

'It depends what it was, but we have back-ups of everything in our own secure area, as well as on the Luzern network... Surely they couldn't have gotten in there as well!' Karla's voice rose and she put a hand to her mouth, then immediately made an effort to control herself.

'Perhaps they only wanted the actual information and ignorance caused them to accidentally delete your computer's contents,' replied Chiu Liow, noticing how tense both women were.

'No, the computer itself would've prevented accidental erasure,' said Tamara, her tone harsher than normal. 'The only way it could've been done would be by somehow introducing a very large power surge to just this workstation.'

'I see,' said Chiu Liow. 'Have you lost anything that can't readily be replaced?'

Karla pointed to what was left of her reference collection. '*That's* what I won't be able to replace in a hurry. My plant specimens... It's taken me so long to find them all!' She sat down on the nearest chair and gazed up at him, completely at a loss as to why anyone would want to break in and destroy their work.

'Why are these particular plants so important?' The peacekeeper had never before had any reason to look into the details of Willsmere's work.

Shaking her head in frustration, Karla shrugged, then explained that apart from their environmental value and potential medical significance, it was important to their food sciences to have full records of as many potentially edible species as possible.

‘All the sites I obtained them from are recorded, of course,’ she continued, ‘but a few of the places are murder to get to, and some of the species are extremely rare. Fortunately, we have a full set of duplicates of all my original specimens in the Federation Herbarium in Oslo, together with their frozen gene pools. We also have the DNA and tissue samples from the specimens I’ve finished with in our secure cryogenics store – which doesn’t seem to have been opened – and most of their genomes are now in the knowledge base, but there were still thirty-two to define and enter. The problem is, there’s no way I can quickly obtain return samples from Oslo for the ones I still need to work on. They always seem to take forever to do anything...’ For a moment, Karla covered her face with her hands, then looked up at him, tears in her eyes.

‘You have my sincere sympathy, Karla,’ said Chiu Liow, briefly placing a hand on her shoulder. He turned to Tamara, who was now sitting down as well, her arm linked with Karla’s – they both needed the simple reassurance of touch.

‘What are you and Researcher Theophanous working on?’ he asked.

‘We do the core research that determines which species and other interventions are required to rehabilitate the forests, grasslands and other natural areas the Federation has decided aren’t damaged beyond repair. Part of my role is to work out which regions can survive as true wilderness and which can only be used for plantations, or other types of agriculture. We also mass-produce embryos of the more fragile plants and animals, then use them to re-establish wild populations.’

‘Thank you. Now, I need you to answer some questions regarding how entry into the building – and afterwards, the laboratories – could have occurred. I assume you have standard security procedures?’

‘Of course we do, Peacekeeper,’ said Tamara, rather tersely, ‘but you’ll have to check with the infotechs at central security to find out if they’ve authorised anyone for entry without telling us...which I doubt; I’m responsible for liaising with them. Either way, our security system here is still doing the retina scans at the gates and at the main door...which means the identity of whoever got into the building might be in its database.’

‘Well,’ said Karla, with a slight pressure on Tamara’s arm, ‘the chances are that there won’t be any record. My guess is that everything’s been erased by now. Mind you, to do that without leaving any trace would be incredibly difficult. All the security system’s transactions are logged, of course.’

Chiu Liow hesitated before replying, but quickly realised that without too much trouble – he hoped – it should be possible to obtain help from the Federation’s Special Investigation Unit to look into the issue. Still, security matters aside, there was enough for him to follow up that didn’t require their specialist personnel.

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‘Yes, I imagine the records *would* be gone by now,’ he said, frowning slightly. ‘So, presumably Researcher Mik Theophanous isn’t implicated. I see no logical reason for him to sabotage your work and then arrange for someone to assault him... Have either of you determined whether his computer, or anything else in the laboratory, or for that matter, anything in the remainder of the building, has been interfered with?’

‘I’ve run a check on both Søren and Mik’s computers, as well as my own, and they’ve verified themselves to be fully functional and intact, but we haven’t had time to check either lab thoroughly...and certainly not the rest of the building,’ replied Tamara, brushing a curl away from her face. ‘It’d take ages because it’s so big, but our building maintenance computer will know whether anyone’s entered other parts of the complex since Karla and I left yesterday, at around 22:30 – if the records haven’t been changed, of course.’

Chiu Liow nodded. ‘Very well. Thank you.’

‘Do you want to see the other labs first, or the scanner records? We can show you where the console’s located.’

‘I think it would be best if you check your own laboratories after we have seen what the security system has to tell us,’ he replied, in his oddly formal manner and with another gentle smile. ‘I am quite certain you can be trusted to let me know of any disturbances you might find, but at this stage, please do not clean or tidy anything away. I will call in our forensics team to examine your laboratories, the grounds, and the remainder of the building.’

During their walk to the security console, Chiu Liow had the opportunity to observe his companions. Tamara appeared to him to be of Anglo-Celtic descent, with short brown curls, grey eyes, fair skin, slightly stubby nose and a wide, friendly mouth. She seemed like someone who lived firmly in the present. Karla showed her northern European background in her greater height, broad shoulders, high forehead, fair hair and bright blue eyes. Despite being understandably upset, her mouth had a determined look, and he could imagine that once the trauma of these events had been dealt with, the work destroyed last night would be painstakingly reproduced, no matter how long it took. Casting a surreptitious glance at their left hands, he noted that neither of them wore a fertility ring, which didn’t surprise him as he estimated their ages to be only in their early thirties.

They turned a final corner then waited outside a large, plastiglass-enclosed room containing, Tamara told him, the computer and the robotics controlling Willsmere’s security, internal climate and general facilities. The door opened for them after routine retina scans confirmed their identities. Karla requested a report of everyone who had entered the building and its rooms since midnight the previous day and the present time. The screen neatly tabulated times, rooms and names. All the names

– other than those identified as the two ambutechs and the peacekeeper – were those of staff members. Mik’s name was shown as not having left until this morning, but otherwise, Karla and Tamara were the last to leave yesterday and the first to arrive today.

Karla, out of habit, thanked the computer, which replied that she was welcome, its tone soft and somehow reassuring. Nevertheless, she could feel herself becoming faintly nauseous and briefly laid her hand against the hard, cool surface of the console. The information confirmed that either a staff member was involved and had somehow managed to bypass the security system, or their database had indeed been altered during the night.

‘We will need to interview them all, as well as the information technologists at the central computer site,’ stated Chiu Liow, echoing Karla’s thoughts. ‘Would you be so kind as to ask for a full set of identification records?’

To his surprise, the request was answered by the computer without Karla having to repeat it. ‘Ah, I see,’ he said, peering at the screen. ‘I have right of entry to this building and to this room, so I suppose I also have rights to certain information held in this system. Presumably it can all be transferred to my comlink?’

‘Yes, it can,’ said Tamara, ‘but because you don’t normally work here, you’ll have to enter your ID number for confirmation, together with your handprint.’

Chiu Liow did as she asked and the computer announced that the records had been successfully transferred. ‘History has a depressing tendency to repeat itself,’ he murmured, checking his comlink to make sure he had the information.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Karla.

‘Oh, I have a strong interest in ancient architecture, which inevitably leads to a study of history and social trends. I find it helps me understand my role as a peacekeeper, so even though these types of crimes might be uncommon now, they weren’t in the past.’

‘Look, I don’t want to appear unconcerned,’ interrupted Tamara, frowning, ‘but could we postpone the chitchat until we at least see how Mik’s doing?’ She had become red in the face as she spoke. ‘Sorry, I don’t mean to be rude, Peacekeeper Jones, it’s just that I’m finding it hard to deal with the idea that a member of staff, either here or at central security, is involved. In fact, I’m finding it almost impossible to believe any of this has happened!’

She turned away, embarrassed by her brief outburst, and asked the computer for an update on the condition of Researcher Mik Theophanous. After a brief delay, the screen cleared to show the face, identity number and name of a medcentre practitioner, who was able to give her the information she asked for.

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‘Researcher Mik Theophanous is now conscious and has no serious injury, Researcher Solanum. He’ll be well enough to leave here by tomorrow morning and has requested that you take him home at 11:00. The injuries to his head appear to have been caused when he was struck from behind with a heavy object and then fell onto something with a sharp edge. The cut on his forehead may even have happened afterwards if, for example, he wasn’t rendered unconscious and turned to face his attackers. Either way, his injuries should heal within two weeks. Also, he may have been sedated, since neither blow would have caused him to remain unconscious for long. However, we found no trace of anything in his bloodstream.’

The practitioner paused for a moment to see if Tamara had any questions, but as she didn’t, continued: ‘After tomorrow, he won’t need any medication or other treatment, so unless there are unforeseen complications, I won’t be allocating any home aftercare. Unfortunately, he suffered concussion and at this stage is unable to speak with us about what happened. To help him recover emotionally, I suggest you attempt to talk it through with him at the earliest opportunity. Although,’ he added, with eyebrows raised, ‘I gather he actually has three cats. He must be an extremely well-adjusted person!’

‘Thank you, Practitioner Sanderson,’ said Tamara, managing a small smile. ‘I’ll be there tomorrow at 11:00.’ Turning to Karla, who had brightened a little at the news, she exclaimed, ‘Well, that’s a relief! Though I must say, it all sounds really weird. Anyway, I’ll tell him what’s happened here today...so maybe he’ll be able to talk to you soon, Peacekeeper Jones.’

Tamara led the way to the building’s main entrance, a rather vague expression on her face. Noticing, Karla smiled for the first time that morning. She had seen that look before, but never, until now, associated with Mik Theophanous.

While the two women examined their laboratories, Chiu Liow made arrangements for the forensics team to attend, then indulged himself in a short but leisurely stroll around the grounds of Willsmere – even though, outside, the full heat of the day felt almost as if he had stepped into a furnace.

Bellbirds echoed loudly throughout the grey-green forest nearby, contrasting strangely with the harsh cries of aggressive wattlebirds. An intricate cobweb, spun during the morning by an ever-industrious spider, caught his eye as he passed. In its centre, the owner waited patiently inside a curled-up leaf for its first meal to arrive. Smiling, Chiu Liow wished it luck.

Earlier, as his patrol car approached the research station, the peacekeeper had reverently admired Willsmere's impressive nineteenth-century towers, and he now silently gave thanks to the people of the twentieth century for having the foresight to preserve so much of the building, as well as its ancient trees. He slowly passed his hand over the ornate brickwork of the original boundary wall, then gazed up through the dense canopy of a gnarled oak. Chiu Liow realised that Willsmere must once have been a landmark – before the older, low-lying, coastal regions of Melbourne were partially submerged during the late twenty-first century, due to the effects of global warming. The immense complex now sat at the top of a gentle rise leading down to the mouth of the Yarra River, several kilometres away. It overlooked a city which had become the 'Venice' of the south, replacing the ancient and entrancing original. 'Such a pity,' he thought, with a sigh. 'So many beautiful places lost forever.'

Even Willsmere's history was a sorrowful one, and despite the heat, he shivered, imagining the tragic lives of the inmates of this former 'Kew Lunatic Asylum'. Were the patients of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries able to appreciate the beauty of their surroundings? Or had the beauty been created to allow the community to congratulate itself on its willingness to give only the 'best care' to those unfortunates? What were the words he had once read about Willsmere in the National Australian Library? "It has been too big a problem for people to consider and they have shuddered and walked away."

Shaking his head, Chiu Liow walked on a little further, thinking about all the old cities that were once situated conveniently by coastal harbours or large rivers. The ancient centres of inner London, Stockholm, Copenhagen and Amsterdam were now ghostly ruins, surrounded by water and inhabited by shadows, while the newer, and yet still relatively old, cities of Vancouver, Miami and New Orleans had been destroyed by the unleashed violence of tidal waves. The tidal waves followed a worldwide series of massive earthquakes, during which Japan and the American state of California were destroyed, together with countless other vulnerable regions and low-lying island states.

Many historic inland sites had succumbed as well – to the wreckers' ever-hungry machines in the drive to find more living space for both the world's refugees and its burgeoning population. There was neither the time nor the will to preserve the ancient monuments, artworks and buildings as the multitude of wars and other catastrophes of the twenty-first and the twenty-second centuries finally drove Earth's people into a desperate fight for survival.

Melbourne was more fortunate than many other coastal cities, being sheltered from the worst storms by Port Phillip Bay. Some of the older buildings in the central area were lost, but those which had been well

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built, or were strategically placed on the summits of low hills, survived as islands in a shallow and gentle sea. The noise, smell and dirt of the city's streets were, in time, replaced by the grace and silence of solar-electric powered watercraft. The walls of the buildings, once covered in grime from exhaust fumes, returned to their original colours, and after almost two hundred years, the sunlight now sparkled on clean waters.

Narrowing his eyes, Chiu Liow looked into the distance, bringing himself back to the present. 'We survived,' he thought soberly, 'even though our ancestors didn't leave us much!'

'Your report is not the first to reach me, Karla,' said Federation Research Coordinator Zago, her face creased with a thousand wrinkles and her voice holding the slight quaver common to those of extreme old age. 'Here in Luzern, we have received news of two similar incidents: one from Brazil, three months ago, and the other from your sister laboratory in Queensland, just twenty minutes before you called. Unlike you, they were fortunate at the Lamington station not to have anyone working late, which meant no injuries were sustained.'

'I see by your face I have upset you with this news,' Zago continued, using the more formal language of her generation and background, 'and I am sure the violence will have disturbed you all gravely, so please replay this transmission for Mik. I want him to understand how deeply I sympathise with him.'

'Yes, I will. Thank you... But what happened at Lamington?' Karla found herself tensing as she waited for the reply.

'We are greatly puzzled by the damage there. Like you, some of their results were erased from one of their computers. This is only a minor inconvenience, of course, and although the plant stocks still under indoor culture were harmed, I am thankful to report that they were not entirely destroyed. However, this, together with the loss of a large number of their test plants, will delay the outcome of their outdoor growth trials by some one and a half years. Naturally, we will coordinate extra personnel to assist you in developing a fresh set of embryonic plants for them, once they have established what was lost. How long do you estimate it will take you and your colleagues to determine exactly which losses *your* laboratory has sustained?'

'I can tell you now. We were incredibly lucky in one way, because our frozen gene pools are completely intact. I don't know if whoever did this ran out of time, or was scared off for some reason, but I'm thankful to say that they didn't get around to vandalising any other labs – only mine. The embryo cultures in Mik and Tamara's lab are untouched, so the only real loss is my original species collection. Fortunately, Søren's set of little

creatures hadn't yet been transferred from Lamington... Oh!' Karla's eyes widened. 'Zago, are you sure *they* weren't damaged?'

'Ah, yes, Karla... Do not excite yourself unnecessarily,' murmured Zago. 'I will arrange for a transfer of samples from Oslo once you give me a complete list of what you require. If *I* do it, they may move faster than they would for you. Also, if they realise there has been no culpability on your part, they will be more ready to part with their treasures.' She chuckled at the thought of overcoming their bureaucratic resistance, then added, 'In the meantime, in case it is needed, I will arrange a permit for you to return to the sites from which you obtained the specimens.'

'Thank you, Zago.' Karla felt both relieved as well as a touch foolish. She should have realised Zago would deal with the situation promptly. Their Research Coordinator was a precise and meticulous woman, with almost eighty years experience in the ways of the scientific community and its necessary – although at times excessively irritating – flock of seat-warming functionaries. 'What happened in Brazil?' she asked. 'We haven't heard anything about them.'

'The event was not reported to either the public or to anyone outside the immediate circle of people who needed to know. We felt the news would only cause widespread alarm and that no benefit would be gained by notifying other centres. The local peacekeepers could find no trace of the perpetrators, nor any sane rationale behind the attack. However, the fact that there now appears to be a pattern of incidents changes the situation. A comprehensive report will be sent to everyone in our network, as well as to the Federation's Special Investigation Unit.'

'What about the staff? Was anyone hurt?' Karla kept her thoughts to herself. For once, Zago was wrong. They should have been told.

'I am sorry to say that two of our researchers, Eduardo Arreza and Sirinya, were injured, but thank goodness, not seriously. Unfortunately, they were unable to identify their assailants in any way.' Zago briefly shook her head and frowned. 'None of their computers appear to have been tampered with, but some of the frozen plant and animal embryos were, regrettably, stolen. No fungi were lost, however, because we think the perpetrators were disturbed at this point by the no doubt unexpected return of Eduardo and Sirinya.'

'I see!' exclaimed Karla, shocked. 'I'm so glad they're all right... What do you think the FSIU will do?'

'I expect they will liaise with the local peacekeepers and provide enough resources to ensure the investigation proceeds without delay. Presumably they will also ensure security measures in all our centres are thoroughly examined and improved where necessary. Now, Karla, is there anything else I can do for you before I go?'

'No, thank you. The forensics team is here at the moment. Once they've finished going through everything, I'll concentrate on cleaning

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up. I think we'll all feel a lot better once we've sorted out the chaos. I'll let you know if anything new turns up.' Karla tried to smile, but failed.

Understanding, Zago nodded and bade her a fond farewell. Karla returned the greeting then closed the connection, preoccupied and deeply disturbed by the news the Federation Research Coordinator had given her.

When Tamara went to the medcentre the next morning, she found Mik sitting up and watching Fliedermus perform graceful gymnastics on the curtain bars surrounding the bed. Quite clearly, there was very little wrong with either of them.

'Hi there, Mikko. Want to go home?' said Tamara, with a grin of relief. The dark smudges under her eyes showed how difficult it had been to sleep after a long day cleaning up the mess at Willsmere, as well as dealing with the news of the attacks on the other two research stations.

At this point, Fliedermus scampered to a spot above Mik's shoulder, hanging by her tail and dangling a furry face directly in front of Tamara's. The creature burred happily, batting at her hair with one paw, then suddenly, with an extraordinary display of aerodynamic agility, up-ended and leapt into Tamara's arms. When she nearly fell backwards with the weight, Mik burst out laughing and Tamara simply had to join in. She gave Fliedermus a kiss on the nose, then handed her to Mik, saying, 'Here, take your cat and let's get you out of here.'

Mik climbed out of bed with some difficulty, as his beloved feline was by this time sitting on his chest. 'Come on, move!' he implored her.

Pretending to be insulted, Fliedermus leapt to the floor, built up speed, and skittered sideways towards the door, arching her back and tail as she went.

'If she's like this now, you'll have to help me when I get home to the others,' said Mik, smiling as he watched Fliedermus. 'They'll probably be hysterical. I don't suppose anyone thought of telling them where I was?'

'As a matter of fact, yes, we did. I went to your house, let myself in, and got pounced on by Red Matilda. She glared at me for ages before getting my message that you were okay and that I had no intention of invading your privacy! Meanwhile, Possum was hiding under the bedcovers. She poked her nose out just as I was going, so I hope she came out later to eat what I left for her, assuming Red didn't grab the lot. That cat's a monster!'

'Well, I didn't name her Red Matilda for nothing. Haven't you read any twentieth-century history?' said Mik, with a teasing grin. 'Anyway, Fliedermus is creating havoc. We'd better move, and I'm sorry, but you can't watch while I get dressed!'

The Cicada

Tamara poked her tongue out at him, but obediently turned around while he put on the clothes she'd remembered to bring. He really did look wonderful, she thought, studying him for a moment after he tapped her on the shoulder to let her know they were ready to go. Even being attacked and spending a night in a medcentre had done nothing to change either his sense of humour or his general appearance. If it weren't for the mark on his forehead, it was almost as if nothing had happened.

They presented themselves at the main reception area, where Mik pressed a thumb against the keypad of the computer with "Patient Arrivals and Departures" displayed on its screen. After the usual exchange of information, and once he'd been issued with a record of stay and aftercare instructions, Mik and Tamara left the building, led by an overjoyed Fliedermus. Outside, the small blue flowers of the trafficway's living surface spread before them in a dense carpet. Its beauty and delicate scent seemed to invite them to enjoy the warm, sunlit day.

'According to my aftercare schedule,' said Mik, briefly putting an arm around Tamara's shoulders, 'I'm supposed to go home and rest. Furthermore, I'm to have 'a close friend' with me until morning. Do you think you'd qualify?'

When Tamara mumbled something indecipherable, Mik laughed, his voice rich and deep.

'I do believe you're blushing, Researcher Tamara Solanum. Would you rather I contacted Søren? He should've returned from Lamington by now. I'm sure he'd be enthralled at the idea of spending a day and a night by my bedside, instead of advancing the cause of science by another twenty-four hours.'

Fliedermus gave his game away by rubbing herself against Tamara's legs, purring loudly. Tamara giggled and looked him straight in the eye. 'If you want to tease people, my friend, you'd better leave your cat at home.' Mik pretended to be chastened, but utterly failed to convince her.

The two friends walked on towards the medcentre's public callstation, Mik in his usual lively way and Tamara matching his stride. When she entered Mik's address code into its small, robust terminal, the screen glowed yellow and showed the message "Transport in 5 minutes". As they waited, Tamara told him what had happened at Willsmere while he was unconscious. It appeared the practitioner in charge of his treatment had already given him the basics, yet although Mik was recovering well, he still had no memory whatsoever of the night's events. He could only remember working peacefully, listening to his music – then waking up in the medcentre bed with Fliedermus asleep by his feet. He now found it hard to control a sense of complete outrage at the wanton destruction of Karla's work. Nevertheless, he also had to admit to feeling relieved that so little damage had been done to his or anyone else's.

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Once their transport arrived, they both sat quietly during the short trip, not wishing to discuss such sensitive matters in public. When they were alone again, as they walked, Tamara continued her description of the events and gave him the news from Research Coordinator Zago. Mik said very little. It was all too much to take in.

By the time they arrived at Mik's home, the sun glinted on its greenhouse entrance, where, inside, a riot of greenery and brilliantly coloured flowering plants displayed the botanist's vibrant taste. When he pressed the security keypad with his thumb, the door slid aside to admit them. Following the circular staircase down into the house proper – which as a private dwelling in this particular part of the city was built below ground level – they entered the main living room, which was lit by a plastiglass sun dome in its ceiling. The temperature of the house was kept within reasonable limits by the insulation of the earth surrounds, so the room felt delightfully cool and the air fresh and pleasant. As was customary, the building had self-sufficient energy, water, and waste disposal systems that supplied fertiliser for the small outdoor garden of food plants, which Mik tended with loving care.

As soon as they walked in, an enormous golden-red cat leapt from an armchair and bounded over to greet them. Mik crouched down to rub his face against hers, laughing as Fliedermus attempted to swat Red Matilda's waving, bushy tail. Red Matilda turned and cuffed her playmate over the ear, and then the two capered around the room, rolling over each other in their excitement. A little grey head appeared from beneath a ruffled floor rug and the smallest of the household's trio of cats appeared: Possum. As Mik stood up, she sidled delicately up to him to wind herself around his legs, purring noisily. Tamara bent down and, with some effort, managed to pick her up. Possum immediately nestled into her cradled arms.

Leaving the other two cats to their antics, Mik, Tamara, and her furry bundle, went through to the kitchen, where Tamara collapsed thankfully onto the nearest chair. The worry of the past twenty-seven hours eased as the cat's effect on her began to take hold.

'Mik, I think you'd better take Possum away from me. She's nearly sending me to sleep.' Possum immediately stopped purring and snuffled into Tamara's ear.

Rubbing the side of his slightly crooked nose, Mik quirked his eyebrows and said, 'Apparently I'm not allowed to remove her. We wouldn't want to risk sending her back under the rug, now would we? I'll keep you awake by creating a midsun masterpiece. What would you like with your food, Tamara? A good pinot grigio or a nice soft merlot?'

'Well, neither. You're supposed to be taking it easy and definitely not drinking alcohol. How about you sit here with Possum and I get something for us both instead?'

The Cicada

Mik paused in mid-stride towards the pantry and turned back, then picked up Possum and obediently sat down on the chair opposite, an expression of mock remorse on his face, which soon disappeared as he replied, 'Just don't wreck anything, Tamara. I know you're not interested in cooking.'

She picked up a lemon from the fruit bowl on the table and threw it at him, missing completely when he ducked. Possum leapt off his lap and scabbled around after the fruit where it had rolled underneath a small side table. Sniffing carefully, she decided it wasn't edible and patted it one last time with her paw, just enough to make it roll a little further, then gazed up at Tamara, eyes wide.

'No, it's not a toy,' answered Tamara. 'Sorry.' When she got up from her chair to retrieve the lemon and wipe it clean, Possum pressed herself against Tamara's legs, tail in the air, and was rewarded with a piece of soft cheese. The cat carried it over to her own special place by the kitchen sink, where she contentedly ate her treat.

Tamara watched for a few moments, and when she turned to ask Mik what he wanted to drink with his meal, found he was no longer in his chair. Instead, he was fast asleep on the living room couch, with Red Matilda and Fliedermus snuggled up beside him, also sleeping soundly. For once, Mik's hands were still, one of them resting on Fliedermus, the other tucked beneath his cheek, where long, thick eyelashes lay on his warm, sun-browned skin. Feeling guilty, Tamara took the chance to study him, gently stroking the smile lines deeply etched around the corners of his wide, mobile mouth. Then, unable to resist the temptation, she followed the outline of his eyebrows with her forefinger. They were spaced widely apart and towards their outer ends, the black hair grew a little longer and stood straight up, as if in perpetual surprise, giving him the appearance of an habitual comic. He muttered something in his sleep and turned over. Tamara quickly drew away.