

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

Lying warm and snug between the sleeping bodies of her two companions, Shela yawned, rolled over, and idly stretched out a paw to pat Freddi's hair. When Freddi murmured and twitched, resisting being woken from her delicious dream, Shela stood and carefully walked up the bed until she could brush Freddi's face with her whiskers. A hand came from under the covers to push her away, but the huge black cat was insistent.

Blinking, and rubbing her nose where it had been tickled, Freddi propped herself up on one elbow to stroke Shela's head. The cat began purring, so loudly that Meng Jarrah woke up as well and put an arm around Freddi's waist in an attempt to draw her back down into the cosy comfort of their bed. It was too late. Their hungry feline was demanding breakfast!

Freddi kissed Meng Jarrah on the forehead, then lightly on her lips, saying, 'She won't let up until I get her something to eat, my love.' Meng Jarrah held her close, passionately returning the kiss, but when Shela wailed in protest, reluctantly released her. 'I give up!' she exclaimed, laughing. 'So, what will you get us for breakfast?'

Freddi grinned, got out of bed, stretched, then reached for her robe. 'You'll see. Come on Shela, and stop being such a nuisance!' The cat jumped onto the floor with a loud thump and bounded along the corridor towards the kitchen, tail in the air.

Meng Jarrah stayed in bed a few minutes longer, idly watching a large huntsman spider move slowly along the wall opposite. When it crawled down low enough to be caught, she got up, neatly captured the creature and carried it outside, then had her shower and dressed. Yawning, and contemplating how best to spend her day, Meng Jarrah had just finished brushing her thick, dark brown curls when Freddi called out from the kitchen for her to come and have breakfast, which she had placed on the verandah table so they could enjoy the view while they ate. Despite being the middle of winter, the sun shone brightly in the clear sky, and the air was fresh with the wonderful tang of eucalyptus.

The view was impressive, for the house lay close to the foot of Mount Coottha and was surrounded on all sides by well-established, centuries-old gardens. As an added bonus, the nearby Brisbane River provided a

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delightful destination when they wanted to use up some of their own, and Shela's, excess energy with a good long run. In overall appearance, their home was a replica of an early nineteenth-century style known as 'the Queenslander', with an extensive verandah and ornate latticework to enhance its appeal. However, as was now customary throughout Australia, the building had self-sufficient energy, water and waste-disposal systems, and was modern in all its functional aspects.

After gobbling down her substantial meal of oat porridge and soymilk, Shela stretched in satisfaction, then found a patch of sunlight to sit in while she cleaned her face. Once finished, she rolled lazily onto her back, trying to entice someone into stroking her stomach. However, much to her disgust, they ignored her for the time being – Freddi and Meng Jarrah were too intent on enjoying their own breakfast of strong, freshly brewed coffee, savoury pancakes with melted cheese, and fresh peaches.

When Freddi at long last gave Shela the attention she had begged for, the cat caught at her hands in delight, although with long claws carefully sheathed. Meng Jarrah turned from the last of her food to watch, chuckling at the sight of her two friends, who had taken to rolling around on the floor together, pretending to wrestle. They were a beautiful pair. Freddi's black hair, long and dressed in ringlets, hung down over her face as she played, hiding her unusual light golden eyes.

Just as Freddi finally stood up to take a shower, her comlink chimed. To her dismay, it was the Coordinator of the Brisbane Peacekeeping Force.

'So sorry to interrupt your morning, Freddi, but there's been a suspicious death and we want everyone who's part of the criminal investigation squad on hand. I know you were looking forward to an uninterrupted day off, but it appears to be an ugly case. You'd better pack your bags – you'll probably have to stay in the area for a while.'

'Where am I going?' asked Freddi, suppressing her shock at the news. Murder, if it *was* murder, was a relatively rare occurrence, although Freddi had had more than the usual peacekeeper's experience with it when, six years ago, a rogue corporation used it as one of their weapons in an attempt to compete with the Federation for control of the world's highly lucrative market in forest products.

'Stanthorpe,' replied the Coordinator. 'It's a couple of hundred kilometres from Brisbane – on the New England Highway, not far from the New South Wales border. It's fairly high above sea level, in case you haven't heard of it, so take some warm clothing. Apparently it's cold there at this time of year. One of the locals told me the birdbaths froze last night!' He gave a brief smile at the notion, quite foreign to the usual Queensland climate. 'When can you get there?'

'I should be able to leave in about thirty minutes. Send me what you have in the meantime and I'll read it on the way. Do you want me to bring Meng Jarrah, if she has time?'

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‘Yes, that’s a good thought. We don’t yet know how long the body’s been there, or the time of death, which means a pollen analysis would be helpful, as well as any other details she can provide, botanical or otherwise. I’ve already sent our own entomologist and the Stanthorpe pathologist will be there as well. I’ll let them know Meng Jarrah might be coming with you. Anyway, if you give me a call once you’ve arrived and have had an initial look-see, we can take it from there. The local peacekeepers have secured the site and begun some preliminary work, but they’re waiting for us before they do much more... Oh, and your transport should arrive soon, so good luck,’ he added, before closing the connection.

Meng Jarrah had been listening and nodded when Freddi turned to her with a brief explanation. ‘Of course I’ll come with you. If you’re planning to be away for a while, I’d prefer to come along and help. Our forest regeneration trials at Lamington are doing extremely well, as you know, and there’s nothing urgent about any of my other research to prevent me from going with you.’

Delighted at the idea of a long trip, as well as the chance to explore somewhere new, Shela purred and padded over to the walk-in closet where her leash was kept. She pulled it down from its hook and carried it to the front door, then sat down to wait. Before long, Freddi and Meng Jarrah had packed the few things they needed and were ready to leave. As promised, an airjet was humming quietly on the trafficway a short distance from the house. Once they were all comfortably settled, it lifted and sped off, with Shela gazing out the windows, ears twitching and nose pressed to the plastiglass window.

Stanthorpe was first settled by Europeans after the discovery of tin at Quartpot Creek in 1872. Over time, it grew into a thriving agricultural community, and its wineries, flower farms and orchards were still famous throughout Australia. As they flew over the distinctive granite outcrops surrounding the small town, the two women stared at each other in astonishment. The whole district was spectacular!

The airjet finally landed in a clearing several kilometres south of the town, in a region that was part of the former Girraween National Park, now part of a wider conservation area. The pilot climbed out and watched in amusement as Shela leapt to the ground, gleefully sniffing the air, as well as everything else within reach, tail waving high. Meanwhile, Meng Jarrah and Freddi gazed in awe at the area’s angular granite tors and massive boulders, which sometimes gave the illusion of teetering on the point of falling.

They didn’t need to be shown where to find the body of the person whose death had defiled this beautiful place; Shela led the way to where a

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small group of local peacekeepers and the two forensics experts were patiently probing and then recording what they saw. Approaching with caution, Freddi called out, and one of the peacekeepers turned and walked slowly towards them. The woman hesitated before introducing herself, somewhat taken aback by the sight of Shela and her unusually tall and striking companions. At two hundred and fifteen centimetres, Freddi was some thirty-five centimetres above average height, while Meng Jarrah was only a little shorter.

Understanding her expression, Freddi smiled and said, 'I was hoping our Coordinator would tell you about Shela. She goes everywhere with me, and often helps solve our cases.'

The peacekeeper, whose name was Nyneve, met Shela's inquisitive gaze and shook hands with them. 'Well, any additional help will always be useful, I'm sure,' she replied, then indicated they should all walk back to where the body lay.

A cold wind had sprung up and Meng Jarrah ran a slim, dark hand through her hair, brushing it from her eyes and shivering, despite the warm clothing. When they reached the vicinity of the body, she stared at it, frowning. Having worked on a part-time basis for over two years as a forensics consultant to the Brisbane Peacekeeping Force, this was still the first suspected murder victim Meng Jarrah had seen, although not the first violent death. What she saw appeared to have been a relatively young woman of about forty years of age, slender, although well built, with long, wavy black hair and what might once have been a beautiful face. Now, some of it had been eaten away. She was not wearing any clothing, only a pair of simple silver ear circlets.

The person who was evidently the entomologist was carefully collecting specimens of maggots and insects from the body, as well as taking small pieces of the tissue from which they came. The other forensics specialist was taking samples of earth, while meticulously searching for any foreign objects that could have belonged to the dead woman, or to whoever was with her.

Freddi shook her head, saddened by the sight. Turning to Nyneve, she said, 'I think Meng Jarrah had better start gathering information about the local flora. It looks as if the weather might change soon, don't you think? Also, who discovered the body?'

Nyneve was studying the sky, a worried expression on her face. 'Yes, I think we're in for quite a storm. We probably have only a couple of hours at the most before it starts. Fortunately, our trackers have already worked out that two people carried the woman here and they've marked the likely route taken. Also, no signs of a struggle have been found, so it's possible she was either dead already, unconscious, or sedated. Now, before I answer your question, I'll just have a quick word with my colleagues...won't be a tick,' and she headed off.

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As they waited, Meng Jarrah donned protective clothing and unpacked her kit. The entire local flora would already be on file, so her main objective would be to catalogue all the vegetation in the immediate area and to take sets of soil and other samples along the path identified by the trackers.

Before long, Nyneve returned with the peacekeeper who recorded the apparent route and who had meticulously compiled a report containing the evidence that led to his conclusions. He shook Meng Jarrah's hand and introduced himself as Smithson, offering to show her the way. She quickly accepted, but before setting off, waited to hear what Nyneve had to say.

'It was a pair of Italian bushwalkers and their cat who found the body,' Nyneve told them. 'Beautiful creature,' she added, remembering the animal's deep blue eyes and silky, chocolate-coloured fur. 'Their names are Pietro and Elena. Naturally, they're deeply distressed, so we took them to the medcentre in Stanthorpe. We haven't pressed them for much information...just let them talk for as long as they wanted. They obviously *needed* to talk, because with a few simple promptings they gave us a fairly complete picture anyway. It seems that when they rounded that huge teetering boulder up there,' and Nyneve pointed to a spot about three hundred metres away, 'their cat screamed and bolted back the way they'd come. Pietro ran after her, but Elena could see an unusual mound of rocks down here and decided to investigate. She could smell something off by the time she came close, but very bravely in my opinion, covered her nose and mouth and then removed some of the rocks to see what was in there.'

Hunching her shoulders slightly against the cold wind, Nyneve held up an evidence bag she had brought with her. 'This red blanket covered the entire body before Elena moved it aside a little. When she saw a hand, she cried out and vomited, yet had the wits to call us once she'd calmed down. By that time, Pietro had caught their cat and was struggling to bring her down here. However, she wouldn't come any closer. In the end, he left her tied to a small tree and ran down to join Elena. He removed a few more rocks from where he thought the body's head should be, and then they both moved away from the smell to sit with their cat and wait for us to arrive.'

'It must have been hard for them, with their cat in hysterics,' said Freddi, looking back to where the body still lay.

'Yes,' agreed Nyneve. 'Just finding a dead body would have been bad enough, but the state they were in by the time we arrived had a lot to do with the effect their cat was having on them. We decided to call the Breeding Centre in Brisbane to get some advice on how to calm her down; nothing our local medcentre or animal healer could do helped. She was trembling and panting so much, we all thought she was about to collapse.'

'What did the Breeding Centre suggest?' asked Meng Jarrah.

'We were to give her a strong sedative to put her into a deep sleep while we waited for someone from Melbourne to arrive. Apparently there's a

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woman from the Breeding Centre there by the name of Gwenllian who has an unusually strong bond with cats.’ Nyneve glanced at her comlink to see what the time was, so didn’t at first notice the astonishment on the faces of both her listeners. Looking up again, the peacekeeper said, ‘She should be in Stanthorpe in less than an hour... Do you know her? You both seem incredibly surprised.’

Freddi and Meng Jarrah nodded. ‘Oh yes,’ replied Meng Jarrah, ‘we know her very well indeed.’

They arrived in Stanthorpe as the first drops of rain fell. The old town was quiet, orderly and pretty, with very few people walking along the brightly coloured trafficway. Meng Jarrah absent-mindedly noted that the flowers covering its surface were quite different from those commonly used in Brisbane, or for that matter, anywhere else she’d seen in Australia. ‘Ah well,’ she thought, ‘no time to dwell upon things like that now,’ amazed, under the circumstances, she had even noticed.

When their airjet landed, they all concentrated on unloading the body and their specimens. The morgue formed a rear annexe to the medcentre, where the practitioner on duty was waiting for them. She had never encountered a death quite like this one before, and beyond making the facilities available, had no wish to be involved, particularly if it turned out to be a murder. After one reluctant, sideways glance at the covered form on the hoverbed, she led them to the examination room.

‘All the door and storage locks are ready for your security details to be entered, and so is our building’s knowledge base. You can code in your voice patterns and handprints whenever you want. This main door will respond to your retina scans and no one else’s...other than mine and those of the other staff when they’re on duty, of course. Do you think this will be enough, Nyneve?’ asked the practitioner, gazing at them all with a somewhat frozen expression.

Nyneve said it was ample and thanked her warmly for the help, at which point the practitioner left, appearing immensely relieved.

The facilities were excellent, thought Freddi, as she surveyed the large room, with its shiny equipment and plastiglass-fronted cabinets and drawers. Meng Jarrah had already spotted a suitable workstation where she could examine the material she had collected, so began unpacking then setting up her equipment. The entomologist hummed to himself as he did likewise, while the pathologist was busy laying out the body on one of the examination benches. Fortunately for everyone else, the bench was located

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in its own screened containment field to ensure no one other than the pathologist had to either view or smell the corpse unless they needed to.

After putting on sterile coveralls, Freddi and Nyneve entered the containment field, gave their names and Federation identity numbers to the pathology computer and pressed their thumbs onto its keypad. The pathologist then made a formal statement giving the current location of the deceased, where the body was found, who found it, and the names of the people who were to undertake the initial investigation. He also confirmed the time and date: fourteen hundred hours, sixteen minutes, on Saturday the fifteenth of July 2456.

Meanwhile, Shela lay quietly outside the morgue in an inconspicuous spot, tail moving gently from side to side, her eyes narrowed, sniffing the new and intriguing scents. She knew better than to interrupt anyone during these proceedings with her own views on the matter. The cat stretched out her front legs and rested her chin on them, content to listen and to watch the little she could see.

Pietro and Elena gazed at Gwenllian in wonder as the slender, pale-skinned woman cradled their cat, Bella, in her arms, touching her forehead to the cat's and crooning softly. A strange rainbow-coloured aura surrounded them both, shimmering in the winter sunlight coming into the room through a break in the dark clouds outside. The rain had stopped, and except for Gwenllian's hypnotic voice, the silence in the room was profound. The plaintive cries of fear, which had sounded in their heads since Bella first detected the aroma of death and again when she woke from her induced sleep, began to subside, to be replaced with a surge of pleasurable excitement as the cat recognised Gwenllian as one of her own kind.

When Gwenllian finally gave Bella a hug and stood up, the aura disappeared as suddenly as it had formed. 'She'll be fine now,' she said, 'and might even be fairly mischievous for a few days. I'm a little unusual, you see, and tend to have that effect on cats. I have telepathic powers too, just as they do.' Gwenllian inclined her head and smiled at Bella's companions, her hazel eyes seeming almost too large for her thin, oval face.

Both Pietro and Elena continued to stare at her in astonishment. Pietro was the first to recover. 'This really is too much for one day, you realise. How are we to comprehend this?' he said, taking Elena's hand in his and holding out the other to Gwenllian, who grasped it firmly in her own. 'You have our profound thanks for bringing our dear Bella back to her senses, however you did it. But, telepathy in humans? We have never come across such a thing before!'

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‘Have you always had this power, if you don’t mind my asking?’ added Elena softly, studying Gwenllian as she might a new species from another planet, although with respect as well as awe.

‘No, it developed without warning almost six years ago. At first I didn’t want to believe it was happening, but events overtook me and I was forced to accept it. I’ve worked with the Breeding Centre in Melbourne for about five years now. It’s one of the places where Australian cats are bred and trained. The gentechs there, as well as the feline nursing mothers, helped me develop my mental abilities and learn to control them. My range is now greater than that of most cats, although the skills are practically the same. The only differences I’ve noticed so far are the creation of the aura under certain circumstances and, not surprisingly, I can deal with more abstract concepts than they can. I *am* human and *they* are still cats, so of course this fundamental difference in our minds allows me to understand things they can’t.’

Gwenllian smiled again, and this time they returned the smile, while Bella rubbed herself against Gwenllian’s legs, purring contentedly.

‘The nursing mothers,’ asked Pietro, ‘did they accept you as one of their own, or were they alarmed by you, to begin with?’

‘No,’ answered Gwenllian, remembering her first encounter with the cats at the Breeding Centre, ‘they immediately recognised me as one of their own and treated me as if I was one of their kittens.’ She laughed. ‘They told me off if I didn’t do as they wanted. Evidently, I was a bit slow to learn.’

There was a quiet knock at the door and the practitioner entered, raised an eyebrow, and cast a questioning look at Gwenllian, who nodded and smiled. Turning to the others, the practitioner said, ‘I gather everyone is feeling a great deal better? Good. I’d like to do a final check, and afterwards you can go back to your lodgings, if you like.’

Pietro and Elena waited patiently while they were examined, and then, when they began to collect their coats and other belongings, the practitioner said, ‘The peacekeepers will want to speak with you tomorrow, or so they’ve asked me to tell you. Gwenllian, they’d like you to be present, if you don’t mind, just in case your help is required. Shock sometimes returns in cases like this.’

Gwenllian immediately agreed. ‘Perhaps I can stay at the same communal house as you?’ she asked the two Italians. ‘Do you think they have any spare rooms?’

‘Well, let us call and find out,’ replied Pietro, sounding practical and level-headed. Before long, he nodded to Gwenllian and handed her his comlink so she could speak with the house supervisor.

Having made their arrangements, they were about to take advantage of the break in the storm to make their way to the communal house when another knock at the door sounded. Gwenllian smiled to herself as she

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turned around; she had wondered how long it would take before Meng Jarrah left the morgue to find her. It hadn't been a surprise to sense her friend's presence, as well as Freddi and Shela's, when she arrived in Stanthorpe. There were very few crimes this serious, and very few peacekeepers with sufficient experience to be chosen to help with the investigation. It was therefore only logical Freddi would be here, and equally logical that Meng Jarrah would accompany her to assist.

Meng Jarrah came in and swept Gwenllian into her arms, lifting her off the floor in a ferocious hug before kissing her soundly on each cheek. 'Gwen, it's wonderful to see you again!' she exclaimed. 'It's been over a year. How are all your cats?'

Gwenllian laughed. 'They're all marvellous. More and more of them are becoming official members of the Melbourne Peacekeeping Force. They seem to thrive on accompanying the peacekeepers, once they understand they have to refrain from taking matters into their own hands, so to speak.'

'Yes, they can be a tad underhanded if they're allowed to be,' quipped Meng Jarrah, grinning broadly. Turning to Pietro and Elena, she shook hands with them and said, 'Hi, I'm with the investigation team from Brisbane. I'm glad to see you're both beginning to feel better after finding the body this morning and that your cat is as well.' Crouching down, she held out a hand for the cat to sniff, which Bella did, very delicately, before licking one of the offered fingers. They made an attractive sight, thought Pietro. The woman's skin was almost the same colour as their cat's fur.

Meng Jarrah gently stroked Bella's head, then stood up, saying, 'Freddi's here as well, Gwen, but you probably know that already.'

'Yes, and I'm delighted. It means we should be able to clear all this up fairly quickly, don't you think?'

'Are you staying on, too?' asked Meng Jarrah.

'It might be a good idea. Nyneve knows about my work with the Melbourne Peacekeepers, so thought that since I had the time, I could be of use here, at least to begin with. Naturally, it's up to Freddi to agree as well, but I don't think she'd mind some extra help, do you?'

'I'm fairly certain she'd be very pleased, but you can ask her yourself. She should be finished soon. Where are you staying?'

'In the same communal house as Pietro and Elena. What about you?'

'Nyneve has offered us her spare room – at least for the time being. I guess it depends upon how long we're here. However, enough chat for now. I'd better get back to work... Do you want to join us for dinner tonight?'

Bella sent a silent cry of protest to Gwenllian; she wanted to spend more time with this strange grimalkin.

'Would you mind if I stayed with these good people instead?' replied Gwenllian. 'There'll be plenty of time to catch up tomorrow.' She briefly touched Meng Jarrah's hand. 'Tell Freddi and Shela I look forward to seeing them. I'll be here at 09:00, if that would suit?'

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Meng Jarrah agreed, and before returning to her work, gave Gwennlian one last hug.

CHAPTER TWO

With the assistance of the entomologist, they were able to estimate that the woman had been dead five days. The pathologist now combed her hair more tenderly than any hairdresser might have done, while her skin had already been closely examined before being washed. Anything unusual found on its surface would be used to trace where she came from before being buried at Girraween. The fingernails contained their little secrets too. They added to the story of who she once was, as did the semen found by the swab, routinely performed for all unexplained deaths. Satisfied, the pathologist set aside all the small containers for analysis. Very little could be hidden from them now.

Meanwhile, Meng Jarrah had begun searching through the stomach and gut contents for remaining plant and animal material. Based on the available DNA fragments, a list was soon compiled of the woman's last meal. She had evidently dined well. There were traces of kangaroo, as well as rock oysters, leeks, potatoes, shitake mushrooms, chicken pâté, raspberries, wheat and rye.

Freddi raised an eyebrow when Meng Jarrah showed her the list. In an era when eating meat, especially red meat, was fairly unusual, kangaroo was only to be found in the few restaurants serving meals made from the annual cull. This meant there was every likelihood of tracking down the venue where she last ate. As to her identity, this was far more straightforward since her DNA was registered in the Federation database, as was everyone's. Her name was Rhianna O'Connor, born here in Stanthorpe forty-two years ago, although normally a resident of Brisbane.

'The phoenix tattooed on her thigh is unusual,' the pathologist remarked. 'Tattoos aren't particularly common in Australia.' Pursing his lips, he considered for a moment, his head tilted to one side. As he did, he bore an extraordinary resemblance to a wise owl, with his round face, thin, hooked nose, and enormous eyebrows that tweaked up at their outer ends. 'Her general health was extremely good,' he continued, 'but this bruise on the side of her neck, immediately below the jawbone, is odd. I can't say I've ever seen anything quite like it before, have you?'

'Well, yes, I have actually,' replied Freddi, leaning over for a better view. 'I'd say it's possible she's been in a fight – one involving someone with advanced martial arts skills, for example. It could explain the slight

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bruising on her breasts. Didn't you say those marks might pre-date the event that caused her death?

'It's not entirely certain. There's a margin of error of several hours, but yes, they might. Well, we'll keep searching, given we haven't found the definite cause of death yet, which in itself is remarkable. Still, if she was struck, I'd have thought that type of blow would have killed her immediately. If so, and judging by the state of the food in her stomach and gut, it would have happened approximately three hours after she finished her last meal. At any rate, hopefully we'll know more once we have a complete toxicological analysis of her liver, as well as some detailed studies of her lungs and kidneys.'

The pathologist glanced at the nearest laboratory computer, which displayed the time in large numerals. Being already a few minutes past 19:00, he was ready to finish up for the evening. 'I think I'll take the remaining specimens I want for tomorrow then tidy her away. Would that suit you?'

Freddi nodded, looking over to where Meng Jarrah was still peering at their samples. Turning back to the pathologist, she said, 'Would 09:00 tomorrow be convenient for me to come back? I don't know when Meng Jarrah wants to finish up tonight or start again tomorrow, but I don't imagine you'd mind her staying on if she needs to?'

'Yes to the first question, and no to the second,' replied the pathologist, with a brief smile. 'It's an honour to work with Meng Jarrah, being the foremost expert in her field.' He paused, then in a low voice added, 'If you don't mind my asking, what brings her here? I would have imagined she'd still be concentrating on her research.'

Freddi returned his smile, almost as briefly. 'Forensic work is an interesting sideline that suits her,' she explained. 'It means she can sometimes keep me company while I'm working. We met five years ago, when I was part of a team unravelling an unusually complex case, which, amongst other things, involved sabotage of her research centres, as well as various Federation sites. I was the investigating peacekeeper in Myanmar, where one of her centres is located. We developed our bond through working together and have lived with each other ever since.'

The pathologist felt the two suited each other immensely, in personality as well as in appearance, with Freddi's ebony skin and strong build perfectly complementing Meng Jarrah's warm, brown features and wiry strength. 'She's Australian, isn't she?'

'Yes, her people, the Yugambeh, originally came from the Lamington region, but that was a long time ago. She still feels the strength of her ancestry though, particularly in her love of the land. She's passionate about her work, and since we met has been helping with the restoration of the Lamington region's soils and forests.'

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'I see,' answered the pathologist, nodding thoughtfully. He turned away and silently placed Rhianna O'Connor's body into its cool-storage cabinet, then cleaned and tidied his worktable, all the while humming softly. Looking up at Freddi, who had watched him, fascinated by the fastidious care he had taken of the dead woman, he said, 'And what about you? Where did you originally come from?'

'Jamaica,' she replied, 'and I have a half-brother here in Australia, who was also involved in the case I mentioned. He's a peacekeeper in Melbourne and headed the investigation for a time. He was part of the reason I decided to move to Brisbane. We work well together, and sometimes share cases and information. Anyway, I'd better see how Meng Jarrah's doing then find my cat. I expect Shela's thoroughly bored by now. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Freddi walked slowly over to Meng Jarrah and lightly put an arm around her shoulders. Meng Jarrah absentmindedly took Freddi's hand in hers, pressing it to one cheek and briefly looking up before turning back to her specimens.

'Do you mind if I keep working a bit longer?' she asked, her head still bent over her work.

'No, of course not. I'm about to fetch Shela, then find something to eat before bothering Nyneve. Do you want me to bring you anything, or would you prefer to take care of yourself?'

'Umm...you could bring me something in about an hour, if you like. I'm sure I'll be ravenous by then, and with a bit of luck, I may have worked out what's puzzling me.'

At this point, Freddi heard a distinct, cat-like wail in her mind. Shela was evidently hungry, and with all this talk of food, had finally chosen to make her presence felt. Freddi gave Meng Jarrah a quick kiss, then left her to concentrate.

Shela had, in fact, been unusually bored. Normally there were so many emotional colours in the minds of the people around her that she could amuse herself by surreptitiously listening in and, very occasionally, gently nudging them in a direction she felt to be more suitable – though had never confessed to Freddi she did such things. Of course, Shela knew better than to interfere with anyone connected with one of her companion's cases. That would have meant crossing a boundary her nursing mother at the Breeding Centre in Jamaica would have totally disapproved of. She would even have given her a cuff on the ear for daring to contemplate such a thing! Today, however, Shela had been constrained to wait as patiently as possible in the anteroom to the morgue, it being out of the question for her to have wandered at large throughout the medcentre. Since her fur could