

CHAPTER ONE

The flooded streetscape of the central city and the brown waters of the Yarra River, snaking its way toward Port Phillip Bay, greeted Yngwie as he peered out the window of the interstate airjet circling high over Melbourne's Tullamarine airport. The bright, early autumn sky had turned the glass of the landmark Rialto tower into a gleaming finger of blue light, soaring upwards in a gesture that to him seemed appropriate, considering what he had come here to do. Yngwie chuckled, then stretched and yawned. The trip from Western Australia had taken most of the day, travelling from the north of the state, where, amongst other things, he had taken a tourist flight over the Bungle Bungle range, located in the vast Purnululu reserve. At this time of year, during the wet season, the heat and humidity were in stark contrast to Norway, still in the grip of the same icy sub-zero temperatures of two months ago, when he left his home town of Rjukan.

Yngwie was not due back until mid-June, ready to begin university in Oslo in July, where he intended to study information technology. Eventually, he wanted to specialise in the challenging new field of large-scale holographics. Meanwhile, there were still three months left to enjoy, so he hoped Melbourne would prove more interesting than he anticipated. There was one place, though, he wanted to see, and this was the old forest on the northeastern boundary of the city. The forests here were altogether different from those of Europe and elsewhere, and were home to a remarkable variety of unique creatures and colourful birds.

His thoughts were interrupted by the voice of the airjet's captain announcing that they had landed and passengers were now free to disembark. Although nowhere near as hot as Western Australia, the heat outside still held Yngwie in its fierce grip as he walked the short distance from the main airport building to the waiting railcar that would take him to Ferntree Gully, located on the outer edge of Melbourne, at the foot of the Dandenong Ranges. He entered his Federation identity number into the transport's terminal, together with his destination, then found a seat and watched while the other passengers from the latest flights settled into theirs. A little over an hour later, Yngwie was standing outside the communal house, in the centre of Ferntree Gully, where he had booked a room.

The Seed Gatherers

The entrance to the communal house consisted of a plastiglass-enclosed foyer, surrounded on the outside by what appeared to be a large vegetable garden and a small fruit orchard. Dusk was falling and Yngwie was more than ready for his evening meal, so instead of exploring the area as he might otherwise have done, he approached the foyer door and asked to speak to the manager. When the door slid aside, he didn't have long to wait before a young woman entered the room, smiled, and introduced herself. As they shook hands, Yngwie said, 'I have a booking for two weeks, which I confirmed yesterday... Oh, and by the way, is the *entire* living area beneath the ground?'

'Yes, it is,' replied the young woman, her eyes crinkling in amusement. 'Most of the buildings outside the older central areas are underground. They have been for a long time... More energy-efficient, and safer too. It also frees up the land. Did you notice our garden outside?'

'I did. It's a unique approach, and gives an air of mystery.' Yngwie grinned. 'I like it, and I like the gardens I saw on the way here from the airport.'

'Well, there should be plenty for you to enjoy then, especially our forests. Do you intend to do any walking?'

'Oh yes. The big trees...the mountain ash...are one of the main reasons I came here. I understand there aren't many left?'

'No, sadly, but we look after the ones we still have. Now, we need to complete your booking, so if you could just place your right hand on the identification pad of the computer here... Thank you... And we also have an old-fashioned custom of asking our guests to sign and date our guest book. Do you mind?'

'Not at all.' Yngwie signed his name with a flourish then wrote the date: Saturday, the third of March 2457.

After the evening meal, rather than socialising with the other guests, Yngwie returned to his room. He took his hand reader from his backpack, checked the time, had a shower, then got into bed and set the alarm to wake him at 04:30. Five years of painstaking research, testing and probing had gone into the software he and his friend Torleif had built, and tonight, they would see the results of their work. For their plan to succeed, they each needed to be precisely where they were now: Torleif was still in Rjukan, Norway, and Yngwie was here in Ferntree Gully, Melbourne. At 04:56 Melbourne time, the software would be activated, and two minutes later, when the sun set in Rjukan at 18:58, local time, Torleif would see whether the first step in their plan had succeeded. If not, he would contact Yngwie, and if Yngwie heard nothing, he would find out for himself what happened next, when the sun set tomorrow,

Chapter One

here in Melbourne, at 19:53. The final step, when the cascade was programmed to begin worldwide, would occur at 21:46 Melbourne time, which was when the sun went down in Perth, at 19:46, their time. Yngwie smiled; he was sure of their success. Afterwards, well...that was another matter.

The next morning, in nearby Berwick, Shahid rose from his bed, laid out the mat his mother had so lovingly embroidered, then knelt to pray. When he had finished, and after carefully rolling up the mat and putting it away, the young man made his preparations for the day, with his usual calm, precise movements and attention to detail.

Today, his morning would be spent travelling from his home to the forests of Sherbrooke, in the Dandenong Ranges, thirty-five kilometres from the centre of Melbourne. Once there, he intended to make his way up the hillsides on foot until he found the mature mountain ash for which he was responsible. Due to environmental degradation and changes in climate, *Eucalyptus regnans* was now a rare and increasingly endangered species in the State of Victoria, so the regions where it grew were divided into segments, each with its own seed gatherers and team of forest guardians. As a seed gatherer, Shahid's work contributed to the survival of the species and to the rehabilitation of areas where the trees could be reintroduced.

Outside, the day was already too warm and, despite the air-conditioned comfort of his landjet, Shahid looked forward to the cooler temperatures within the forest. He had brought food for his midsun meal plus an ample supply of water because once he reached his destination, there would be nowhere convenient to obtain any. All private dwellings had long since disappeared from the Dandenong Ranges, and the closest township, Ferntree Gully, was located on the plains of the western side, with Gembrook twenty kilometres away on the eastern plain.

When he arrived at the base of the mountain, Shahid secured his landjet and put on his backpack. The dry forest of mixed trees – messmate, narrow-leaved peppermint, mountain grey gum and blackwood – grew far up onto the hillsides, replacing the mountain ash that once lived there. As he walked, Shahid listened to the birds calling to each other, some loud and raucous, others melodic and sweet to his ears. He recognised the song of a grey butcherbird, which was followed by the screech of a white cockatoo, and then the keening cry of a currawong. The sound he longed to hear was missing: the call of the lyrebird. Common in this area before white settlement, they became increasingly rare as the forests were cut down and introduced animals preyed upon them. Now, they were all gone, their glorious dance a distant memory.

The Seed Gatherers

After walking for some time, Shahid located the tree he was seeking: a three-hundred-and-fifty-year-old mountain ash, some ninety metres in height. Straight and tall, with white bark and brown peeling layers, it was, to him, a wonderful sight. The old tree was in flower and the coming season promised to be bountiful. Scientists from the Willsmere Research Centre in Kew, here in Melbourne, had almost finished their aerial survey of the mountain to establish how many of the eucalypts were in flower, and the results so far were encouraging. For the past three years, very few had flowered sufficiently for a good harvest. With luck, however, this year, he would collect the seeds in mid-winter and send some to both the Global Seed Vault in Svalbard, Norway, and to the Federation Herbarium in Oslo. It was time to replenish their stock.

Shahid inspected the tree closely to make sure it still appeared to be in good health, then continued on towards the next mountain ash listed on the survey map. The dry forest floor crackled underfoot and small insects scurried away as he walked. The danger of fire was ever-present, and too frequent bushfires in the past were one of the reasons the mountain ash were now rare, but today the risk was low, there being only a light breeze. Nevertheless, should the worst happen, he had memorised the locations of the well-provisioned underground fire bunkers liberally dotted throughout the hills.

One of these bunkers provided a cool and restful place for Shahid to first pray and then eat his somewhat elaborate midsun meal, prepared by his mother that morning. Although he was twenty-eight years of age, he saw no reason to live elsewhere than with his parents, particularly as he thoroughly enjoyed their company. His father worked as a medical practitioner at the Ferntree Gully medcentre, while his mother was a psychologist with the Melbourne Peacekeeping Force. Both were proud of their son's work and glad he had chosen to remain at home until, perhaps, the day came when he found a bondmate, although this was not something they discussed.

The early afternoon passed pleasantly, despite the breeze having become stronger, ruffling Shahid's soft, black hair. He wore it shoulder length, which suited his oval face, with its large, expressive brown eyes. Of a slight build, he was nevertheless extremely fit, and strong enough to easily climb to the tops of the mountain ash to collect their seeds. Perched in the treetops, Shahid felt even closer to his spiritual centre, as well as to the forest he helped protect. Today, though, was a day of remaining close to the ground, looking for signs of ill health in the understory plants and the soil surrounding the trees. Noticing a young blackberry seedling – a noxious and rampant weed if left to grow – he knelt to remove it, and then collapsed to the ground, writhing in agony. His leg felt as if it had been stabbed to the bone and he had only enough

Chapter One

time to pull his comlink from his pocket, desperately hoping to activate its emergency signal, when he lost consciousness.

With a wet scarf wrapped around his nose and mouth, Yngwie watched the flames for as long as he dared. The reality was far more frightening than he had ever imagined, the noise and smoke almost overwhelming. Turning aside at last, he moved away from the fire and walked as quickly as he could safely manage in the direction of Ferntree Gully. Running was out of the question – the terrain was far too dangerous and stumbling could cost him his life. With still almost two and a half kilometres to go before he reached the edge of the forest, Yngwie noticed someone lying motionless on the ground, near the base of a small eucalypt. He cautiously approached then knelt down to feel for a pulse. Although weak, it was there. As he reached for his comlink to call the nearest medcentre, he noticed, about one and a half metres away, a large, dark spider, hiding in the leaf litter. He instinctively flinched, but the startled spider soon scuttled away. Relieved, although still wary in case there were others nearby, Yngwie spoke with the medtech who answered his call.

‘A large, dark spider, you say,’ said the medtech, eyebrows raised. ‘Were its legs thin, or thick-looking?’

‘Definitely thick,’ answered Yngwie, ‘and it was one of those fat, ugly things everyone thinks of when they talk about scary spiders.’

‘Hmm... We’re not aware of any large, venomous spiders in this part of Victoria, but we’ll send some anti-venom with the ambutechs anyway. They should be there in about twenty minutes at the most. Keep him still in case he wakes up, and don’t move him.’

‘What if the fire comes closer? The smoke is getting worse.’

‘If all else fails, you’ll have to carry him out, but in the process, if he *has* been bitten by the spider, he might die. You need to be prepared for the possibility.’

‘Damnation!’ muttered Yngwie. ‘Well, I hope the ambutechs get here quickly. Can you stay with me while we wait, in case something happens and I don’t know what to do?’

‘Yes, no problem... Where are you from, if you don’t mind my asking? Your accent is a little unusual.’ The medtech smiled in an effort to reduce the tension.

‘I’m from Norway...on holiday. I want to stay for at least a few weeks. This is a fascinating country, but harsh.’

‘Yes, it can be, but yours can be unkind as well, can’t it?’

‘Oh yes... The winters are long and it’s easy enough to die, but we’re used to it, so manage fairly well.’

The Seed Gatherers

‘How are you finding the heat?’ The medtech had noticed Yngwie was beginning to perspire.

‘The heat is fine. Our summers can be just as hot, though not for long.’ Yngwie wiped his face with the scarf he had taken off to make his call to the medcentre. He was beginning to feel ill from breathing in so much smoke.

‘Do you have any water with you?’ asked the medtech.

‘Yes. Why?’

‘I suggest you drink some and then cool your face and wrists with as much as you can spare.’

Yngwie did as the medtech suggested, feeling slightly better as a result, but not much. ‘Oh hell!’ he exclaimed. ‘The fire’s too close. The wind has sprung up and changed direction. Sorry... I need to get us out of here. You can keep track of my comlink, can’t you?’

‘Yes, we’ll keep a close eye on you, don’t worry. Do you know which direction to go?’

‘I do...’ replied Yngwie, before shoving the comlink into his shirt pocket and then manoeuvring Shahid onto his shoulders. Holding him tightly, he began walking, trying hard not to think about what would happen if the approaching fire caught them. After almost a kilometre, Yngwie was close to collapse. He stumbled, regained his balance, and as he did, saw two ambutechs approaching. One of them gripped his shoulder to reassure him, then helped each other lift Shahid onto the hoverbed they had brought with them. A quick, but meticulous, examination showed that Shahid had indeed been bitten by a spider, which in all likelihood sounded like some species of funnel-web, even though they were not normally found in the region, other than an innocuous, relatively small variety.

‘Right,’ said the taller of the two ambutechs as he administered the antivenom, ‘this should do it, though I don’t imagine he’ll wake up for a while.’

‘With all these trees and so much undergrowth, I think it’d be best if we carry him, rather than try to use the hoverbed, don’t you?’ suggested the second ambutech.

‘Yes, I do, so let’s get going. We don’t have much time. Can you manage to walk, young fellow?’ he said, addressing Yngwie.

Yngwie stood up from where he had been sitting, resting his back against a tree. ‘Yes, I can manage. It’s not far.’ He staggered slightly, then straightened his shoulders and tried to smile.

‘Good man. I’ll go first, you follow, and my mate here can follow on after you. Okay?’ and with that, the ambutech, who was now carrying Shahid over his shoulders, walked on at a brisk pace, with the others close behind.

Chapter One

Once they reached the waiting ambulance, Yngwie looked back and saw the firefighters were already tackling the flames, which, fortunately, hadn't reached into the treetops. However, this was no time to linger, so when Shahid was safely strapped in and everyone was inside, the ambulance lifted off and shortly afterwards landed outside the main entrance to the Ferntree Gully medcentre.

'There, you should be feeling better now,' announced the practitioner treating Yngwie. 'Your nose, throat and lungs don't seem to have sustained any lasting damage. Your blood pressure is normal now too, so you're ready to go home.'

'Thank you,' replied Yngwie, standing up. 'Are you able to tell me whether the man I came in with is recovering?'

'Ah, yes... It seems I have you to thank for saving my son's life. It's his Namingday today, too. It would have been doubly tragic if it had also been the day he died.' The practitioner hesitated, making an effort to control his voice. After taking a deep breath, he managed to say, 'We intended to celebrate this evening, but will need to do it another day. My bondmate and I would be glad if you could join us when Shahid has recovered.' He put his head to one side and smiled, holding out his hand.

'I did what anyone would do,' replied Yngwie, raising his eyebrows in surprise, but returning the smile and taking the offered hand in a firm grip.

'Perhaps, but not everyone would have the strength to carry him so far. It's just as well the spider bit him through his clothing. Otherwise he might have died immediately, or else soon afterwards from having to be moved before pressure bandaging could be applied. We'll need to investigate though, because I've never heard of this type of thing happening here in Melbourne. People are sometimes bitten by other spiders, but none as venomous as this one.'

'What do you think it was?'

'We agree with the ambutechs that it was most likely some type of funnel-web...possibly a male. Apparently at this time of year they tend to wander around during the night searching for a mate, and if they haven't managed to return to their burrows by morning, hide somewhere dark and damp. Shahid must have knelt down just where the spider was hiding.' The practitioner looked away for a moment, frowning, then shook his head and said, 'Would you like to visit him tomorrow, when he'll no doubt be in better shape to thank you himself?'

'Why, yes, that sounds fine,' said Yngwie. 'Could you tell him I'll come back at around 14:00?' By then he and Torleif would know how their

The Seed Gatherers

'experiment' was progressing, although it would take a full twenty-four hours to complete.

'Good, good... Thank you again, and we'll look forward to your visiting us when Shahid is home, which we anticipate will be in a few days time...assuming you intend to stay in Melbourne that long?'

'Oh yes, I have places I want to see and the communal house is very comfortable.' Yngwie smiled, and then the practitioner left to see to his other patients. After he had gone, Yngwie checked his comlink: 16:42. Excellent... There was enough time for a brief nap before the evening meal, which would be followed by a long sleepless night tracking the cascade.

CHAPTER TWO

Despite the lack of sleep, Yngwie revelled in his sense of achievement. So far, the cascade was working perfectly, and unless the Federation managed to block the software, it would continue to do so for the full twenty-four hours of its operation. Afterwards, he was certain this security glitch in the lattice communications network would be resolved, and no one in future would ever be able to repeat his and Torleif's actions...which was precisely what they wanted. Their artwork, as they regarded it, would be unique, unable ever to be reproduced by anyone else.

He paused to enjoy the warmth of the sun against his skin and to breathe in the delicate, fresh fragrance of the living carpet of tiny red flowers that made up the surface of the trafficway. The distance from the communal house to the Ferntree Gully medcentre was only about one and a half kilometres, so, for Yngwie, used to the mountainsides of Norway, this was a pleasant little stroll. A few minutes further walking brought him to the building, which consisted of two towers, one rising fifteen storeys high and the other eight. Yngwie wondered why the building needed to be so large... Presumably the Federation limited the birth rate here to one child per family as they did everywhere else? And surely Australians were no more accident prone than other people? Perhaps the medcentre housed research facilities?

Dismissing the question from his mind as being of little importance, Yngwie concentrated instead on simply enjoying this exhilarating day. The doors of the main entrance – which was located at the base of the smaller of the two towers – slid aside for him as he approached. He went to the reception area and waited until someone in attendance noticed him.

'May I help you?' asked a middle-aged woman, looking up from her computer screen.

'I hope so,' replied Yngwie pleasantly. 'I came in yesterday afternoon with a young man named Shahid, who, as it turns out, was bitten by a spider. His father works here as a practitioner and suggested I might want to visit – if Shahid is well enough by now?'

'Oh yes! I heard about it. You're quite the hero, rescuing him from the fire, too.' The woman grinned. 'He's doing fine, so if you go to the fifth

floor of this tower and look for room 504, you'll soon find him. I'm sure he'll be glad to thank you in person.'

Yngwie, embarrassed by the praise, nevertheless returned the grin and thanked her, then found the lift to the fifth floor. A short while later, he was standing outside room 504 and wondering if he should have brought a gift of some type, particularly as Shahid had missed out on his Namingday celebration. Oh well, he didn't know him, so it'd be difficult to guess what he might like. Still, perhaps he could bring him something when he visited the family for the promised dinner? Yngwie knocked on the door, waited a moment, and went inside.

'Hello,' he said, standing by the foot of the bed and smiling. 'You're feeling better, I see. My name is Yngwie. I'm the one who found you when you were unconscious...in the forest yesterday.'

Shahid gazed at him, the dark smudges beneath his eyes showing the stress of his ordeal. He held out a slim hand and Yngwie moved closer to take it in his own. They looked at each other for a few seconds, brown eyes meeting grey, before Yngwie gently released Shahid's hand and sat down on the chair conveniently placed by the bed. 'I met your father yesterday,' he said. 'He treated me for smoke inhalation. I'm fine today, though. I understand the firefighters managed to put out the blaze fairly quickly, and that very little damage was done.'

Smiling, Shahid nodded.

'Do they know yet how the fire began?' continued Yngwie, wondering why Shahid hadn't yet spoken.

Shahid nodded again, but held up a hand, as if to say, 'Wait a moment.' Yngwie then watched while he leaned over to his bedside table and picked up his hand reader.

As Shahid used the keypad in an extraordinary display of speed and dexterity, Yngwie was startled to hear a soft, mellow voice answer his question: 'Yes, two people were camping in the forest and lit a fire at midsun, even though it's illegal to do so. The fire spread into nearby grass, then into the undergrowth. They contacted the forest guardians almost immediately, but even with only a slight breeze, fire can spread quickly in hot, dry weather. We were lucky to escape.'

'Aren't you able to speak without using your hand reader?' asked Yngwie, intrigued by this use of the technology, which he knew existed but had never before witnessed.

Shaking his head, Shahid touched a single icon on the hand reader's screen: 'No. I have a rare genetic disorder and have never been able to speak.' Clearly, he answered the question quite often and had programmed the icon to give this explanation.

'I'm sorry,' said Yngwie. It wasn't often he came across anyone with a serious disability. Not only did the Federation limit families to one child

Chapter Two

in most circumstances, they also required prospective parents to undergo genetic screening before granting them fertility rights.

Shahid touched a different icon on his hand reader: ‘Don’t worry, I’m used to it. My work doesn’t require me to speak with many people, so it isn’t a big problem.’

Yngwie laughed, while Shahid grinned. Obviously, the conversation was proceeding along familiar lines.

‘Okay,’ said Yngwie, ‘one more standard question. What is your profession?’

Shahid waggled his eyebrows, touched the screen again, and the hand reader’s ‘voice’ said, ‘I’m a seed gatherer, and I look after the forest as well. Seeds from rare species are stored here in Melbourne and samples are sent to the Federation Herbarium in Oslo and to the seed vault at Svalbard as backup, to make sure we have stock for the future. We also use some to rehabilitate degraded areas.’

‘Were you collecting seeds yesterday?’ Yngwie knew of the Svalbard facility, and like most Norwegians, was proud of his country’s contribution to its establishment during the twentieth century.

‘No, we do that in pairs, or teams. It’s too dangerous to do alone. I was assessing the trees’ health, as well as that of the surrounding areas. The mountain ash are flowering well this year, so we want to collect as many seeds as we can in mid-winter, when they ripen. We were lucky there was little wind yesterday and the fire didn’t get into the treetops. They usually die if they’re burnt.’

‘What about the spider that bit you? What if there are more? Won’t they make it harder to do your work?’ Yngwie repressed a shudder at the memory.

‘I’m sure the Federation will send someone out to do a survey, and afterwards, we’ll decide what to do. If it’s a ground-dwelling species it may not be so difficult to deal with, but if it’s a tree dweller, that may not be so good.’ Shahid made a face, then, using the hand reader, searched for an image to show Yngwie. ‘Is this anything like the spider you saw?’ he ‘asked’.

‘It ran away very quickly, so it’s hard to say, but, yes, it did look something like that. Your father said it was most likely a funnel-web. Is that one?’

‘Yes, it is. I’m amazed some people actually like these things and enjoy studying them. Ugh!’ answered Shahid, after closing the image.

‘When you’re well again, may I come with you on one of your surveys? One of the reasons I came to this part of Melbourne was to see the old forest. It’s so unlike those we have in Norway. There’s much more variety, and the birds are wonderful.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Shahid, pleased. ‘I’d enjoy the company. Do you take photographs?’

The Seed Gatherers

‘Not often, unless I want something special. I’m interested in art though, especially holographics. I intend to go to university this year and eventually specialise in that field. It’s another reason I wanted to come to Melbourne. The person who succeeded in creating the first true, moving, life-sized holographic image came from Melbourne. Unfortunately, they died soon afterwards, but the woman’s son continued her work. I’d like to meet him, if possible, and see some of his performances. Have you ever seen any?’

‘No, but I’ve heard of the woman, and her son, Zarik. I work in collaboration with the Willsmere Research Centre here in Melbourne, and some of the scientists were involved in a case some years back when someone tried to steal their research and sabotage their work. The woman, Marika, worked as an information technologist at the central computer site in Clayton and almost certainly engineered the security breach that allowed those responsible to break in and attack one of the researchers. He wasn’t seriously hurt, but during the investigation, she was murdered.’

‘What! Murdered?’ exclaimed Yngwie.

‘Yes, and then the person who killed her was murdered as well, the same day. The case was a complex one that went on for a long time. I had only just begun working at Willsmere, so it was all extremely upsetting. If you come to visit again tomorrow, you could meet one of the scientists involved in the case. Her name’s Karla. I think you’d like her.’ Shahid smiled. He and Karla had a great deal in common. She had spent many years collecting samples of rare plants from all over Australia for a reference collection and so could fully appreciate the work Shahid did.

‘What time does she intend to visit?’

‘She promised to be here at 14:30. Would that be convenient for you too?’ answered Shahid.

‘Yes, I think so... Tell me, are you allowed to leave your room yet? I could take you for a tour of the hospital if you wanted a change of scenery. I see you have a comfortable-looking wheelchair here.’

‘Thank you, Yngwie, but only for a while; I’m still very tired. We could go to the roof garden. It’s not far.’

The roof garden provided a pleasant environment for staff, patients and visitors alike, and also helped keep the building cool. Shahid breathed a sigh of relief once they were outside. He hated to be cooped up for long, so remaining in hospital for even a few days seemed almost like being in a prison, albeit a comfortable one. Still, at least his father popped in to see him as often as his work allowed, and his mother had spent most of the morning with him...and he wasn’t dead!

‘Great view,’ remarked Yngwie, peering out over the safety railing. ‘Forest on three sides, and a wonderful vista across the valley towards the older city areas. My home is in a valley too, but the mountainsides are

Chapter Two

steep. We like to think trolls still inhabit them.’ He chuckled, then turned around, saying, ‘Do you know what trolls are?’ Shahid shook his head. ‘They are part of our Norse mythology from thousands of years ago. Giants, they were the children of the first living being and grew in wisdom until even the gods consulted them, but in more modern times they are described as hideous and an enemy of humankind. It’s hard to know the truth of the legends. Do you want to hear their story?’

Shahid nodded, and then listened, entranced, as Yngwie suddenly began to sing, his voice strong and pure. There was no one else in the garden to hear this saga of the old Norse gods, their lands and their battles. When it was finished, the silence was complete. Not a bird called, not a tree whispered, no mechanical sounds interrupted the peace. Yngwie stared out across the land, lost in thought.

‘Thank you,’ said Shahid, after almost a minute had passed. ‘Will you sing again for me one day and allow me to record your song?’

Yngwie turned to him and said, ‘Yes, why not... But it’s time for me to go and for you to return to your bed and rest. You must get well enough to show me your trees!’ Laughing, he wheeled Shahid back to his room, then said goodbye and left.

Once back in his own room in the communal house, Yngwie returned to the task of checking the progress of his and Torleif’s artwork. Satisfied, he allowed himself a few hours sleep before the evening meal. Afterwards, at sunset, it would be time for the cascade to reach Melbourne.

In Luzern, Switzerland, Federation investigators were putting all their resources into dealing with the mass of reports coming in from all over the world of an event generally regarded as virtually impossible. By 19:16, as the sun set and the cascade reached them, they had already begun their investigations, yet even now, were no closer to either stopping the event or discovering where it originated. All they knew at this stage was that it began at sunset in Perth, Australia, on the fourth of March, and was making its way around the world to coincide with the sun setting at every point on the globe where someone with a comlink was located. This meant that nearly everyone over the age of seven would potentially receive the message – or image, to be precise.

Unless for some reason they were unable to use one, the Federation required its citizens to carry a comlink, using their Federation identity number as their contact code. The safety benefits were considerable and it made physically locating people relatively simple. Official messages could also be broadcast to any target audience required, and it was this facility the perpetrator of the outrage had taken advantage of.

The Seed Gatherers

As the reports came in, Morag MacIain, the Coordinator of the Federation Special Investigation Unit, sat with arms folded, staring at her computer screen. How long the event would continue was anyone's guess. The best theory to date suggested that once initiated, the software was self-perpetuating, using the comlinks it infected as servers. Morag knew that whoever had done this needed to be highly sophisticated, since the programming skills required were considerable. The cascade had even been so well managed that once the incoming message was retrieved and the image had displayed for five seconds, the message deleted itself, leaving no record other than the time of deletion. To date, all attempts to capture and trace these messages had failed. However, other than the shock factor, at least the event was doing no real harm...so far.

Communications and computing devices used by libraries, medcentres, training centres, transportation systems, financial systems, private homes, commercial and government buildings, and individuals, were all connected to the intricate global network referred to as the 'lattice'. Overall responsibility for maintaining the lattice lay with the Federation, but each country had its own section to manage, and where there were semi-autonomous states, or where the country was particularly large, some tasks were delegated to regional centres.

In theory, the lattice and its communications layers were secure enough to prevent misuse of the messaging system, even if an employee of the Federation's Special Investigation Unit, for example, chose to run amok and use their high-level access to make the attempt. Therefore, someone had evidently found an obscure security loophole, or had used their connections to create one. Either possibility was a potential nightmare.

The messaging system had been developed in Luzern one hundred and forty years ago and required constant maintenance to ensure all its routines were up to date and that there was no possibility of mistakes being made, such as sending a message to the wrong target audience. Periodic testing and maintenance involved one or more information technologists in each country, and therefore the number of people who could potentially either create or directly exploit a security loophole numbered in their hundreds. Other than senior members of the FSIU, there were also numerous people worldwide with the authority to use the system – senior peacekeepers and environmental guardians, for example, as well as various government officials. However, very few held the necessary authority to send a message to every comlink on the planet. Morag herself was one of these few, but had never had reason to use the facility.

Investigating each and every one of these people within a relatively short period of time would be a logistical headache of gigantic proportions, requiring more resources than the FSIU could readily employ. So, was this

Chapter Two

the real purpose behind the cascade: to tie up their investigators while something even worse was being put into place?

Naturally, it would be a comparatively easy matter to scan the lattice storage areas of everyone authorised to work on or use the system, together with their comlinks, hand readers, back-up drives and computers, but it seemed unlikely anything suspicious would be found, and there was always the possibility there were storage devices of which the FSIU would be unaware.

Nevertheless, the process was already underway, and at the same time, all their storage and other devices would be examined for faults that could potentially have compromised security. Morag expected to receive the initial set of results first thing in the morning. Meanwhile, they had at least determined that none of these people's individual identities appeared to have been used to initiate the cascade – or to be more accurate, there was no record of their having done so. And to make matters even more difficult, there was no record of *anyone* having initiated it, although this was hardly surprising.

Morag stood up to make herself another cup of strong coffee. It was nearing midnight, yet she needed to deal with one last issue before she could allow herself to go home and sleep. The thought of her bed in her beautiful house on the steep mountainsides of The Rigi, overlooking Luzern, was almost too enticing, but she knew that without thinking this through, it would be almost impossible to sleep. Sighing, she stretched, making a conscious effort to relax her neck and shoulders, then sat down to drink some of the hot, aromatic liquid, and began putting her ideas together.

The minutes ticked by, then the seconds as Yngwie stared at the screen of his comlink, almost holding his breath as he waited for the sun to set. 19:49, 19:50...19:51... Yes! There it was! The flames burned, writhing in their five-second display of ecstasy and passing on to the next wave of comlinks, moving with the sun in perfect concordance. He had almost two hours to wait before the fire reached the end of its twenty-four-hour journey around the world, after which he and Torleif would go down in history...anonymously, of course.

The news broadcaster paused, then said, 'I have just been informed by Federation authorities that the worldwide breach of our communications network, which showed an image of flames burning the Statue of Liberty in Paris, appears to have ended.' Yngwie grinned as an image of the

The Seed Gatherers

statue was briefly displayed on his hand reader. ‘However, peacekeepers are on alert in case it is a prelude to a further attack on the Federation, or even a warning of some type. Morag MacIain, Coordinator of the Federation Special Investigation Unit, is here with me... Coordinator MacIain, has the FSIU determined how this breach occurred, or who is responsible?’

‘So far, we are reasonably certain that no one with the authority to send out messages on behalf of the Federation or any other government body is responsible for the security breach, either inadvertently or on purpose. We have yet to determine how it was accomplished, but are putting all available resources into finding out. Fortunately, no actual harm seems to have been done by the message, but we will be on alert for any further occurrences or other interference with our communications systems.’ Morag smiled grimly. ‘If the person or persons responsible for this event are now watching, which I assume they are, please be assured that your actions are regarded as being of a criminal nature and are subject to severe penalties.’

As Morag’s green eyes seemed to gaze directly into his own, Yngwie looked away, suddenly unsure, although not afraid. Instead, he felt drained, exhausted. ‘I need to sleep,’ he thought, then realised what he needed even more was company. He couldn’t call Torleif; that would be far too dangerous. They would have to wait at least a week or more for the FSIU to find the security loophole and close it. Once that was done, they could celebrate, even if only to raise a glass of schnapps to each other over the lattice.

After a long, satisfying shower, Yngwie began to feel a great deal better. He looked at himself in the mirror, ran a hand over his cropped blonde hair, even though it didn’t need it, then carefully chose what to wear. It was still warm outside, even though it was now late in the evening, so he put on a loose-fitting sleeveless black top that showed off his finely muscled arms, followed by matching trousers and a pair of lightweight, comfortable shoes. With luck, there might be someone in the common room of the communal house to meet and to get to know, and perhaps go out with – at least for a walk, but preferably somewhere more interesting where there was music.

His luck seemed to be holding because the first person he saw in the common room was a young woman sitting alone, reading. She looked up when he entered and smiled...grinned, actually, as she was dressed in black as well, also with a sleeveless top. Her dark, curly hair fell around her shoulders in a luxuriant mass, and as Yngwie approached, he noticed her eyes were dark brown – quite beautiful. A long, straight nose, well-defined mouth and high cheekbones lent character to her face. She stood up, held out a hand, and introduced herself. ‘Hello. I haven’t seen you here before. My name is Laurita.’

Chapter Two

Yngwie shook the outstretched hand and almost winced. Her grip was remarkably strong, matching her overall build, although she was slightly below average height, while Yngwie, at one hundred and ninety centimetres, was ten centimetres above average. He held her hand a fraction longer than normal for two strangers meeting for the first time, then said, 'Hi, mine's Yngwie, and no, I haven't been to Melbourne before. I'm here on holiday and to do some research before I begin university in Oslo, at the beginning of July. What about you?'

'You are Norwegian?'

'Yes, and you?'

'I am Spanish, but travel so much I begin to see myself as a kaleidoscope of nationalities.' Laughing, she sat down, patting the chair next to her, inviting Yngwie to sit as well, which he did.

'Where have you come from this time?' he asked her.

'The Independent Democratic Republic of Tibet. Fascinating place... Such an old culture, although it's remarkable they still have so much left, considering how long they had to struggle to retain it.'

Yngwie nodded. The country was high on his list of priorities as one he wanted to visit, although he had to admit, more for the mountains than for the culture. 'And why have *you* come to Melbourne?' he said.

'I work as a seed gatherer. I was in Tibet to locate certain ancient strains of barley and bring them to the seed vault in Svalbard, then afterwards, to take some to the Federation research facility here in Melbourne. You see, I am familiar with your country...or at least, part of it.' At Yngwie's obvious surprise, Laurita smiled and added, 'Have you never heard of seed gatherers?'

'As a matter of fact, I have. I met one only the other day. How strange. His name is Shahid. Perhaps you know him?'

'No, but I hope to meet him tomorrow. My friend, Karla, who works with the research facility, mentioned a seed gatherer had met with an accident and was in the medcentre in Ferntree Gully. She suggested he might like some company while he recovers and thought that if I stayed here, it would be easier than if I stayed with her at the communal house in Kew, which is near the Willsmere Research Centre. I'll be visiting him tomorrow with Karla... You're grinning! Why, what is so funny?' Laurita grinned as well, liking this young man, although he seemed quite a few years younger than herself.

Yngwie shook his head, chuckling. The old gods, it seemed, had a sense of humour. 'I've arranged to visit Shahid tomorrow as well, while this mutual friend of yours, Karla, is there. He suggested I'd like to meet her.'

'What a coincidence! Not only do we dress alike, we already have friends in common!' Laurita stared at Yngwie. 'It is rather odd, you know. You even remind me of Karla... How did you meet Shahid?'

The Seed Gatherers

'I'll let *him* tell you. I wouldn't want to spoil his story. Does he know you'll be there?' Yngwie looked down at his hands for a moment, wondering how Shahid would manage with so many people visiting at once.

'Yes, Karla did tell him, though he may have forgotten. It seems the accident was serious.'

'I doubt he forgot, even if he didn't mention your visit. No, I think he just wanted to leave all the introductions to Karla. We had a lot to talk about already, and he was still very tired, so I didn't stay long.'

'I understand. Speaking of tired, I see you are dressed to go out. Would you like some company?'

Yngwie could hardly believe what he had heard. 'I would,' he replied, as nonchalantly as he could. Laurita stood up, took him by the hand and said, 'In that case, let us find the closest leisure centre, where, with luck, there will be a dance floor and some decent music!' She laughed when Yngwie answered, 'Precisely what I was hoping for myself.'

Outside, the silence was broken only by the sound of an occasional owl or the screech of possums fighting, as well as the chirruping chorus of frogs, which seemed to be unusually abundant here. They walked to the nearest callstation, entered a request for a leisure centre into its terminal, and were given the choice of one a few kilometres away in Ferntree Gully itself, or in Berwick. When Laurita glanced at Yngwie for his opinion, he selected the one in Ferntree Gully. No need to spend time travelling further than necessary. The terminal confirmed that their transport would arrive in twelve minutes, so they sat down to wait.

'How long do you intend to remain in Melbourne?' asked Yngwie.

'Only a few weeks. My next trip will be to Peru. The Federation has a special gene bank in Lima for potatoes, sweet potatoes, and a number of other edible roots and tubers from the Andes. It was started in the second half of the twentieth century by people who recognised how dangerous it would be to let the old varieties die out. There are thousands of different types, and I am to bring a selection to a new agricultural project in Ethiopia which will make use of some particularly poor soils.'

'Why doesn't the Federation simply use the postal service? They're usually very reliable.'

'We prefer to make these deliveries ourselves because the stocks are so valuable and it also gives a personal touch to the project. If there are any issues, I can help resolve them. I am a type of ambassador for the Federation, if you like.' Laurita smiled. 'Using the lattice to communicate is easy, but nothing can replace dealing directly with people.'

'No, that's true.' Yngwie smiled as well, then laughed. 'It's so peaceful here, it reminds me of home.'

'Well, we'll find some noise for you to enjoy. Here comes our transport!' Laurita stood up, and after boarding the light railcar, a few

Chapter Two

minutes later, they were walking towards the entrance to the brightly lit leisure centre.

Inside, it almost seemed as if the entire population of the outer southeastern region of Melbourne was determined on having a night out. There were people everywhere! Surprised, Yngwie and Laurita mingled with the crowd, content for a while to simply wander around, taking in the atmosphere. There were live performances here and there: musicians playing, artists of various types exhibiting their works and their skills, mini-theatrical events, singers with their original creations, and people reading their poetry or other written pieces. Fortunately, the acoustics of the centre were excellent, otherwise the noise level would have been unbearable. They stopped to listen to one particular performer, whose voice was heartbreakingly pure and entrancing. She sang of the time when, long ago, the mountain was home to thousands of people, living in small towns – Kallista, Olinda, Sassafras, Ferny Creek, Belgrave, Emerald, Cockatoo, and many others with names still alive in memory only. All were gone now, abandoned as the fires became more frequent and more fierce each dreaded summer; abandoned as the need to conserve the few remaining natural forests and other wild places became a priority for the newly formed World Federation of Nations as it struggled to deal with the devastation created by hundreds of years of war, over-population and environmental degradation.

Laurita wept. She knew all too well how difficult the ongoing struggle was to rehabilitate the forests, the open plains, the oceans and rivers, and how hard it had been, and still was, to restore the farmlands. Yngwie took her hand in his and gently pressed it. Listening to the singer, he had picked up the melody as well as the refrain, and as she reached what seemed to be the last one, joined in, harmonising perfectly. The singer nodded slightly, while Laurita stood on tiptoe to kiss Yngwie on the cheek. The other listeners applauded when the song finished. Smiling, Yngwie shook hands with the woman, exchanged a few words, then together, he and Laurita continued on in search of their dance venue.

By the time they reached an open doorway leading to a large, high-ceilinged room full of dancing couples and groups, Laurita had recovered her earlier good humour and was eager to join in. The walls of the room were covered in moving images of people and places from all over the world, which almost gave the illusion of being part of an even larger space, full of colour and life. The music was a fusion of modern with the current interest in early nineteenth-century western European and English dance melodies. Yngwie grinned. He was familiar with both the style and the dancing itself. One of its most attractive features, at least for him, was the close contact it allowed between the dancers.

They moved around the perimeter of the dance floor and, as the next arrangement was about to begin, joined in. Laurita, it seemed, was also

The Seed Gatherers

familiar with this style of dancing and accepted Yngwie's hand as he offered it to her, then circled gracefully, ready for the moment when he held her by the waist, lifted her high into the air, then set her down, before bowing and leading her on towards the next movement. As they held each other before moving apart and then closing in again, Yngwie found himself wishing their time together need not be so brief. Yet brief it would be, and nothing could change that. Best to focus on enjoying the evening.

By midnight, the full effect of a sleepless night and the aftershock of the forest fire began to take their toll – Yngwie felt dizzy and even a bit weak. Shaking his head when Laurita noticed his expression and asked if he was alright, he crouched down, putting his head in his hands. Concerned, Laurita knelt down beside him. 'Do you want me to call the medcentre?' she said, putting a hand on his shoulder.

'No, I'm just exhausted. I didn't sleep last night and I think it's finally caught up with me. I'll be fine, honestly, though perhaps you could get me some water?'

'Of course. I won't be long,' and Laurita walked swiftly over to the servery, where various refreshments, as well as iced water, were available. When she returned with the water, it was to find Yngwie where she left him, but standing up and staring at the display wall in horror. She turned to look, and saw the same image that briefly showed itself on her comlink at sunset, but this time, it was huge and the flames seemed to burn even more fiercely, eventually melting the Statue of Liberty. As it dissolved, the onlookers gasped, then gazed at each other, confused. Someone took out his comlink to call the peacekeepers. One joke was moderately funny, if no harm had actually been done, but this seemed to be taking the prank too far, particularly if it meant there was more to follow.

'Perhaps we should return to the communal house,' suggested Laurita, taking hold of Yngwie's arm. 'I don't feel like dealing with this.'

'Yes, let's get out of here,' murmured Yngwie, after taking a deep breath to steady himself. 'I'd like to walk back, if you don't mind? It would help clear my head.'