

## CHAPTER ONE HALCYON

Everyone knew: children at a birthday party in Amsterdam, farmers in Kosovo, Pakistani bus passengers, train engineers in Spain, museum goers in Japan; Yemeni mine workers, Brazilian soccer players, doctors in Jordan, Dutch judges, pilots in Argentina, Swiss students, German stock brokers, a Japanese rock band, monks in Burma, Egyptian archaeological workers, Mexican journalists, mountaineers in Tanzania. Everyone knew. No one would forget where they were on this day.

One million, two hundred thousand people live in Prague. Last week's Film Festival had been a grand success. The Music Festival had begun, the Marathon scheduled in two days. It was late afternoon on a Tuesday, everyone talking about the Ice Hockey Season Opening game at Tesla Arena, fourteen thousand tickets sold out weeks before.

Because the zoo was only a few kilometers away, it didn't take long for the rabbits, gorillas, pigs, cats, hens, stags, ducks, lizards, birds, horses, lions, tigers and elephants to make their way to the city. They sat waiting, quietly, on the bridges, lining the pathways next to the river.

Was it a power outage? Odd to happen in September, but certainly nothing to worry about.

Once inside the hotel lobby, White Crow, Marc (his rabbit ears at attention), Mal'akh the Mourning Dove (cooing oo-wa-hoo, hoo hoo) and Marcus, the Yellow Labrador with white ear tips, immediately see Asha and Emilie. "Is there somewhere private?" Asha, pointing, "A meeting room is over there." White Crow turns to Marc. "Will you find Shilli and Samuel?" At the other side of the lobby, Julian tips his head, motioning to Wayne to follow.

The conference room was medium size, a large oval table with surrounding chairs, a video screen, small side table, a large blackboard, photographs of antique Bohemia crystal lining the walls. As White Crow and Mal'akh fly to the table, Wayne stands by the closed door, Marcus at his feet. White Crow - "It's happened all over the world. People will react differently. Each of you is a different person than you were a year ago." Emilie - "How long will it last?" White Crow - "We don't know." Emilie, turning to Julian and Asha. "I forgot to tell you, Shilli's here." Mal'akh - "Samuel and Shilli are on their way."

White Crow turns to Asha. "Please go to speak with the person in charge of this territory, Marcus will go with you. Julian, will you find where the sick are being cared for?" Julian - "Is it all right for Wayne to come with me?" "Yes, Mal'akh will come too." When everyone left, White Crow and Emilie were alone in the room. White Crow - "Have you learned to fly?" Emilie - "I did my best. I'm too young to get a license." "Find whatever you need. Keep it hidden and safe. Take walks by the river. We'll need your help soon."

As Asha and Marcus walk together, a man passes by, rifle in hand, five dead doves slung over his shoulder. After a few minutes, realizing she's made a wrong turn, Asha decides to try what she and Emilie so often talked about. Stopping, standing still, closing her eyes, she asks for a sign. On the cobblestone walk, pill bugs roll into balls, moving together to form the shape of an arrow, pointing to the right. Asha and Marcus turn right at the corner.

Prague Castle is the largest castle complex in the world. Two blue uniformed Castle Guards stand watch at the main entrance gate. Asha walks with Marcus at her side. "We'd like to see who is in charge. We're here with information about what's happened." The guard is obviously taken aback but answers "Please wait here." He walks away.

In a few minutes, the guard returns. "Do you have identification, credentials?" Asha reaches into her pocket and hands him a slip of paper. He leaves. After a short wait, the guard returns. "Please follow me." Walking through the courtyards, Asha whispers to Marcus "I never dreamed anything like this could happen. I'm scared." "Do your best, like you always do."