

CHAPTER TWELVE CHRISTMAS

After Marcus died, Gentil, the Labrador puppy and Chopper, the English Bulldog, who both first appeared at Marcus' funeral, never left Emilie's side.

Trusting one another, the bond between everyone grew stronger. Differing opinions led to daily rousing arguments at the morning meeting, ending in laughter and different language idioms: "Bite your tongue." "Bite your elbow." "He's an ant milker." "I stepped in the spinach." "You're the apple of my eye." "You're a squeezer of limes." "That's my neck of the woods" One morning, there was a knock on the door. An elderly Czech woman stood at the door. "I am shocked at the badness of what one man did. Many of us could not fight our tears back." Quietly, she walked away.

It was December. The seasons hadn't changed. It wasn't cold, it hadn't snowed. No clouds covered the sun.

Shilli and his family were consumed by having found Matheus. Who they found was not the person they remembered. The man who had kidnaped Matheus had sold him to a factory owner in Prague. Matheus had worked at night, sleeping during the day in the factory basement. He was told if he said anything to anyone, his mother, father and twin brother would be killed.

Emilie spent her time studying all the written aviation information she could find, knowing it would never be a substitute for the real thing. Both the plane and fuel had been carefully hidden since September. Asha continued to study plants and flowers. Everyone who spent time with her seemed comfortable sharing any and all of their problems and concerns, always asking for her advice.

After their first interview for the documentary on Progeria, Emilie's stepfather and Neil felt an instant kinship.

Lapis and Samuel shared a love of music. When Lapis explained the details of Synesthesia's dual sensory experience, Samuel understood, conceptually, that something affecting one sense could cause a response from another sense. Samuel - "Remember when Snug, Youri and Mal'eck taught us what they know about communication. Music can be communicated telepathically. I tried it, it worked!" Thinking of a color response from a sound, something clicked for Samuel. In that instant, he knew what he wanted to do. He would be a teacher.

Wayne spent most of his days exploring Prague. Asha often joined him. One day, they saw a small girl fall off her bike, hitting her head on the stone walkway. Rushing to help, Wayne picked her up to find a two inch gash on the top of her head. Sitting down, holding her in his lap, he asked “ What’s your name?” The child, seeing blood everywhere, crying and terrified, answered “Beth.” “You have a cut on your head. I’m going to fix it.” Taking a napkin from his pocket Wayne cleaned the blood away from the cut, taking a hair on one side of the cut with one hand, a hair on the other side with the other, knotting them, gently pulling the skin together. “Does that hurt?” “Just a little.” Asha reaches into her pocket for a small piece of candy. “I have something that will help. Put this on your tongue and all the pain will be gone.” Hopi wisdom and a placebo.

Irena had never been as enthusiastic about the practice of law. Working on a legal action, a chimpanzee and orangutan as plaintiffs, the human race as defendant was an extraordinary challenge. Who would defend the human race? It hadn’t taken her long to learn sign language. Since communicating with Ayres the orangutan and Victoria the chimpanzee was vital to the case, she made many trips to Chuchle forest.

There was only one disagreement between all the law students working together doing research. Was it best to begin in the United States, where Ayres and Victoria would have a jury of their peers, or better to go directly to the Hague, with two dolphins, Eisely and Ctibor, as principal witnesses? Though the International Criminal Court had only reached one verdict in its ten year history, it was finally agreed that would be the best venue. The research gathered on the specifics of how, as a species, the human race had affected the planet Earth shocked more than illuminated.

Would the concept of “Never interfere with your adversary when he’s in the process of destroying himself” be relevant for this case?

The Christmas marketplace booths were festive with hand made wares. Barter was still the currency of the day.

The Halcyon's lobby buzzed with activity. A nine foot tree in the lobby was decorated with colored paper chains, glass ornaments and sparkling lead tinsel. Waiting for Christmas Eve, baskets of hand made "surprise balls" sat under the tree. For weeks, people had been at work for that moment when different colored strips of papers would be unraveled to reveal tiny surprises, until the center of the paper ball was reached... for the best surprise of all!

Every small table in the hotel lobby was filled with ribbon candy and Hold to the Light postcards. When lit from behind by a small candle, the cards' different images were illuminated through hundreds of cut outs.

Many foreigners lived in Prague. Adding the number of international tourists visiting the city when things had changed to the city's population guaranteed this would be a multinational celebration: Sinterklass, St. Nicholas, Black Peter, Krampus, Befana, Santa Claus, Pere Noel, the Tomtem, Grandfather Frost, Ded Moroz and the Snow Maiden.

The eve of St. Nicholas' feast day, (the sixth day of December), everyone met in Old Town Square to celebrate. When St. Nicholas appeared, an angel and a devil walking with him, every child was silent. With a flowing white beard, dressed in a Bishop's cloak and hat, he rewarded good behavior with gingerbread, naughtiness with a piece of coal. . . and a reminder to behave better next year.

When the Winter Solstice began (the 21st of December) the large bronze statue in the Halcyon lobby became the center of attention, everyone talking about the legend of the Kingfisher. Children decided to make their own nests, tucking in their personal message, setting them to sail down the Vlatna River.

The morning of the 24th, a messenger was sent to the Halcyon to invite Shilli, Neil, Emilie, Asha, Julian, Samuel, Wayne, Lapis and Irena to the Castle for a Christmas Eve Celebration. On his way, the messenger had an accident and never delivered the message. Having made extensive preparations, the government officials were not at all pleased when no one arrived.

During the day, the two puppies, Gentil the Labrador and Chopper the Bulldog, had sought out everyone separately. Approaching each young person, they quietly communicated their message. “You’re going to defend the human race. We will help you.”

Christmas Eve. The Czech Philharmonic had just finished a concert in Old Town Square when Irena arrived back at the Halcyon, a small cat draped around her shoulders like a stole. “This is Solace. She and I just found each other.” It was time to light the huge two hundred year old brass chandelier, its curved arms filled with holly branches. The lobby was full. The moment the 32th candle was lit, the dry leaves caught fire. As it spread, everyone was transfixed by the beauty of the brass orb surrounded by blazing holly branches. For several seconds, no one moved. Rational minds soon sprang to action.

For the past four months, hospitals had emptied. No one had become ill. No one had died. No one knew why.

It was twilight. New Year’s Eve. Animals formed a circle around the city. In a clear, cloudless sky, the last image many would see for the year was a World War II biplane, Emilie in the cockpit, Gentil and Chopper at her side, Ayres the orangutan and Victoria the chimpanzee in the rear, were leaving for the Netherlands. It had begun.

A New Year. Power was restored. Hopeful snowflakes, no two alike, blanketed the city.