

Chapter Eleven
Another Guest House & More Good Company



Safi made her way along the path the group was taking. In a few minutes they met up and Lirit scooted off the horse to run to her mother. After an affectionate welcome, Lirit joined Pen on her horse and Safi mounted Theo's to continue the journey. They rode toward a long, low house with a thatched roof, which occupied a grassy space next to a stream that fed into the river.

The group stabled the horses behind the house, after which Theo, Safi, and Lirit bid their farewells. Pen thanked father and child for their company, and Bend led her to the house where a young woman named Hand rose from a loom in the courtyard to greet them. "We've been expecting you, so I've made up rooms for you both. You might want to relax in a bath and have a bite to eat before you go up to the mote house to see Book and the Guest."

Pen and Bend took turns at refreshing themselves, and then sat down to a meal of bread, beer, cheese, and fruit with Hand, a pleasant, quiet woman whose face and long plaited hair were almost the same caramel color, and whose eyes were startlingly green. Her unfamiliar accent, made Pen ask how she came to join the group that moved to the Valley.

"I was in college at the time, in Beirut. My parents were from Mali originally, although my grandmother on my father's side was from Spain and had met my grandfather in Morocco; he was originally from Egypt. So I've got West African, Arab, and Spanish roots. In Beirut I met several Peace Corps workers from the United States, including Theo and Safi, who were vacationing there, and who were deeply involved in the Conversation. I had grown up with conflict and had seen friends killed in bombings, so you can imagine that the idea of escaping

the ever-present wars in my part of the world was particularly appealing. As we all talked, we realized how much we had in common as well, because many of us had left very restrictive, fundamentalist religious families and traditions. I was in Lebanon because I had essentially run away from home after being offered to an old mullah as a fourth wife. I jumped ship while on holiday with my parents, got a job as a translator, and went to school part time. My parents didn't pursue me (I think my mother was unhappy about the marriage anyway), but neither did they allow me to return home. Here I get to use my various talents, like weaving and dying, in addition to cooking and talking—which I'm also good at. My Spanish came in handy when the Guest arrived, because he occasionally babbled in Portuguese while he was unconscious."

At that Pen started, and blurted out, "It's Jack! I remember, it's Jack—the fellow I was working with on a project about native American astronomy! He's Portuguese—but he speaks Spanish and half a dozen other languages."

Both Hand and Bend laughed aloud. "'Jack' is not exactly a Portuguese name!" said Bend.

"It's a nickname because we couldn't pronounce 'Joao' properly—so he ended up with the English nickname for John. Anyway, that's who your Guest is, the other 'visitor' who came through the portal with me. We had taken a short backpacking holiday out of the lab—the observatory—and found an old mine shaft. Jack started fooling around with the device we found inside, and that must be how we ended up here."

"So you both must have wandered around a bit in order to end up down here—and you must have fallen into the river near where the path comes out of the foothills. The trigger is only about a kilometer away at that point," Bend suggested.

Hand explained how Pen's companion had been found. "He apparently stumbled into an empty cabin about two hundred meters up the path, and collapsed. Ohashi came across him three days ago when he went to harvest some herbs up by another spring. He came back to get me and we put Jack on a travois and carried him up to the mote house where Ohashi and Book could keep an eye on him while they work. He was unconscious for a while, but started to come around two days ago—after we had already sent Theo down to fetch Bend. He doesn't have much of a memory, but he's aware enough to speak English or Spanish now, at least most of the time. When he was delirious I could understand some of what he said, but not all because I really don't speak Portuguese. There are quite a few Brazilians down at the citrus groves, but nobody nearby—so it's especially good that he's now able to let us know how he feels and what he needs. He seemed much stronger this morning, and perhaps Pen's arrival will help him get his memory back, too."

They quickly tidied up the remains of the meal and headed up the staircase to the mote house. When they got to the top, Ohashi and Book both greeted them, and after introductions were exchanged, they went inside, where a somewhat scruffy but smiling Jack sat on a woven chair sipping a cup of tea. Ohashi offered everyone a cup, and they sat down to determine what Jack could remember. As he squinted at Pen, she pointed out that he should be wearing glasses. When she asked if he had a backpack or anything, Hand retrieved the pack that had been found with him, and Pen located his spare case. "He had been wearing progressive lenses, but pushed them up on his head while he was fiddling with the device because they were still too dark for him to see inside the mine; they probably fell off when we came through the portal. He always keeps a spare pair, though, in case the others break." She then placed the glasses on Jack's face, and he nearly jumped. "Pen," she said. "Jack, it's me, Pen."

Gradually, as they sat and talked, Jack became more aware of who he was and what had happened to him. By the time the sun had started setting behind the Western ridge, he was beginning to recall bits of his experience. So the company decided to go down to the nearby pub and have dinner. Preparations were well underway for a festival, so the pub area was crowded with folks ready to relax after a long day, and to welcome—if somewhat curiously—the new arrivals. Pen was already feeling at home among these people, but Jack was still astonished by it all, and remained largely silent. He sat next to Hand, with whom he seemed particularly comfortable, and occasionally asked her a question in Spanish, when some point of the conversation seemed to escape him.

As she sat listening to the buzz around her, Pen took in the “flavor” of the moment—the casual friendliness, the earnestness, and the warmth of the gathering. Several groups of people sat around large tables, sitting back on comfortable chairs, eating and drinking and talking. An outdoor fireplace had been lit, and a grate atop it was being used to grill marinated vegetables; as each batch was completed, a tray was passed around, until the cook determined that all of the diners had what they wanted. Then someone else pulled several loaves of bread out of the adjacent oven, and that was passed around as well. Each table was furnished with several small bowls of condiments from which the diners ladled portions onto their plates for dipping bread, grilled squash, tomatoes, or other fare. Bowls of hearty soup were also available, and someone announced gleefully that there was cake tonight in honor of a name day. At that, Pen turned to Book, who was sitting next to her, for an explanation.

“Well,” she said, “we try to be thoughtful about what we name our children, but very early on we adopted a custom—initiated a celebration, really—to mark the naming of babies, and another, later as a rite of passage into adulthood, when children choose names of their own. The first adults really started the practice

for themselves, though. Many of us wanted to give ourselves new names to honor our new life, and for some reason we thought that those of us who wanted English names might have some fun if we were to structure the naming in some way. So those of us whose native or choice language is English came up with the ‘both noun and verb’ idea. Lots of folks thought that was silly, but more of us thought it made for interesting possibilities. I chose ‘Hand’ because I work with my hands, and ‘Book’ snatched her name up immediately so nobody else would grab it. But we don’t enforce any of this. Theo and Safi liked their names, for example. We kid Theo about wanting to be known as a god, but his original name means ‘gift of god’ and Safi’s means ‘wisdom.’ Theo’s mother had named him that in thanks, and Safi had been named for an admired quality, so they had already been well named.

Clara had adopted the name of a much-admired foremother, even though she thought she was too old for foolishness like name-changing. But the idea was to be more mindful about a process that many English speakers had begun to take lightly—too lightly, we thought, for something potentially important to one’s life. Instead of naming our children after celebrities, we started giving them names that reflected something that we wished for them or that described them in some way. So babies get named after a favorite animal or bird, or a quality, or even to reflect an attitude. The name being celebrated tonight, for example, is ‘Gift’ who was born to a woman who decided rather late in life that she’d like to have a child. She’ll be called ‘Gift’ until she reaches puberty, at which time she’ll begin to try out new names—if she wants to—until she finds one she likes, and then we’ll have another party in honor of her new name.”

“Is everything you people do purposeful?” wondered Pen. “I mean, don’t you ever do anything unreasonable—anything that you haven’t thought out and discussed beforehand? This doesn’t sound very spontaneous, somehow.”

The old doctor, Ohashi, smiled at her—indulgently, she thought—and chewed on a pipe stem for a moment in preparation for a reply. “Spontaneity is

overrated,” he insisted, “but not unnecessary. Deciding whether or not to take a quick dip in the river does not require a committee decision or a long conversation. But we’re used to long conversation, so it would not be unheard of to hear a group of young people debating for hours whether or not to take a swim, and then finding that it was now too cold or too late to do so. We like to talk. Even those of us, like Bend and I, who are given to introspection and solitude, enjoy a good long chat when it seems appropriate.”

Bend grinned. “I would imagine that Pen finds the notion of my being introspective and solitary somewhat out of character, because I haven’t shut up since she met me.”

“But that’s my fault,” replied Pen. “I keep asking all these questions.”

“And that’s one reason why we talk so much,” added Book. “We see curiosity and wonder as the ground of understanding. ‘Why’ is the basic question of philosophy, and it makes us look for answers. The difference between the life we live here and the life we left, is that we embrace the possibility of multiple answers; we don’t want just one: true or false, yes or no. That is not to say that we never reject any answer, or that we don’t think some are right and some are wrong. While it’s quite possible that there’s not one certain specific answer to a given question, we do recognize the existence of wrong answers, and that some answers are better than others. What we talk about most is which answers are better and why they are better, and what their future impact might be.”

“But it does get silly sometimes,” said Hand. “Some of the most heated arguments have to do with whether or not a particular pitch was a ball or a strike. Which is why I’m really glad we don’t have electricity here, because there will never be night games, so the arguments can’t go on forever. A baseball game by candlelight would not only waste candles, but the umps would go blind!”

As everyone laughed, and the discussion turned to finalizing plans for the festival, Pen leaned back in her chair, sipping from her glass of wine, and nibbling bits of dense, fruit-filled cake. The conversation seemed to float on the breeze, redolent of honeysuckle from the pergola overhead, which held pendants of grapes intermixed with fragrant flowers. Pen realized that she was fading quickly, and that Jack had already fallen asleep; she glanced at Bend, who had noticed the same. He nodded to the others, who said goodnight to their dinner companions and helped the visitors back to their quarters for the night. Ohashi and Book supported the sleepy Jack up the path and stairs to the motehouse, and the rest walked to the guesthouse. Hand presented Pen with a packet of nightwear and fresh clothes for the morning, tied in a large square of cloth; then she climbed the stairs with a similar package for Jack.

Pen and Bend sat on a wide bench outside their rooms and watched the waxing gibbous moon set, leaving the valley to be lit only by stars. Noting the valley's palpable sense of peace, Pen remarked to Bend, "I hope our coming hasn't compromised your life here. I would be more than happy to stay, especially if it meant that you would all be safe from my world. What I left was only barely tolerable, with increasing political tensions, religious fanaticism, anti-intellectualism, anger, violence—all those things your people came here to get away from. I came to my valley because it's where my family is from, and I could do work here that kept my mind off what was going on in the rest of the world. But Jack has family and a life; he's a visiting scholar, a post-doc who's interested in what ancient peoples knew about astronomy. He has a wife and a baby back in Portugal, and he was only supposed to be at the observatory for the summer, at my invitation. If we're missing for long, someone will come looking for us, and if *we* could accidentally work the trigger, someone else might be able to as well. What would happen then?"

Bend sat quietly. "I'm not sure," he said after a few thoughtful moments. "But we'll talk about it at breakfast. The good thing about our proclivity for

conversation is that it produces solutions more often than not—and they’re usually pretty good ones. So we’ll sleep on it, and talk the problem through when we’re not so full of cake and wine. Wait till you taste the coffee here; Hand raises a special bean in the hills about a hundred meters up the mountain, and it packs a punch. But it’s also delicious. So sleep well, and try not to worry.”

And so she did. And didn’t.



Pen awoke to a liquid cacophony of blackbird song rising from the horsetails near the creek. The bathhouse was empty, so she took her kit and fresh clothes, washed her hair, and dressed before she went looking for anyone. When she emerged, Bend and Hand were sitting at the courtyard table, sipping from large mugs; Bend had been right about the coffee—the aroma was delectable. Hand passed her a mug and the carafe, and Bend surrendered a tray with a pitcher of milk. “I’m afraid you’re out of luck if you like sugar with it,” warned Hand. “Honey tastes lousy with this coffee, but we do try to make small amounts of milk available for such indulgences.”

Pen savored the rich brew, and sat enjoying the weather—again crisp, clear, dry, scented with aspens and sagebrush—and the company. They chatted about the trip from Cottonwood and about the midsummer festival until Book arrived to let them know that Jack was awake. They gathered up coffee, fruit, and fresh muffins, and headed up the stairs to the mote house. Ohashi and Jack were sitting on the parapet wall, in front of which a table had been set up, along with several chairs, to accommodate breakfast. In the distance, Pen could see a great blue heron lift off from the marsh and fly just below them, eventually landing at the pond near the guest house. As they sat drinking more coffee, the sun made its way over the eastern ridge, bathing the valley in rosy light. Mists still lay over various ponds and marshes below, but people were

already at work in several fields. The ubiquitous large straw hats bobbed in rhythm as hoeing and cultivating proceeded, and tuneful chants occasionally wafted up the hillside from various directions. Others could be seen walking to and from the pub, some leaving with baskets on their arms to take to the fields, others pulling small carts with jugs to refresh the workers.

“I still find it difficult to understand why this all appears so seamless,” Pen remarked, standing by the wall and taking in the view. “What about scheduling who does what and when, and who hoes and who takes the food to the people working the plots? Surely it doesn’t all happen without any planning at all.”

Ohashi took another sip of coffee, and then offered an answer. “We sign up,” he said, simply. “About once a month—at new moon—we post a list of jobs and projects in the mote house, and people sign up for what needs to be done in the coming weeks, to make sure we have enough people for the tasks at hand. Occasionally we’ll be short a few, or there will be a surplus of volunteers for a particular undertaking, but generally the slots fill up according to necessity. People will notice that something needs doing, and will elect that task. We try to lay jobs out at the motes, and things that need long-term planning get discussed on a regular basis. Otherwise, we rely on people to assess needs and act accordingly. No two people seem to agree on what jobs are preferable, so we don’t seem to have a problem with distribution; folks gravitate toward work they’re good at, but trade off when someone else wants to learn a particular skill or take a turn at something new. There are lots of people, for example, who find pulling weeds peaceful rather than disagreeable, and others happily let them do it. So everything gets done, usually in plenty of time to allow for rest and recreation.”

“But what if something didn’t get done?” Pen asked. “Would you have to force somebody to complete an undesirable task, or draw lots or something to ensure fairness?”

“Remember what we were talking about just after you got here,” said Bend. “What has to be done is seen as purposeful and valuable, so we don’t really have a problem with ‘undesirable’ work. In the old world, the least sought-after jobs, like garbage collecting or sewer work, were not only onerous, but ill-compensated. People used to joke that garbage collectors made more money than teachers, which generally wasn’t true—but if it were, why would that be a bad thing? Work that nobody wanted to do *should* have been really well paid, while work that was highly prized should have been in some sense its own reward. But it didn’t happen that way, so we tried to make sure that people were responsible for most of their own basic care—including taking care of their own toilets—so that we didn’t have a special class of folks devoted to work no one else wanted to do. There are no servants here. The only people who don’t take part enthusiastically in anything that needs doing, are those who are too young, too old, or too sick, to participate, or who are temporarily incapacitated .”

“But,” Pen went on, “Hand seems to be akin to an innkeeper—she looks after guests’ needs, cooking, probably keeping the place clean. Who takes care of the toilet at the guesthouse? Or is that part of what I do as a guest? At any rate, the cooks and guest-house keepers, and in some sense doctors, seem to fall into what my world calls ‘service industries.’ How are they different?”

“For one thing, we *choose* to serve people; we’re not forced to,” answered Hand. “I’m not a very good farmer because my spine is slightly malformed. I do seem to have a knack for growing herbs and coffee, however, because I’ve developed ways to cultivate and harvest without repetitive bending, and I can grow my crops on the slope above the guesthouse. When it became clear that we could use a hostel of some sort, especially to house visitors who came to our motes from other settlements, I volunteered to build and maintain it. Once we had the structures built, we set up the garden and the coffee plantation, and when that was done I had plenty of time to weave and experiment with new dyes and

cloth-blends. I also get a chance to cook, which I enjoy doing, but don't have the patience to undertake on a large scale, like those who have become pub-keepers and chefs."

"And Ohashi and I keep the mote house up, tend to the sick, and help people with book projects—although we both often lend a hand at planting and harvesting," added Book. "Mostly it's about mindfulness, though. Being aware of necessity, attending to what's going on in the world, thinking about how we live; we are not really interested in efficiency, but rather in consciousness: being aware of what we do, and trying to enjoy it, even if it means hard physical labor. And that labor gets results. We grow flavorful, nutritious food, we cook it well—and usually minimally—and we make the necessities of life beautiful as well as useful. Much of that perception of beauty is actually tied up in being aware of how something will be used, and letting its use guide its design."

"I have certainly noticed that everything seems well designed," remarked Pen. "But what happens if you suddenly need a lot of something? If you do everything by hand, that would seem to preclude a quick response."

Book knit her brows together thoughtfully, and went on. "I don't think you quite understand. We're so *deliberate* around here, that it's difficult to imagine a 'need' that would appear so suddenly as to require such an immediate solution. If we decide, for example, that we 'need' to grow a new crop because one isn't working as well as we'd like—it's too difficult to grow, or causes unforeseen problems of pest management, say—then we think about what we might grow in its place, or re-examine its necessity in the first place. Usually we introduce crops for nutritional variety, so that our food in a particular growing season doesn't become too monotonous. But when we first came, we grew only what we could depend on for survival, and we managed quite well. We knew we would have time in the future to expand our culinary repertoire, but we also knew that for the moment we needed very few staples to get by; we

depended on the same kinds of foods that natives ate when this area was first occupied. After we had more time to work on expanding choices, we gradually introduced and experimented with new varieties and new species, and increased our cultivation of indigenous plants. All of this took years to accomplish, but efficiency and large-scale production were never goals. We know that for this valley to thrive, we have to manage human interference carefully—to tread as lightly as possible. So everything we do, from building homes, to furnishing them, to entertaining ourselves, is done with use and with consequences in mind.”

Ohashi grinned and added, “It was good that we Japanese were many, because the river gave us areas in which to grow rice, and so we could make *sake*—which was the only liquor available until the grapes were discovered down by the lake, and until the vines that were brought started bearing. Beer came second, and we have some good stout varieties—but the *sake* is still the best alcoholic beverage we make. And its uses are medicinal as well as pleasurable.”

Throughout the conversation, Jack listened attentively, but looked puzzled, so Bend offered to give him a brief history of the valley. It took them most of the morning to make it all clear, but Jack began to understand the dilemma that his presence and Pen’s entailed. In response to his growing alarm, Bend went on to explain their options.

“One thing I haven’t told you about,” he continued, “is the time factor. We can set the trigger to send you back to within a few hours of when you left, so we should be able to get you back without anyone’s noticing your absence. But sending you back presents its own set of problems; another set arise from letting you stay.”

Pen got up to stretch her legs, and Ohashi noted that it was time for elevenses; the sun had risen to the point where the shade from the mote house had receded to within a few feet of the large main doors. They moved inside, where

it was noticeably cooler, and Ohashi went to the back room for fruit and cheese, and for a flask of tea cooled in the creek that ran behind the mote house.

Pen had to laugh when more food was spread on one of the long tables in the center of the room. The walls between the side doors were lined with shelves, which in turn were filled with books of all sizes and shapes. “It looks like the Library of the People Who Eat Constantly,” she said, happily tucking into a superb apple, small, firm, and rather piquant.

“These apples were here when we came,” Bend replied to her unspoken question. “Early in the history of the old valley, apple species were grown commercially. Some of the seeds must have lain dormant over the dry centuries, or birds must have flown these in from elsewhere. Like most of the other indigenous foodstuffs we found, these are well adapted to the climate—as are these grapes; small and seedy, but really tasty. But we really don’t eat *all* the time; we just don’t eat much at a single meal, and take in small amounts frequently. It keeps us fueled for strenuous work, but we don’t get fat when we’re not working in the fields, either. You’ve probably noticed that the fare is seasonal and plentiful, but not widely varied; we have few facilities for long-term storage, and can’t import out-of-season foods, so we do with what grows according to the time of year: fruits and grains during the warm months, root crops and hardy greens during the cold. If we can’t store it in traditional ways, such as in root cellars or by drying or canning, we just don’t eat it when it isn’t growing. That makes the harvest of seasonable crops all the more enjoyable. And we don’t eat many very sweet things; the fruit we grow is so flavorful that we seldom feel the need for traditional puddings or desserts.”

Pen rose and went to the side of the room, where a pair of doors stood open, revealing yet another vista. She noticed that people were swimming in the river and asked if that were a regular pastime.

“Well, sitting around talking all day isn’t quite the norm,” replied Ohashi. “In fact, even the bookish Book seldom sits down for long. And if we’re not ‘working’ per se, we’re often playing—at sports, dancing, walking in the hills, actively meditating—that sort of thing. The swimming is a common morning practice in summer, along with sculling and canoeing. If you arise early enough tomorrow,” he added, “you can join us and several others from the village for Tai Chi at sunrise, out on the parapet. It’s an extraordinary experience, even for those of us who do it all the time.”

Jack interrupted. “Can we get back to this business of time?” he asked. “Is it really so that we could return to the other place without having been gone too long? I am scheduled to leave for home in only a few days after our trip. This is a very attractive place, but I have a small child and my wife was reluctant for me to leave even for the summer. So I cannot enjoy your hospitality for very long if I can leave. I would also not want anyone to discover your whereabouts. But since it seems that Penelope wishes to stay here, perhaps, we should discuss that as well. I would not want for someone to think that I had committed some criminal act to cause her disappearance!”

Bend announced that a mote had already been called for that evening, so that the community could consider possibilities and come up with ideas. Jack and Pen would also have a chance to see discussion and decision-making in action. Hand noted that she was needed down at the pub, and suggested that this would be a good time to tour the fields. So the group gathered up the remains of the meal, cleaned up, and started down the stairs toward the river.

