

Chapter Ten
Arriving At the Roots of the Mountains



As they rode alongside the river, Pen noticed the interest with which all three of her companions regarded their surroundings, so she asked, “How do you see yourselves among all this? What do people here believe about, well, life, the universe, and everything?”

Bend decided to tackle this one. “It probably boils down to seeing ourselves as *a part of* where we are, rather than *apart from* it. It’s not a religious belief, but it probably is spiritual in some sense—the perception of a connection between one’s self and something larger. Each one of us participates in his or her local community/economy, and lives in this place. But the landscape is also part of us. We drink its water; we breathe its air; we eat the food grown in its soil. Its molecules interact with ours. Mind you, the landscape could get along quite well without us, as it apparently has for thousands of years. And so our ability to effect changes, about which we may not be able to predict the long-term outcomes, requires that we carefully examine our decisions about what to grow, where to live, how to build—how to live in general.”

Theo added, “We know what this valley once looked like, and what this continent and others on the planet had suffered at the hands of human beings who rarely considered the consequences of their actions. This is why our decision to forego large-scale technologies was foundational to the plans we made before arriving. Every project with the potential for unforeseen change gets deliberated long and hard before we begin. We have to rely heavily on history and experience to determine the potential for harm, but so far we’ve done a pretty good job. We try, for example, to work with indigenous crops whenever possible, and to introduce non-native species only gradually and

under controlled circumstances. Our cloth and paper crops were carefully watched to make sure that they wouldn't be so successful that they would take over the valley; hemp is useful, but we didn't want to turn it into a rampant weed. Fortunately, we need to augment the soil with compost and nutrients in order for it to grow well, so it's not likely to escape outside its own special fields. Bamboo is something we cultivate, but watch carefully, because it's potentially so invasive.

“Quite a number of food plants—berries, vegetables, fruit—must have escaped and adapted between ‘then’ and ‘now’ because we found wild varieties of what were once domestic crops when we got here. Those we've fostered, and they've become the basis for our diet. When we want to introduce a new variety of something or other, we monitor it for several plant generations before we grow it on a larger scale. Our diet is varied enough to make interpretations of different cultures' native foods possible, but if we had to, we could survive quite well on what was here when we arrived. And we cultivate medicinal herbs, too, again being careful not to let anything get out of hand.”

“Like Sparrow's mint garden,” offered Lirit.

“That's a great example,” said Theo, grinning. “One of the children decided to root a piece of spearmint and plant it in an out-of-the-way spot. But before anyone realized it was there, it had taken over a large patch of ground near a creek, and had overwhelmed some native herbs. So Sparrow and her friends spent weeks uprooting the mint, making tea out of it, and watching the area for evidence of renewed mint-growth. They all learned a valuable lesson, and no real harm resulted, so it ended up being an enlightening experience for the children.”

“Now we only grow mint species in pots,” Lirit added.

“I do notice,” said Pen, “that conversations about philosophical or spiritual issues always come back to the practical.”

“That’s probably because we don’t really separate the two domains,” suggested Bend. “We find distinctions—say between the practical and spiritual or the physical and psychological—to be less than useful. These kinds of divisions dominated Western thinking for millennia, but almost inevitably led to sharp distinctions between self and other, or us and them: People apart from the universe, mind apart from body, cause apart from effect, ends apart from means. A view of life that sees these things as independent of one another almost inevitably leads to the thoughtless exploitation of beings that can be seen as ‘other,’ or to a reductionist view of science. It also considers art to be something other than connected to use, so that beauty and practicality belong to two different domains. Anything that doesn’t fulfill someone’s notion of ‘fine’ art is relegated to the ‘lesser’ arts. Here, to be useful is to embody a kind of functional beauty, and beauty without use is wasteful of effort and resources. Art is part of life, as we’ve already discussed, and so a concept like ‘art for art’s sake’ doesn’t make sense to us.”

Pen then asked about religion again: “I know we talked about this with Clara a little, and sometime earlier you mentioned that people here weren’t particularly religious. But what does that mean? Does no one here believe in God? Surely the people who came here had been raised in belief systems of some sort. How do belief, faith, and spirituality fit into this world, beyond just personal traditions?”

“One thing most of us could never come to terms with in the old world was the notion that in order to be ‘good,’ or to act morally, one had to adhere to some religious doctrine that involved a supreme being, or a pantheon of lesser beings, all of whom were seen as directing human life toward some higher goal than earthly existence,” said Bend. “The idea that the only reason people had for behaving well was the potential for punishment seemed pretty infantile to

us. And although most of us had been raised within some kind of organized religion, we didn't find supernatural explanations or reasons to be particularly satisfying. And in many cases, religion seemed to foster exactly the kind of separateness that we were trying to overcome."

"Right," said Theo. "I'm a Jew, raised on a kibbutz in Israel, but I married a Palestinian Muslim I had met in college while studying anthropology. We moved back to Jerusalem when we graduated, but left when it became clear that our respective peoples were determined to destroy one another. Despite cultural and biological affinities between the two groups, animosities that grew out of religious beliefs made reconciliation all but impossible. The result was escalating death and destruction, not only of the people but of the land. When we moved to the States it wasn't any better. Fundamentalist religious views of all stripes contributed to the growing political and cultural wars worldwide. Belief in a god seemed to foment disputes over whose god was *the* god, and cause wars over whose god was mightier, or whose way was the one 'true' way. And these disputes were what prompted most of the discussion that resulted in our coming here. So you can imagine that we might hold a kind of prejudice against traditional religious ways of thinking. After we moved to the States, my wife and I made use of our training in anthropology by joining the Peace Corps in a kind of last-ditch effort to help change things for the better, but what the experience really taught us was how widespread the destruction of non-Western lifeways and values had already become."

Bend added, "But we weren't particularly attracted to the 'spirituality' movements that were becoming increasingly popular, either, because although they seemed to encourage holistic thinking, they also tended to dismiss critical thought. And many of these movements also co-opted the beliefs and practices of native peoples without understanding the contexts of belief. What we all felt we needed instead was to promote an appreciation for the natural world, but not some sort of transcendent view that dismissed science as necessarily

reductionist and destructive. Over the years we've become quite content with the combination of our recognition of interdependence with nature, our appreciation of certain aspects of our ethnic or religious heritages, and an almost emotional affection for scientific process as it fits into our new understanding of the world.

"We don't all agree on everything, of course, but we don't congregate in churches to worship the One True God either. It's quite possible to hold the existence of the universe in awe, and to wonder at the variety and economy of the evolutionary process, without assigning its existence to some master planner. Private beliefs about the existence of a god or gods vary widely, and we would never 'outlaw' a religious perspective. In fact, we've actually got a couple of Jesuit priests here, a Franciscan, a Sister of Charity, two rabbis, two yogis, and assorted other 'holy people' who found no contradiction in coming to a community that essentially sees religion as a source of conflict rather than unity. The real luxury of this existence is that nobody preaches or tries to impose his or her beliefs on anyone. We talk about it, of course, but the religious among us don't try to convert anyone. "

"Bend's a Greggy," announced Lirit. "He's a monk."

Bend hooted at that. "A Graiggian," he said. "From a Welsh Green monastery that only ever had about twelve monks or nuns. Part of a very early attempt to do what we do here—not particularly religious, but certainly contemplative. I joined a 'splinter' group in New Mexico when I was a young man, and met Clara when she came to visit the monestary."

"Well, without religion, what do you celebrate?" asked Pen.

"Birth, death, life, growth, seasons, plenty, community, work . . . All the stuff we came here to enjoy and make possible."

"Baseball," chirped Lirit. "And harvest, especially berries! And snow!"

Theo laughed. “I think she’d be happiest if she were eating berry-flavored snow at a baseball game. Of course, she’s never seen a ‘real’ baseball game—and I have to admit that there are plenty of things about the old world that some of us miss—professional baseball especially, for me. But our games have their own charm—and they’re obviously cheaper and easier to enjoy.”

“So what do you sing during the seventh inning stretch?” asked Pen with a grin.

“Why, ‘Take Me Out to the Ball Game’ of course,” said Theo. “We do, after all, have peanuts and our own equivalent of Cracker Jack. And the kids understand the role of tradition and how much it means to us old folks. Although many of us were still quite young when we came here, in our early or mid-twenties, we had already learned to enjoy some aspects of American or other modern life. And people from other parts of the world brought their traditions with them—the ones that fit in, that is. So we also play cricket and soccer and golf, and we dance and sing and revel whenever an opportunity presents itself.”

They rode up to a rise, and what presented itself below them took Pen’s breath away. In the valley beyond the river the patchwork of fields had become larger and more intensely colored. Large expanses of natural terrain, interspersed with small cultivated plots in a wide variety of greens blending into smaller areas of muted pinks, reds, blues, purples, yellows—in almost every imaginable hue. Ahead of them, on their side of the river, were gathered a number of what appeared to be longhouses, and, on a promontory overlooking the area, what Pen decided had to be another mote house; this one, however, looked like something out of a Scandinavian folk tale.

At Pen’s gasp, Bend and Theo reined in, and the small party stopped for a moment to take in the view. “That’s Tinemaha,” said Theo. “It was once the

name of a small reservoir, but one of the Numa settlers thought it would be a good name for the whole area.”

“Numa?” asked Pen.

They continued on their way, and Theo answered, “The first inhabitants in the old valley. Quite a number of them came with us, because they were friends of Clara’s and had been part of the conversation almost from the beginning. They were interested in helping to take care of the valley the way their ancestors had tried to before it was settled by white ranchers and the soldiers who came in to deal with the ‘Indian problem.’ We’ve adopted a few Numa names for a variety of features, but we don’t really tend to name much. We mostly describe where we’re going—north to the fishing lake, or south to the citrus orchards or olive groves.”

When Pen looked at him, obviously puzzled, Theo went on. “Naming is essentially an act of claiming power over something; in Genesis, human beings were commanded to name animals as a way of showing dominion. So we name ourselves, but try to do so mindfully, and we often come up with ‘use names’ for geographic features, but these are all mutable; and some places have different names among different groups. We certainly don’t go around naming mountains and rivers after the people who ‘discover’ them—as if they didn’t exist before some superior being noticed them!”

As they neared the settlement, Pen began to hear music—a sort of response chant—and noticed some people working in a field just across the river. A couple of them looked up and waved at the little party, and went on with their business, and their singing. “It sounds African,” said Pen.

“It is,” replied Bend. “An old Shona planting song, I think—or maybe harvesting. It’s one of several songs people tend to sing when they’re weeding or planting or gathering crops. We actually sing quite a bit, especially when we’re

working in groups. Or eating and drinking. This particular song has a nice rhythm and it makes for pleasant work.”

“Pub songs are also great favorites,” added Theo.

“What about serious music?” asked Pen. “Symphonies and that sort of thing.”

“I’m not sure why a symphony would be more ‘serious’ than a harvest song,” Bend replied, a little indignantly. “But yes, we do play traditional Western orchestral music—albeit with some modifications that have occurred on account of our having created some interesting new instruments, and because we lack some of the standard horns and such. We also had to compensate for the loss of pianos and other complex components of formal orchestras. Hauling a Steinway through the portal wasn’t really an option, but one chap has successfully replicated a harpsichord—complete with beautiful polished bone keys—and most of the musicians who came did manage to bring their instruments. Our orchestras play what would have been seen as fairly conventional music in different cultures, but in rather unconventional ways. And people are always composing and improvising. There’s a pretty thriving jazz tradition, and ‘folk’ music probably dominates most gatherings, but we play music that reflects the large number of traditions represented by the people who settled here. And there’s a symphonic concert down in a natural amphitheater near Cottonwood every spring, where people from all over the Valley go to play.”

Pen remembered the children’s singing on her way to Cottonwood, and mentioned it to her companions. “That’s pretty typical,” said Theo. “We sing, hum, scat, and play tunes for our children from birth, so music is pretty much bred into them. We’ve tried to provide them with as rich a ‘stew’ as we can, from which they can develop their own music to express their own experiences growing up here. But some of the older children have already begun to experiment with what we’d have to call ‘alternative’ music because it’s unlike

what we've exposed them to. There's even a sort of band that gets together to 'play' whenever the wind's right; they've created wind instruments that depend on the north-to-south katabatic gales that blow through here occasionally. They set them up—it looks like a forest of wooden tubes and pipes—and then take shelter, from where they sit and enjoy what happens. It's really amazing to hear not only the sound of the wind blowing down the valley, but to hear the different sounds that come from the 'arrangement' of the tubes, which varies according to what the kids learn from each 'performance.' It's a combination of true wood-winds and percussion."

"I guess this place would be pretty disappointing to a heavy metal or grunge band from the old world," said Theo. "Our music doesn't get loud enough to cause deafness, and it isn't amplified; everything's acoustic, of course, and even though we can get pretty rowdy during some of our celebrations, we'd probably seem awfully tame to some members of the generation we left behind."

"What we're really proud of," Theo continued, "is the inventiveness shown by the kids. We supply them with what we know: language, music, literature, and other aspects of our various cultures, and they take off from there. The future is theirs, and they seem ready to create it for themselves."

"I've been wondering about language," said Pen, "Does everyone here speak English? Is it a kind of official language or something? All the books I saw in Clara's guestroom were written in English, and that's what everyone so far has spoken."

"Ah," replied Theo. "That's really Bend's purview."

Bend responded with a shrug, and said, "There isn't any such thing as an 'official' language here. There are more English speakers than anything, because it had provided the common language for large segments of the

conversation. I'm a little surprised, though, that the children were speaking English when you met them; they usually practice other languages, or even one they're 'inventing' when grownups aren't around to criticize or eavesdrop."

Pen then remembered the Greek at the lake's edge. "Actually," she said, "I thought I had washed up in Phaeacia when I awoke, because one of them was reading Homer in Greek."

"Well," said Bend, after a thoughtful pause, that tells us two things; first, that they were in fact speaking something else, and second, that you recognize Greek—and a pretty specific dialect at that. Clara has been teaching a small group of children—some of whom were among those who found you—to read Homeric Greek, and they've been practicing from the epics and from Hesiod for several months now."

"In fact," Bend continued, "we try to teach each child at least two languages, and we've discovered that they also play around with writing systems and decipher scripts they aren't already familiar with as soon as they know what languages are attached to them. And then there's the Big Secret Project that seems to be going on throughout the Valley."

"It's not all that secret," announced Lirit. "Some of the adults have already figured out some of it." When Bend nodded to indicate that she should go on, Lirit continued. "It's called 'cryptographia.' We're designing a new writing system that we can use to write any language that anybody speaks—even Basque. It's happening all over, and we get together sometimes to talk about designs and sounds. We're not nearly finished, but we have lots of signs so far; maybe twenty nine all together. We think we need about thirty five, but that's only if we decide to keep it an alphabet. If we decide to make it into syllables, we'll need lots more."

Pen found herself quaking with laughter at Lirit's earnestness, once again amazed at the child's ability to discuss such sophisticated ideas. But instead of taking offense, Lirit just laughed along with her. "I know it sounds pretty funny, but it's really fun, and we think it will be useful. We also wanted something that was ours, that we made for this home, so I guess we take it pretty seriously."

Pen smiled apologetically, and then asked about the linguistic makeup of the population.

Bend suggested that she speak to Book when they got to the mote house, because she was keeping tabs on language preservation in the Valley, so conversation turned to the mote house itself. "It's pretty fanciful," Pen remarked. "Like a place where Beowulf would live, or something out of Tolkien."

"You're close," said Lirit. "It comes from a couple of Topsy stories, *The Roots of the Mountains* and *The House of the Wolfings*."

When Pen again looked puzzled, Theo explained. "One of William Morris's fantasy stories. Since Morris's philosophy was a major ingredient in what we decided to do here, people built this mote house in honor of him. It's more elaborate than any other building in the Valley, and it's built entirely of wood in the style of an old Icelandic long house. The setting, there on the promontory, made it seem appropriate, because a view of both mountain ranges can be taken in from the parapet. It's also located within a couple of kilometers of where we originally arrived, so it reminds us of that as well. It was engineered to be particularly earthquake resistant, as are all our dwellings and outbuildings; structurally it has some things in common with Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel in Tokyo."

Pen gazed across the plain, which at this point was about five kilometers wide, and saw that the river snaked back in front of them and lay closer to the

eastern range than the western at this point, although it bent back to the west just up river, amid what looked like a large marshy area. The foothills rose rapidly above the river near its eastern bank, and the promontory on which the mote house stood afforded a commanding view, and an impressive spectacle. Large doors stood open under the eaves, allowing the interior to catch the breeze. The steeply gabled roof sported carved figures and designs, as did lintels, columns, and doors frames, buttresses, railings—all but the walls themselves. Incised designs were painted in colors that shone across the fields: blues, reds, greens. A large plaza in front of the house, surrounded by a short stone wall, was reached in front by broad stone stairs, leading up from the valley floor; in the back, a broad path led to a larger road that disappeared into the mountains, toward the east. Cactuses, sage, creosote bush, and other native plants reflected muted versions of the building's accent colors, paler blues, grey greens, softer reds. Occasional wild flower stands brightened smaller patches up the hillside.

“We’re actually heading for the mote house, to see Book and Ohashi, who are taking care of the other ‘visitor’ to the Valley,” said Bend. “Ohashi is the local doctor, and another one of the original architects of the Conversation. He also acts as the mote house’s caretaker, and the librarian. He’s almost as old as Clara, and so he has several young apprentices working with him, trying to soak up everything he knows. Book, another of the original settlers, is his most advanced student; she lives near the foot of the stairs—in one of the guest houses like Clara’s.” He pointed to a long, low group of buildings not far from the base of the stairs. “It’s run by Book’s partner, Hand, and lies on the site of an old mineral spring, so you can have another bath if you’d like.”

Pen owned up to welcoming the idea. “I’m a bit bottom-sore, as comfortable as this saddle is. So I imagine another soak would do me some good.”

As they spoke, a figure could be seen walking down the stairs. When it reached the bottom, it waved, and Theo waved back; as he did so, Lirit broke into a

wide grin, and urged her father to hurry. “It’s my wife, Safi,” explained Theo. The little group picked up its pace, and headed toward the approaching figure.

