

Chapter Two Breakfast and a Conversation



he opened her eyes in a dim room, on a firm, but comfortable bed. Blue light filtered through a small etched window of cobalt glass. Swans, she thought. White swans on a blue lake. A large bob-tailed cat stretched near her head, and settled back down into its nap.

Through an open doorway, she heard the remote plucking of strings, and an even more remote melody. Something Scottish, she thought. The music floated on the air, accompanied by the scent of sagebrush and toast. Her stomach responded with its own counterpoint, and she swung her feet over the edge of the bed and sat up. She was still wearing the clothes she had put on after her bath, so she got up and walked toward the open door. The cat again awoke for a moment, then went back to sleep.

Next to the door stood a small, plain, solidly-constructed bookcase containing several books of different sizes and shapes, bound in a variety of materials: a copy of Ruskin's "Nature of Gothic," another thin volume which, she noticed when she picked it up, consisted only of the text of a lecture by William Morris, called "How We Live and How We Might Live." Next to a large tome entitled *Vernacular Architecture*, filled with drawings of houses that seemed to represent different cultures, stood a small, simply-bound collection called "Architecture Notes. Walk." Several identically bound pamphlets were entitled *Little Journeys Reprints*, and next to them Pen found two hand-written, heavily illustrated notebooks: *Liminary Limning of Liminal Lakeside Flora*, which featured exquisite renderings of wildflowers with statistics and color values neatly printed alongside, and *First Year Bird Count*, again with careful drawings of a

large variety of birds and handwritten statistics. Clara's name appeared on the inside cover of both. All of the books were expertly bound—even the notebooks—most with cloth, although the Ruskin had a cover made of animal hide with stamped title and author, and felt comfortable in the hand. The papers varied in quality, but invited touch, and seemed appropriate to the contents of each book. Pen noted the care with which every item in the room seemed to be constructed, and the pleasant simplicity of the room itself.

She walked onto a patio of sorts, shared by several rooms that opened onto it. A short adobe wall, about a foot thick, surrounded the space, forming a railing on which sat the man she assumed was Bend, although she had not been formally introduced. He was playing a lute, mumbling the lyrics under his breath, and apparently struggling with a particular fingering. He smiled when he noticed her, and stopped.

“No,” she said. “Please go on.” And she sat down a few feet away on the wall. She looked over the expanse of the valley, caught up in the combination of strangeness and familiarity it evoked. She remembered the experience at the round window, and turned around to take in the same view, on a more panoramic scale. She still remembered little about herself or why she knew this place, but sat soaking in the feeling of belonging that the view produced. The music was also familiar, but in a different way; it wasn't her music, but she knew it.

Bend stopped playing again. “You must be hungry,” he said, and before she could say anything, he picked up the lute and beckoned for her to follow. They walked into an adjacent room, where a small fire was lit in a brazier, and one of the children she remembered from the lake was scrambling eggs in a pan over it. Next to the brazier lay a sturdy plate with several slices of thick, toasted bread on it. Next to that was a pot of what looked like honey, some plates and cups, and several beautifully carved wooden utensils. “Please have a seat,” said

the child. "I'm Wren." This was the first time anyone had introduced him- or herself, and Pen was grateful.

Bend smiled. "This is a courtesy we will have to remember; many of us have never really had to introduce ourselves before." He lifted a cover off a pot, poured tea into small mugs, and placed them on the long table in front of a window opposite the platform on which the brazier sat. Wren beckoned them over to pick up plates, then brought the pan of eggs and the platter of toast to the table, and they sat down to eat. The eggs tasted a bit unusual, but were light and savory, the bread and honey delectable, and the tea redolent of sagebrush and mint.

As she tucked into her food enthusiastically, her hosts watched her, smiling. "What kind of eggs are these?" she asked.

"Duck," replied Bend. We brought chickens with us, but the ducks were easy to domesticate and added to our culinary possibilities. Occasionally we get wild eggs from doves or gulls or quail, but we only collect them sparingly."

After breakfast, Bend proposed a walk; back in "her" room she found, as he had suggested she would, a pair of canvas-like espadrilles with flexible rope soles. These fit reasonably enough, so she put them on and joined him in the courtyard a few steps below the area where they had eaten. "We'll find you something that really fits, or get someone to make you a pair of good walking shoes, since I imagine you'll want to get to know the place without being led around all the time. Do you remember your name? Is there something we can call you?"

From somewhere under layers of blanketed memory came "Penelope. But 'Pen' I think. I'm not even sure it's my name, but it feels familiar."

Bend laughed. "I'd have thought Odysseus instead . . . in the land of the Lotos Eaters. But Pen could be a valley name—a verb or noun that says something

about us. Children get called almost anything—child who made your breakfast was fascinated by the wrens’ flitting from bush to bush when she was a baby; she was a bit like that herself, and so came to be called Wren. She will probably change it when she’s older, but she likes it for now. Flint, who helped you yesterday, had flint-colored eyes as a baby, and has kept the name even though his eyes have gradually changed to hazel. Adults usually adopt new names, and the noun/verb tradition seems to have caught on. Do you write or draw? Pen would fit.”

“What does ‘Bend’ say about you?” asked Pen.

“A kind response would be that I’m ‘flexible,’” he said with a grin. “But they probably started calling me this because I tend to sway from one point of view to another; perhaps I lack conviction.”

“But what about Clara?” she asked.

“Well,” he said, “Clara says that she’s too old to rename herself, except to use her middle name, since it was her great grandmother’s. But she didn’t really want to change it. Not everyone does, and we certainly don’t force people to. But early on it became a game; a new place seemed to require a new name, and many folks had tremendous fun naming themselves and one another. Babies tend to be given what once would have been called ‘use names’ until they’re old enough to help decide what an appropriate ‘true name’ would be. Rites of passage usually involve taking a new name, or adding one to a use name. So Wren and Flint might very well take a new names in a few years, after they have had time to think about it.”

They walked along a path that led gently upwards, following the contours of the alluvial plains that spread out from stream beds at the foot of the mountains. This part of the valley was strewn with granite boulders, large and small, some configured in fantastical heaps. Among the piles of rocks, small houses—if

that's what some of them could be called—appeared along the path. Some were rather conventional-looking, with cob walls and thatched roofs, their small windows paned with what looked like ancient glass. Some seemed, like the house in which she had bathed and slept, to be extensions or elaborations built among the boulders themselves. Pots of herbs and flowers, and informal borders were tucked here and there among the rocks and houses. Pen immediately noticed, and remarked upon, the pristine nature of the surroundings: no waste, no trash, nothing to mar the almost seamless unity of land and habitation.

Pen finally replied to Bend's earlier question: "I don't know what I do. But perhaps I could write here. Only I don't know where 'here' is, and I certainly don't know what I'm doing in this place, although it feels familiar. But I don't think you've always been here either. Where are your people from?"

Bend led her to an outcrop where they sat down. Here they could survey a large part of the valley below, and could see the expanse of mountains to the east, as well as the more immediate range to the west—with its memory-wrenching profile of peaks and pinnacles. Besides the boulder field, the valley itself consisted mostly of sand and low vegetation: sagebrush, desert holly, wild flowers in muted shades of orange, yellow, purple. Lines of trees indicated the paths of creeks. The almost painful familiarity swept over her again, and she fought back tears.

"I'm not sure how *you* got here," he said. "But we came purposefully, about thirty years ago, when the world we lived in seemed to be falling apart. It was clear that we would never be able to change the situation through the usual means—education, politics, philosophical debate, even revolution—but we found a way to leave, quite by accident. We know where we are, but we don't know *when*. We only know that it's sometime in the far future, or an equivalent moment in another 'place.' Some of the people who brought us here are

physicists and astronomers who came upon a kind of portal; when they figured out how to use the trigger—what we call the insertion device—they gathered people together who wanted to create a livable world—about 2500 of us all together—and we came here. We thought that almost everyone who knew about the trigger had come, but since you’ve arrived we suspect that others may have discovered the same thing in the same place. We hope that your memory-loss is temporary, since many of us experienced it in the beginning but later recovered. In any event, your presence is both welcome and dangerous to us at the same time.”

She felt, then, not only loss but a kind of fear, not for herself, but for these people. She’d seen little of the place, but already felt comfortable. Despite the danger she represented, she had been accepted without question. The people seemed contented, busy, productive, intelligent. “I’ve felt dangerous since I became conscious, and I’ve no idea why,” she observed.

“If others have discovered the portal into the valley, it may pose a threat; much depends on how you found it. If you located it by accident, and were by yourself at the time, perhaps no one would ever know. But if you had friends or family who knew what you were doing, or colleagues who were working with you . . . who knows. You might have been a guinea pig, or a sort of test pilot sent to reconnoiter the ‘other side.’ Some people are on their way up the valley to where we arrived, to see if there are any clues to indicate how you came here. It would also help us if you were to allow a doctor to examine you—to see if you were injured, if there are any metabolic indications of ‘when’ you’re from, or maybe some other way to figure out why you’re here.”

Pen agreed eagerly; until she could remember something concrete, her sense of loss was almost overwhelming and she had difficulty making sense of anything at all. They sat for a while longer in silence. It was still morning, but the sun had risen above the eastern mountains and flooded the valley with light that seemed exceedingly clear but somehow less intense than she might have

expected. Other contrasts became apparent in the sunlight: the landscape formed by the boulder-strewn foothills seemed lower and somehow softer than she wanted it to be, while the imposing peaks of the western range were a little higher, with far more snow cover than they “should” have for the season. What season?

“What time of year is it?” she asked.

Bend was taken aback for a moment, but then replied: “Nearly midsummer.”

“There’s just so much snow,” she said. But what surprised her most, and she could not fathom why, was the view of the lake to the south. And that, she thought, shouldn’t be there at all; not this far north.

When she voiced her observations, Bend smiled. “I think that’s a good sign. You’re remembering things about this place that can give us an idea of when you left where you were. It really is the same place, at least in some sense. We do know that it’s much later than the twenty-first century we left—and there are many strong indications that it’s millennia later. The geological time is post-glacial, perhaps ‘Neocene’—after at least one new glacial cycle. We haven’t been here long enough to explore much beyond the southern end of the valley and a bit over the mountains to the west. We’ve been too busy establishing a viable, sustainable economy to worry much about either past or future. At least until now.”



They moved on to where a large flat rock provided a comfortable place to sit, and a wide-angle view of the valley, looking south and east. The sun continued to rise over the eastern mountains, and Bend began to recount a little of the valley’s history.

“Before the trigger was discovered, fear for the future infected vast numbers of people, and produced a variety of results. Clara—who is about ninety now—had become part of a group of scientists and artists, many of whom were related to one another, and all of whom had come to the conclusion that the only way to survive would be to find a place to live as a group far enough away from the world’s problems and population that a new way of life could be imagined and built. They had begun to gather in small groups to discuss what such a life would ‘look’ like, and at the same time they searched the world for a space in which they could realize their ideas once they had been carefully thought through. A number of possibilities presented themselves, but all were lacking in important factors. If a place were remote enough from others to allow the group to stay apart from ‘civilization,’ it was also lacking in basic resources: clean water, for example, or a climate that would allow the inhabitants to minimize the amount of intrusive technology needed to survive. The companion problem, dwindling world resources in general, made it even more difficult, because we had little control over the air and the gradual but persistent warming of the planet. But while these discussions were going on, the trigger was discovered—at an eerily convenient moment—practically in Clara’s own back yard. That’s when we began to plan in earnest, not only to come to this valley, but to do so in such a way that no one would know we had left; this entailed a gradual, secretive, and logistically difficult process. We did accomplish what we set out to do, but it took nearly ten years to bring it off. And then we began to build our own ‘nowhere’ where no one would be able to find us.”

Pen sighed heavily, wishing she could remember more about who she was, and from “when,” but Bend’s story suggested that she had come from a time not very distant from when the valley was settled. He went on, noting that the lack of linguistic difference indicated that her origins were similar to his, both geographically and temporally. Then he indicated points of interest in the view before them, and continued his narrative.

“Our ‘pioneers’ knew that either significant time separated our old world from this one, or that what they had found represented another moment—a sort of alternative universe, in which history (if there is any) occurred differently. We weren’t sure until we had time to do some geological analysis and some archaeology, and discovered that we probably occupy a moment in the distant ‘future’ of ‘when’ we lived before. Glacial processes, which have clearly affected the landscape, take thousands of years, and geological time occurs in substantially longer chunks than does human time. As you can see, the mountains to the west are glaciated, and considerable snow cover lingers in the higher elevations of the eastern range even now, in summer. The climate is relatively temperate, with cooler summers and colder winters than Clara had experienced, and glacial melt water in summer swells the streams and fills the central river.

“We’ve also found remnants, buried under deep layers of alluvium, of the radio telescope installation near the ‘trigger,’ and evidence of the old aqueduct that once carried the river’s water out of the valley, but we haven’t really had the need or desire to go much further than that. What we have discovered indicates that an extremely long period separates us from our own past, and not much evidence of what has happened in between is readily apparent.

“If you can remember at all what the Egyptians left behind, for example, you must consider that their civilization lasted for about four thousand years, and only about two thousand years separated the end of dynastic Egypt from the twenty-first century. Because of all the layers of technology built up in those two millennia, however, it was extremely difficult for some ‘modern’ archaeologists, and especially the general public, to imagine how and why the Egyptians built things the way they did. Popular conceptions of Egyptian life were so impoverished that people imagined everything from magic to aliens as explanations for the existence of pyramids—when all that people really needed to do was to remove their technological ‘filters’ and try to imagine what life was

like in a desert environment with the particular social and economic framework that the Egyptians had carefully recorded in their texts.

“But archaeology came to be regarded as popular entertainment and unnecessary to human survival, and so, like many branches of science, including geology and astronomy, it drew less and less attention and funding. The only kinds of science anyone wanted to do involved fields with technological and commercial value, or, later, climatology. Even then, no one wanted to do basic science; people were only interested in developing technological fixes, not in understanding the processes involved. Or, they were interested in ‘big science’—the spectacular projects, like mapping the human genome, with potential for substantial economic payoffs. So the public became more and more ignorant about science, and turned more and more frequently to pseudo-science. When ‘psychic’ shows on stage and television moved from the realm of fantasy and science fiction to mainstream entertainment, and supernatural explanations for the origins of life started to be accepted in place of scientific evidence, the people in Clara’s group knew that they needed to find somewhere else to live, a place in which they could remake the world.

“In the end, then, except for large, long-lasting structures, we may ultimately be able to learn very little about what happened in the past; glacial periods last an incredibly long time in human terms—around 100,000 years—and we may never really know ‘when’ we are. The old pine trees in the mountains north of here, which once served as a baseline for tree-ring data, are gone; they’ve been replaced by younger trees, but we don’t have the sophisticated physical and chemical tools for re-establishing the dating system, or to determine how many generations have intervened. What we *can* tell is that some seismic activity has taken place, and the fault block that runs along the southern part of the valley has sunk. That has allowed for deeper lakes, since not enough time has passed to fill the valley up with silt, despite the obvious influence of the montane glaciers.

“At some point in the fairly recent past (say, within a thousand years or so), we know that a large volcano to the north and west erupted, because we’ve got some significant ash content in the soil, and the nearby volcanoes are only small cinder cones—not enough eruptive power to explain the ash layer. Clara and others who lived in this region in a different ‘era’ find it fairly easy to locate identifiable features, as you seem to have done, and that has helped us to know where to place settlements, making sure we have access to hot springs and other elements that make our lives simpler, and that help keep us from making too significant an impact on the land. We also have a good idea of where to look for essential metal ores, although we’re trying to minimize our use of resource-intensive technologies.

“One of the basic tenets of our plan of remaking requires that we use what we already know. Most of the old stories that dealt with apocalyptic change assumed that people are intrinsically greedy and selfish, and that having to start from ‘scratch’ would be a doomed effort—we would all ‘revert’ to ‘savagery’ and replay those aspects of history. But such ideas presupposed that human beings, if required to rebuild from a given point (say, after a nuclear holocaust or a plague), would be fundamentally ignorant about how to live without all the trappings of modern civilization. In order to survive a cataclysmic event, many of these stories assumed, people would have had to deposit all of their collective ‘knowledge’ in a failsafe repository, or they would inevitably revert to some sort of pre-civilized state. Nor would they have learned anything from history, such as how to avoid conflict, or that co-operation solves more problems than competition does. This is one reason we spent so much time talking and thinking through possibilities. We also thoroughly studied the principles of permaculture and sustainable technologies, which had been tried out in various places throughout the world, and clearly worked—although we opted out of some of the more complex technologies, such as sophisticated and resource-intensive forms of solar power. We were really prepared to encounter

a variety of conditions, even though we weren't going to an entirely unfamiliar place.

“In fact, we knew a great deal about the area, even given the difference in time. Geological forces and processes, especially earthquakes, volcanism, and erosion leave highly recognizable evidence, and so we understood not only how things had changed in the valley, but that we had to take living on a fault line seriously, and build to accommodate the possibility of earthquakes. We knew, for example, that in a nineteenth-century quake near here, all the stone houses were destroyed, but the frame houses survived. The engineers who came with us helped us to design buildings (mostly cob and bale supported with wood) that would withstand most earthquakes, and take advantage of simple solar technologies available not only to us but to ancient peoples as well. Structures would also be unobtrusive and blend into the background so that we could enjoy the sheer loveliness of the place, or they would be so beautiful that we would enjoy looking at them and being in them. Even so, every community in the valley maintains its own style, and allows for a bit of whimsy, especially in their mote houses—what we call our community centers—like the one below, which you must have seen when you arrived. The building techniques and new ways of harnessing renewable energy sources that had been developed during the heyday of environmentalism, combined with historically practiced technologies (such as water and wind mills), provided pretty much all of the basic knowledge we needed to do a competent job of building here without destroying or disfiguring our new home. We were also pretty limited in what we could bring with us, so the necessity of building with simple technologies became an important part of our planning.

“We have also tried to be mindful of the traditions associated with this place. Many of the settlements are named in the languages of the first peoples who lived here, and we tend to opt for temporary rather than permanent buildings. In the summer, for example, we erect bamboo and willow shelters near the

fields, or tents for summer-specific activities. One of the communities up north relies on yurts for winter dwellings, and tents for the summer. The mote houses and visitors' inns everywhere are permanent, though, and we use these in winter for social reasons and to work on projects that require interaction. It gets cold here, but doesn't snow as much as you might expect—even given the glaciers near the peaks. The rain-shadow effect holds for snow as well as rain, so precipitation is low in all seasons. The main problems stem from the down-valley wind, which can chill us to the bone in winter. That's when the snug houses and passive solar elements really help.”

Pen stretched in the sun and leaned back on the warm boulder behind her; then she asked, “So how *did* you decide how to leave and what to bring? What do you pack when you're planning to run away forever?”

