

Chapter Four How It All Came About

end led Pen back down the path they had walked along earlier.

They detoured around to the mote house, however, and Pen marveled at the joinery of the ceiling joists, the fragile-looking, but apparently substantial paper-screened doors (modeled on Japanese shoji), with matching pocket doors to close the building down and protect it from the wind. Other buildings included a weaving room with a variety of looms, a pottery, with a raku kiln and a larger, more traditional kiln for everyday ceramics and glass, a storage room for food and clothing supplies, and a tea house with a Zen garden. Bend explained the Japanese elements as having been inspired by several families who had descended from people who were once interned in the old valley, and by others who had lived in Asia or had come to appreciate Eastern aesthetics. Then the two meandered back to Clara's home, and to their rooms. After they had both refreshed themselves, they crossed the patio and walked down a short flight of steps, through an arbor, which consisted of poles stretched between several large rocks to form a small, covered courtyard. The arbor itself was covered with blooming trumpet vine, and as they walked beneath it, Pen was startled by the chirps of hummingbirds. She and Bend passed through a short tunnel in the rocks and entered another courtyard, this one open. She recognized it as the entryway to Clara's house, where she had arrived the previous day. Clara herself was sitting under a canopy, reading. She smiled as they approached.

"Welcome," she said. "How are you feeling?"

“Both rested and tired,” replied Pen, “and still rather confused. However, Bend has discovered that I do have a name.” Clara laughed when Bend said, “Pen.”

“Well, she grinned, “I guess you’ll fit right in—especially if you’re a writer, or if you can craft writing implements.”

They all sat down under the canopy, made of an open-weave fiber, with blue embroidery, and held up by bamboo poles stuck in clay pots. Flowers and herbs spilled out of the pots, adding color and fragrance to the space. Cushions on the woven bamboo chairs echoed the blue embroidery and the colors of the plants. A pitcher of water and some glasses had been set on a tray, on the table next to Clara’s chair, and she offered them a drink, which they gladly accepted. The air was already quite warm, but dry, and the breeze made the shaded area quite pleasant.

“Bend has been telling me about how and why you all came here,” said Pen.

“But I have to admit that it all sounds rather too idyllic to be possible. One thing we haven’t talked about is religion. Since, as I am beginning to recall, it’s been a major source of conflict throughout human history, how do you deal with it?”

Clara grinned at Bend. “I’ll take this one,” she said. “The short answer is, we don’t—because we don’t have to. Bend probably told you that we had been planning and discussing the shape of an alternative community long before the chance to come here presented itself. Very early on in those conversations, the role of organized religion in the world’s troubles became a major topic of discussion. We traced many human ills to the demands and dogmas of various religious beliefs, and realized that most of us were not particularly ‘religious’ in the first place. So we began to talk about the role of religion in human life: why and what did people really believe? As it turned out, although many of us did believe in some kind of a spiritual entity or soul or something like that, most of our investment in religion turned out to be cultural. Jews like me didn’t

necessarily believe in the god of the Torah, but we certainly valued the history and heritage of our people. She smiled and looked up. That's my great-grandmother's prayer shawl, which her mother made for her Bat Mitzvah, and under which she was married; I think she'd be quite happy to see how it's being used today. Sitting out here is like sitting under a *chuppah*, and it often reminds me of my family's history.

"What we came to realize," she continued, "is that the stories, rather than any rigid belief system, are the important element of the traditions. So those who came here brought the stories, and brought rituals that held meaning for them and that would remind them of their origins, but we didn't come here as Jews or Catholics or Buddhists or Hindus or Muslims or anything else. As a result, there are no religious conflicts, because there's no religion as such. It's simply one element in a person's history, and an element in his or her being, but it doesn't define anyone; nor does anyone seek to impose personal beliefs on anyone else. Beliefs get discussed, but nobody evangelizes. The version of the 'golden rule' we have embraced is not 'do unto others what you would have them do unto you,' but rather, 'what is hateful to you, do not unto others.' The difference is significant, and it essentially removes the basis for the kind of conflict you described."

Bend and Pen finished their water, and Bend rose. "We're both hungry, so I'm going to show her the pub," he said, and they excused themselves. Clara promised to join them shortly, and went back to her book.



As they walked down the path through the settlement, Bend pointed out how the houses had sprung up almost organically through the boulder-field that occupied the foothills. Some of the houses had actually been built into the rocks, so that it was difficult to tell where rock ended and house began. Pen had never seen a place in which houses looked so well-integrated into the

surroundings, although they reminded her of dimly recalled visits to old Pueblo enclaves in the Southwest.

When she remarked on this, Bend elaborated. “Part of our architectural inspiration came from the old American Southwest. Even without that, however, we might have come up with something similar. It’s no coincidence that cultures in semi-arid climates and terrains tend to build similar dwellings, from south Asia to the Near East, to the Americas. This kind of architecture is unobtrusive, constructed from native materials, energy-efficient, and conducive to community life, with its effective mix of public and private spaces. We have, however, built several buildings up and down the valley that reflect different historical building styles that various communities want to preserve. These are generally mote houses, where people meet to celebrate or to make major decisions, or sometimes to work on joint projects. One looks almost like an old Medieval long-house, where small groups of people can stay together. Ours, as you must have noticed, is based on traditional Japanese design. Some of the forest cabins I mentioned earlier are fairly fanciful as well.”

Pen noted the absence of any refuse at all—not even a stray piece of paper. She again remarked on the unnerving tidiness of the place.

Bend’s response was another laugh, tempered by a slight scowl. “Well, if people don’t really make anything they don’t need, and if everything they make is used and, when necessary, recycled, not much in the way of trash is going to be produced. Nothing gets wasted. You’ll never even see stray a piece of paper on the ground, because everything we make is labor-intensive and meant to last or be re-used in some way. In cooking, for example, anything that doesn’t actually go into the pot becomes compost; and even though we don’t eat many animals, when we do they’re completely consumed: meat, hair, hide, bones, blood, sinew.” He began to chuckle at his last remark, and when Pen asked why, he replied, “It’s a good thing there are Scotsmen in the valley to make (and eat) haggis when necessary.”

As they turned down another path, they came upon a shady patch of trees situated next to one of the many creeks that ran down from the mountains. A building adjacent to the creek sported sage-green awnings and tables with benches and chairs; several people had congregated into small groups around some of these. Near the building stood a variety of small, elegant structures that Bend said were ovens and dehydrators, most of them passively solar-powered. He led Pen to a low wall next to what looked for all the world like an outdoor café, and spoke to a young man who was bustling about behind the wall, arranging bowls of food and pitchers of juice and tea on a long counter carved from a very large log.

“We’re in luck,” said Bend. “Cook has been simmering chili for the last three days and it’s finally ready.”

“Cook?” She asked.

“Well,” said Bend, “it fits in with the valley tradition of noun/verb names, and also with an old European tradition of naming people after their occupations. Cook likes to cook, and is terrific at it. So when he came here, he quickly adopted the name.”

Pen was astonished. “So, he’s the guy who cooks for everybody? What’s this place, a cafeteria?”

Bend’s laugh burst out once again, but he tried to smother it this time. “I’m sorry,” he said; “some of your questions sound a bit, well, strange to someone who hasn’t had to explain anything like this to anyone but a child. But to answer the question, since this whole community is based on making it possible for people to do what they love and what they’re best at, we have a number of little pubs like this throughout the valley. People can come to eat here whenever they want, although politeness requires notification that one plans to eat for a certain period of time. This pub is only open from late

morning to early afternoon, because Cook is working on a book, about food, of course, that also requires his attention. But he and his two helpers fix ‘elevenses’ and lunch four days a week. The rest of the time we use the place for potlucks where everyone gathers to finish off what’s left from the last day or two, or any leftovers from home-cooked meals. We store a supply of beer and wine here, as well as teas, coffees, and fruit juices in season. The creek provides natural cooling, and there are the solar ovens, a roasting pit, and a range built out back. When it’s raining, Cook uses the wood stove, but since there’s not much rain, he’s usually able to go for weeks at a time without having to fire it up. The surrounding houses use the place the rest of the time, for cooking, baking, preserving, and other food-related activities—even dying cloth.”

Bend introduced Pen to Cook, who shook her hand heartily, then returned to his chores. Bend showed her where to pick up a plate, bowl, and spoon, and then dished up some of the chili and tore off a chunk of fragrant, dense brown bread. He also selected an apple from a large bowl of fruit set into a concrete bin next to the creek, and Pen did the same. The creek itself flowed around the bin, keeping the fruit cool, even though the temperature had risen significantly since she and Bend had left that morning. Under the trees and awnings, however, people sat comfortably, discussing a variety of topics, among them the significance of the visitor.

Bend and Pen joined a small group around a large round table, again constructed from a tree trunk. When Pen commented on the furniture, a woman across the table blushed and admitted to having been responsible for finishing the wood, noting that it was part of a very large sequoia that had fallen high in the mountains several years before, and that had been carefully sawn into rounds that could be used for just such a purpose. Each table top had been carried down during a three day trip, by a party of people using nothing more than a few logs for rolling the wood to a place where it could be

placed on a flat, wheeled cart and pulled to its present location. Some of the pieces had been cut into linear tables, like the one being used to serve food, and some had been left round. The tops had been seasoned and sanded and finished with linseed oil and beeswax to a warm, soft, comfortable surface.

“Good for elbows,” Bend noted.

Pen also commented on the quality of the utensils: a spoon carved from bone, a wide, deep bowl fired with a pale sage-colored glaze, and a flat, square cinnamon-glazed plate, utilitarian and satisfying to hold at the same time. A man Bend identified as Pot took credit for the dishware, prompting Pen to laugh and asked if somebody named Bone had made the spoons. Pot smiled in return and said that Pelt had made the spoons, and that no, Pelt was not a tanner as well; he was just, well, hairy.

Bend introduced Pen to the company, which looked to her like a picture from an old advertisement for cultural unity and diversity: multi-colored faces representing different races and various combinations of races. Everyone was dressed comfortably and apparently functionally, in variations on the tunic/pants combination she wore, or Bend’s caftan, although a few also wore embroidered or quilted vests with various numbers of pockets. The clothes all appeared to be of similar fabrics, dyed with pigments that fit into the landscape, or woven with pale checks or plaids. One woman’s hair was tied back with an embroidered ribbon, and ornaments of all sorts hung around necks or waists—shell necklaces, clay medallions, beads or woven bands, an occasional piece of metal worked into an intricate composition. Almost all of the men sported well-trimmed beards, although one chap apparently didn’t like trimming his, and it descended in uneven layers down the middle of his chest. Another smoked a piped carved into the shape of a man’s head, complete with beard and a mass of curls. The smoke was fragrant and pleasing, but when Bend and Pen sat down to eat, he snuffed it out.

The conversation turned to the question of Pen's presence in the valley. As glad as the folks at the table were that she had survived her time in the river and had made it to the settlement alive and well, it was soon clear that they were also alarmed. One woman, Milk, began to tell the story of the valley's discovery.

“The insertion device that we have come to call the trigger was found in one of the most remote places possible—one where few people would ever be likely to look. We still haven't figured out how it got there, but it seems to have been meant to be discovered by astronomers who worked at the nearby radio telescope array, rather than by some random accident. An astrophysicist and close friend of Clara's had decided to spend the evening stargazing and took a sleeping bag into the hills along an old road behind the complex. When a brief dust storm blew down the valley, he took shelter in an abandoned mine shaft. As he leaned against the wall, a slab slipped down, revealing a mechanism of unknown purpose, but with a mathematically coded 'instruction book' next to it. He took the book back to his cabin, without telling anyone what he had found, and spent all of his spare time during the next few weeks deciphering the code. When he realized that the mechanism amounted to a triggering device to open the equivalent of a wormhole, he spent several more days thinking about the implications of what he'd read. He went to Clara, who was writing a book at the facility and who, at the time, was in her fifties. As they talked through the possibilities together, they consulted others with some expertise in physics and temporal theory. About a year later, they decided to test the device, and two volunteers made the first trip to the valley. When they returned, the plan to settle this place began to form. Several years later, the first people began to arrange their affairs so that they could disappear without causing any alarm, and very slowly the 2500 of us who came began to use the trigger to get here. We took every precaution we could think of to safeguard our passage and the trigger itself—but somehow you discovered it and apparently accidentally initiated the mechanism.”

As Milk finished her story, the small party at the table was joined by a newcomer who was greeted joyfully by everyone. Theo (who, like Clara, had chosen not to adopt a valley name) had just arrived from a settlement about sixty kilometers away, with news that another “traveler” had been found near the trigger. Like Pen, the second “guest” was suffering from memory loss, and Theo suggested that a meeting might help both recollect the circumstances surrounding their use of the trigger. Word of her arrival had already made its way up the valley, and a search of the area around the cave had led them to a semi-conscious man of about thirty who was now under the care of the village doctor. Despite his friendliness, Theo was clearly concerned and expressed some urgency in getting Pen to make the trip northward.

Noting the look of bewilderment on her face, Theo explained that while the absence of one person from the “old” valley might escape notice for awhile, it was much more likely that a missing party of two would initiate a broader search that might lead someone to discover the trigger, and thus the “new” valley as well.

Pen still had no solid idea of who she was, or how she ended up here, but she had already developed some affection for these people, and knew that preventing the old world from invading the new was paramount. She agreed to go north to the settlement called Tinemaha with Theo, and Bend decided to accompany them, so they finished their meal, put together a sack of provisions from the pub, and headed for the settlement’s stable. Pen suddenly realized that she now knew that the settlements had names, and so asked Bend about the name of this place. “Cottonwood,” he said. “Clara named it for the trees along the creek, which give us the aspen-scented air we breathe. She led the second group of settlers down here from Tinemaha, because it’s near where she was born in the old valley.”

Pen had come to realize the source of her earlier shock of recognition; she too had spent time down here—or an earlier version of “here.” She had hoped that

scouting the area would help her regain her memory. But the urgency of Theo's request to travel north meant that she would have to postpone her exploration. They left the pub and quickly reached the stable, where they were greeted by Theo's young daughter, Lirit, who was tending two horses with lightweight leather-and-cloth saddles.

The stable attendant, Rain, was busy fitting a third horse with a saddle and a sheepskin cover. Pen stroked the horse's nose, and patted his flank familiarly. Rain noted that although Pen seemed to know what she was doing around a horse, she may not have ridden for awhile, and the ride north would take most of the rest of the day—or longer if they decided to stop for the night. Rain gave them all bedrolls in case they decided to sleep on the way, added a small cache of cooking gear and a fishing pole, a personal kit for Pen, and the party set off, stopping by to tell Clara and Wren where they were going. They followed a narrow path around the boulder field to the river, and began to ride north from there.

