


Chapter One The Lake

Whose country have I come to now?
Are they violent, uncivilized, savages—
Or god-fearing folk who welcome strangers?
Homer, *Odyssey*, Book VI

t filled the space between the mountains, reflecting the summer sky and the weathered hills to the south. Cottonwoods lined the shore to the east, and their fluff floated out over the water, alighting here and there, seeming to hover just above the surface, carrying the trees' aspeny scent. The air felt *new*.

At once familiar and strange, the mixture of water, soil, and cottonwood on the breeze filled her with an almost physical nostalgia that nearly made her weep. Where was this place? When had she been here before? Still weak from her trip downstream, she looked for a place to rest. The river was fresh, but the lake slightly alkaline, and mineral deposits crunched under her feet as she made her way to a large boulder where she sat, warming her back on the granite, turning her face to the sun.

She must have fallen asleep, because she awoke with a start; children's voices drifted over to her from a short distance away. They were laughing, and carrying a long, shallow basket on poles shared among the four of them. She remained quiet, trying to hide until she could find out more about where she was. The children carried a large cloth into the lake and swished it in the water. They wore short tunics and pants rolled up to their knees, although the pants were getting wet anyway. The cloth floated on the water for a few

moments, and then the children picked it up carefully, wrung it gently, and laid it across the brush. They sat down in the sun and talked quietly; one of them began to read aloud in a language she recognized as Greek. She also knew the rhythm: dactylic hexameter. Another child got up and began to look along the ground next to the shore. As the child neared her, Pen sighed in resignation and the child looked up, startled.

Pen sat still, trying to hide the fact that she had so little on; she realized that she must look a fright with her bruised face and matted, drying hair, her arms and legs still streaked with mud and sand. The child stood still for a moment, then called to her friends. “Look,” she said. “A person!” Pen laughed; at least she hadn’t been mistaken for something else.

“Are you injured?” asked the child. As the others joined her, they asked almost in unison, “Where did you come from?”

“I’m only bruised,” she replied; “I seem to have floated down the river on a piece of wood, but I’m not entirely sure where I’m from. I think I must have knocked my head rather badly.”

“We should take you to the village. Can you walk?” This child, apparently a boy of about nine, looked at her closely, and brought out a kerchief from one of many pockets on his tunic. He walked over to the shore, wet it, and brought it back to Pen. “Here. Can you wipe the blood off so I can see how badly you’re hurt?”

She had a large goose egg on her temple, and although a cut was visible, it had stopped bleeding. “Thank you. I’m a bit weak, but I can walk. Where do you live?”

The boy pointed north and west; “Just a few kilometers that way. If you can’t walk that far, we can rig up a way to carry you.”

“I think I can make it if I have something to drink.” Another child carried a flask slung over her shoulder, which she quickly went over to the river to fill. Pen was guessing at gender, since they were all fairly young and dressed alike except for what seemed to be jewelry made from shells and seeds and other bits and pieces. One rather fair child wore a large hat of open weave, and they all wore what looked like woven grass sandals. The child who had found her left Pen with the others and went to fold the cloth, already dry; they put it in the basket, and shouldered the poles, instructing Pen to follow them. Still feeling shy about her shirt-and-knickers clothing situation, Pen hung back a little, until the boy who had given her the handkerchief motioned to one of the others.

“Use the rain tarp for a cover,” he said, pulling out a densely woven sheet and handing it to her. Pen gratefully tied it around her waist, and began to follow them rather gingerly. But the children followed a path that had apparently been worn from frequent use, and she managed to walk barefooted without much difficulty.

As they walked, Pen was struck by several observations. No one asked her name, and so she felt shy about asking theirs. All five of them seemed older than their physical appearance suggested; their ages seemed to range from about five to ten, but they appeared—wise, perhaps—for their years. Although they didn’t chatter as they made trooped up the path, they frequently commented on what they noticed—a bird, a bit of bone, a lizard on a rock, a very large jackrabbit which ambled across their path. Once or twice one of them wandered out into the brush along the path in search of something and, apparently finding it, tucked it into a pocket or a shoulder bag.

The children also sang along the way—not songs, but a kind of scat, with a flexible, syncopated rhythm, that changed frequently and incorporated a number of melodies. Some of these were vaguely familiar, but Pen couldn't attach a name to any of them. She ventured a question to the eldest child, asking "What were you reading back there? Was it Greek?"

"Yes," he answered. "Homer. The part of the *Odyssey* about the Phaeaceans. Have you read it?"

"I think I must have done," said Pen, and then laughed because of the coincidence: washed up on the shore like Odysseus, and rescued by children doing laundry.

The party walked on for about a half hour; the grade of the path gradually grew steeper, and they entered a larger footpath that led into a veritable forest of large, rounded, weathered boulders, which Pen also found oddly familiar. The shape of the land and the smell of the air gripped her, and she found herself becoming more and more puzzled about the place.

Finally, the children stopped at the edge of what looked like an ancient lava field and called out: "We have a visitor!" One by one, and then in larger groups, people came to the edge of the path to wonder at what the children had brought.

A woman who seemed to be about sixty turned to her fellows and said simply, "We had better find Bend." Then she led Pen beyond the lava ridge to an area which, at first sight, looked like more boulders—but which turned out to be an enclave of dwellings created among the rocks.

Near the center of the compound stood a large, vaguely Japanese building made of wood and thatch, and open on all sides—but with doors that seemed to be able to slide one way or another at the corners. Some of the observers

turned back toward the building once they saw that Pen had been taken care of.

She followed the woman into a shelter, and from there through a break in the rock face and a courtyard, into a room, dimly lit, with a table carved from a tree and overlain by a thin slab of polished stone, surrounded by a number of short, comfortable chairs with broad backs and arms, and covered with cushions. Pen sank gratefully into one of the chairs, spent. The woman brought her a glass—apparently hand-blown, with traces of color around the lip—and asked her to drink. It was surely alcoholic—mead, perhaps, honey-sweet and refreshing. She lay back into the cushions, more tired than she could ever have imagined being, and enormously grateful. The woman sat in a nearby chair and watched Pen drink her fill and begin to relax.

“We have never had a stranger come here before, so you will have to excuse us if we seem unsure of what to do for you,” she said, smiling faintly. “You need not answer any questions, but they will inevitably be asked, and the first will always be, ‘where did you come from?’”

“I wish I knew. I remember falling and hitting my head; then I was in a river, hanging onto a log which floated downstream until I came to the lake where the children found me. I slid around in the mud at the mouth of the river when I tried to get out onto the shore, and then I must have kept falling until I got out. I don ’t know where the rest of my clothes are, or what I was wearing—or where I was before I fell into the river.”

“Your memory will probably return soon; the shock will wear off, and then perhaps things will seem clearer. Bend will help you remember.”

As Pen started to ask who this “Bend” person was, a middle-aged man came in, with a tidy grizzled beard, short-clipped grey hair, pale green eyes, and wearing rimless glasses. He did not introduce himself, but nodded to Pen and

to the woman, who supplied him with what little information Pen had given her.

He looked disturbed, but smiled at her. “You are welcome among us; we have never really thought that we would ever have a ‘foreign’ visitor, but I think we have been preparing for your arrival, nonetheless. You must get some rest, and a bath, and some clothing—and most likely some food. Clara will find some things for you to wear, and prepare food and a place to sleep. If I may, however, I should see to your wound. The children say that you might have suffered a concussion when you fell and hit whatever caused that contusion.”

Pen leaned her head back on the chair, and Bend examined the lump on her temple carefully. He told Clara to prepare a small bandage and some salve, but suggested that a bath might help more than anything. Exhausted, Pen nodded weakly, then rose to follow where Clara led.

They walked through a narrow passage in the rock wall to another room with a small pool in the center, and which smelled faintly of sulphur. A table with towels and a basin of sand stood next to the pool; on the opposite wall, a small door led to another room.

“The water is from an underground geothermal spring,” Clara told her. “The best way to bathe here is to rub yourself with sand before you get into the pool, brush it off, and then just get in; there ’s a bench to sit on which will let you submerge yourself up to your neck. The water doesn’t smell wonderful, but it feels lovely. I’ll bring you a pitcher of fresh water and mint soap for your hair after you’ve spent some time in the bath. Oh, yes. The toilet is through there,” she said, pointing to the other door. Then she left Pen alone, to her ablutions.

Pen visited the small adjacent room, which housed what seemed to be a composting toilet, and then submitted herself to the healing power of the mineral bath. A ewer of water and an empty basin now stood on a stool next to

the door, along with a slim leaf of translucent, mint-scented soap. When her skin began to pucker into pruney ridges, she reluctantly climbed out of the bath and wrapped herself in one of the flat-woven towels, which proved to be soft and absorbent. She lathered up her wet hair and rinsed it into the basin, feeling refreshed and clean.

Clara announced her return by calling out to her guest, “Here are some clothes; are you decent?”

Pen smiled, realizing that she was probably far more “decent” now than she had been when the children found her. Clara had brought a tunic, some long trousers, and an undergarment—a kind of union suit made of finely woven linen-like fabric, with a convenient flap that buttoned at the sides.

“Most everything is made in only a couple of sizes here: child and adult. If these aren’t satisfactory, though, I can get you a caftan like the one Bend wears. I ’m afraid the primary consideration in making clothing here is function, so there isn’t much variety.”

Pen thanked her, and Clara left the room. The underwear was soft and ample, and fit well under the tunic and pants. Pen wondered at the fabric; like the chair cushions, it was finely woven, soft, and dyed with quiet colors that matched the landscape. The sage-green pants had to be rolled up a bit under the sand-colored over-shirt, but the clothes felt as good as the bath had: comfortable and refreshing. Pen folded her towel across the table, not sure where she should empty the basin. She went to look for Clara to ask her, and so left the bathroom, following the path she had taken in behind Clara. As she entered the first room, she saw that Clara had been joined by the boy who had looked at her wound by the lake. Clara did not introduce him, but called him “Flint” when she asked him to go prepare Pen ’s bed; she indicated that Pen should sit again while she dressed the bump, and then sat down near her.

“I would imagine that you are very tired. If you ’re hungry, however, I have some bread and fruit ready.” Pen hadn’t realized it until then, but yes she was hungry. Famished, in fact. Clara brought over a tray of dark bread and sliced tomatoes, along with fresh berries and dried apricots in a bowl, and Pen gratefully took some of each item, washing it down with more of the mead. Clara watched while she ate, thoughtfully nibbling on an apricot and taking some of the mead herself.

When she had appeased her hunger, Pen felt overwhelmingly tired, almost drifting off to sleep in the chair. Clara helped her up and led her down another passage through a small room with a round window that looked out onto the landscape. Pen stopped to take in the view. The rock-strewn foothills in which the settlement stood lay in the foreground; behind these stood tall, jagged, snow-covered pinnacles thousands of feet high that rose out of thick conifer forests. Framed in the window was a mountain whose profile pierced through her torpor like a hawk ’s scream: *she knew this place*. She had been born here, under this mountain, but the valley beneath her mountain had been ruined—bled dry by the insatiable city to the south, and then all but abandoned. This, finally, was too much. Pen slumped to the floor in an exhausted faint.

