

Chapter Thirteen The Journey's End

Bend walked over to Pen and put his hand lightly on her shoulder. She looked at him with damp eyes, but smiled. As they turned to walk back to the chairs, Clara emerged from her room and joined them.

“I couldn’t help overhearing what you said,” she said softly, and settled into a chair. “And I’m pretty sure, as a result, that you are who I suspected you were when you arrived. Let me tell you my story.”

Bend and Pen exchanged puzzled looks, but sat down to listen.

“When I was a young woman,” Clara began, “I was interested in many different fields, and had trouble figuring out what I wanted to be when I grew up. I went to several different colleges, and got a couple of degrees, then had children and later taught as my ‘final’ career. Very late in life I became something of an amateur astronomer, and began to write about the history of astronomy, among other things. That’s what I was doing when we discovered the trigger mechanism. At the time, both my daughter and I were widows, and her children were grown, so we began spending more and more of our time in the valley. She was a prime mover in the conversations that eventually led to the migration to *this* valley, but she did not come herself. She did not want to leave her children and their young families, and although she told her daughter about the plan, and we discussed it in broad terms, I was the only one who came. Like everyone else who made the journey, I had a cover story, that I was lost on a hiking trip—something fairly easy to do when you’re an old woman who hikes alone. And so it is altogether probable, that I am, in fact, your

missing great-grandmother.” Clara leaned back in her chair, with a satisfied smile, and awaited the reaction from the two people beside her.

The tears that had been welling up in Pen’s eyes spilled over, and Bend instinctively pulled a handkerchief out of one of his pockets. After an exchange of names and more information, it was clear that Pen had found her great-grandmother, and the long-standing mystery was solved. Clara was pleased to know about her granddaughter’s annual hikes *in memoriam*, and happy to know that her great-grandchild had grown up and prospered, as much as anyone could prosper in the uncertain “present” out of which she had stumbled.

“Well,” said Bend, finally, “this is clearly not much of a coincidence, anyway, because it was probably inevitable that one of the children would follow in the footsteps of her fore-mother—especially one with a fairly legendary persona.”

“True,” replied Pen. “I used to hang on my grandmother’s knee, begging for stories about her mother, and pestering my mother for her memories. I read Clara’s books and notebooks over and over again—although she was known as ‘Lizzie’ to us—and probably went into astronomy because of them. That and the family history in the valley made ending up at the observatory at some point pretty much inescapable, especially since we used to visit there frequently on our regular trips. Then, when I took up residence there, my mother and grandmother bought the house, and began to spend more and more time in the area.”

Clara nodded. “It makes sense that they would move back, because your mother wanted to instill a love of the valley in her children, just as her mother had in her, and I had in your grandmother. Just having a ‘home’ to visit, no matter where anyone lived, has always been important in the family. I never expected, however, that anyone would show up here—and practically on my doorstep. When the last group came through the portal, we were sure that the

device was well enough hidden that it wouldn't be found. Those few members of our families who knew exactly where we had gone agreed with what we were doing, and had vowed never to look for us because they wanted us to succeed in what we were doing. I guess we were a bit too confident in our ability to hide the device."

"It *is* very well hidden," Pen reassured her. "There aren't very many people who would be climbing around up there anyway, especially given the fact that so few people live in the valley or even travel through any more. And then, even if they did find it, they'd have to have someone with Jack's rather esoteric capabilities to turn it back on, which seems fairly unlikely. Had it been found by somebody other than Clara in the first place, it probably would have ended up in a junk pile somewhere. So when Jack and I go back, we can simply destroy it, and you're safe." But her eyes welled up again, as she realized what leaving now meant.

Clara and Pen spent the rest of the afternoon getting to know one another, and catching up on family news. Bend slipped away to tell Ohashi and the others what had happened, and to help prepare for the evening's gathering.



Prodigious amounts of food began to arrive up at the mote house, and tables were set up, with cushions and chairs, and a fire was lit in a large central grate, beneath an open space in the roof. Ohashi noted to Jack that the fire was largely ceremonial, although the chill night air after sundown would make it welcome, even in mid-summer. As people began to gather, Bend went down to retrieve Clara and Pen, and Hand joined them on their trek up the large stone staircase. When they reached the top, Pen stood on the parapet with her great-grandmother, gazing over a field of yurt-like tents that had sprung up during the afternoon. "Those are mostly folks from the north," Clara told her. "They've come down a bit early for the mote, and will stay to harvest lavender

and other crops over the next week or so. The southerners rarely send more than a handful, because they trust us to make decent decisions, and they don't want to leave their crops. Don't worry; you and Jack haven't really upset our routine significantly."

The sun seemed to plummet beneath the western peaks, but the twilight persisted for a considerable amount of time after that. Oil lamps and the central fire lit the building and the parapet softly, and people filled nearly every square inch of space within the great mote house itself. The group fell silent as Book began to outline the problem. Nearly everyone had already heard the story about the new arrivals, so Book concentrated on what she had learned from Jack about how he'd re-triggered the insertion device, and about how he and Pen had discovered it in the first place. As remote as the site was, and as deeply-hidden in the old mine adit as the device itself was located, the group was still alarmed at the possibility of another accidental discovery.

A shepherd from the north, Arne, rose and spoke for his group. "I understand that these people might want to stay, but we cannot chance it. If even one of them goes missing, there will be search parties, dogs, or technological devices that might find the trigger; and if it gets into the wrong hands—hands that we spent a very long time and sacrificed much to escape—this valley, and our world, is doomed. How long will it take the profiteers and land-grabbers and war-mongers who run the old world to take over here and start their whole miserable, destructive cycle over again? I feel sorry for these two, and especially for Pen because she has found her relative, but how could she stay without jeopardizing everything we have built over the past thirty years?"

A young woman from the south, introduced as Song, spoke next. "The trouble is, even if they go back, how can we be sure that they will not tell someone of their 'adventure' among the quaint utopians? Will we be able to rely on a promise to destroy the trigger and then keep silent?"

Mumbled discussion could be heard throughout the group, but as Jack stood to address them, everyone quieted down again. “Neither Pen nor I wish to cause harm to your life. I could not stay, no matter what, because as much as I admire what you have built here, I must return to my family and work for a better future. You have shown me what is possible, so I now have to return to Portugal and see if I can help change what is happening in my world, my time. And I agree that we both, Pen *and* I, must return together. Otherwise, people will think that I did something to her, and they will hunt for her, and I might also be prosecuted or jailed or something like that—especially since I am foreign, and therefore already suspect.”

Several people, including Pen, who sat next to Clara, holding her hand, laughed uncomfortably.

“However,” Jack continued, “Perhaps she could take steps to cover her ‘trail’ by going back for a short time, and then returning—and then I could destroy the trigger behind her. If you will permit that, I think we will be able to insure your safety—and that nobody will ever be able to discover the device again.”

“That sounds like a good idea on the surface,” said Arne, “But how can we be sure that either one will be able to keep the secret before she returns?”

Bend stood up, looked at Pen and Clara, and then addressed the crowd. “I think we have to trust her,” he suggested, “because if we can’t, we may have already failed at what we started out to do. If Clara’s daughter and granddaughter could keep the secret from their own child, and if those that all of you trusted before you left can keep it, surely two people who have had even a short time to learn who we are and what we are doing could keep it as well. We have not had long to convince either Pen or Jack of the virtue of what we have begun. If we have, we will be fine. But if we have not, I am not sanguine about our ability to convince our children—who may come to long for something we have given up—that this is worth preserving.”

As Bend sat back down near the fire, Clara rose and looked around. “As frightening as their arrival might be,” she said, gently, “I think of it as a gift: not only a personal gift, which, of course, it clearly is—but also a reminder of what we could lose. Even if they both go and never return; even if Jack blows up the trigger; even if they both were to blow up with it—since we don’t know how the trigger got there in the first place, we will always be at risk of losing everything. Whoever ‘gave’ this place to us could take it away. We will never be safe in any real sense of the word, because whatever *deus ex machina* provided the machine itself could just as easily contrive another that sends us back, or otherwise remakes our world. I have often felt, over the years, as if I were participating in somebody else’s experiment, and that someday it would end, the data collected, and we’d be sent packing.

“That’s not to say, however, that I think we need give up and just wait for something to happen. If it is an experiment, it seems to me that it’s a noble one. And if Jack and Pen carry out the plan that Jack has spoken about, I cannot see how this will alter our situation significantly. One more element of chance will enter the equation, but that’s about it. If Jack and Pen are capable of silence, and if they can arrange a cover for Pen’s return, I suggest—selfishly, perhaps—that they be allowed to carry out that plan. If we are the people we say we are, and if she has come to believe in what we do, then I think she should come back to us, and contribute what she can to helping make our world.”

The discussion carried on for a time, but in the end the consensus was to allow Jack’s plan and Pen’s return after she had made sure that she could do so safely. Both Pen and Jack were embraced by several members of the group, including Arne and Song, and everyone milled around them, talking and eating and enjoying last summer’s vintage. Eventually, Ohashi began to put out the lamps as a signal that everyone should clean up and return to their accommodations. Hand and Book escorted an exhausted Clara down to the

inn, while Pen, Jack, and Bend helped others wash and dry dishes, and put away chairs and cushions.

“This is a pretty amazing building,” Jack said, admiring the space, and the storage compartments. “It’s a bit of everything, isn’t it? People can sleep in here, and there are all the books, and these tables that fold up to cover the storage bins—it’s almost medieval in some ways, but also very modern. Maybe ancient and modern Scandinavian all in one.”

Ohashi laughed and agreed: “That was pretty much the original idea. Although you’d think I would have preferred a Japanese mote house, like the one Clara’s village, I liked the drawings for this one best. Large, but very compact, very tidy, and also very reminiscent of old Anglo Saxon mead halls—like the ones in *Beowulf* or the Icelandic *Eddas*.”

“I just hope I’m not a modern-day Grendel!” laughed Jack, as he settled down in front of the fire, which was beginning to burn down. Bend and Book pulled chairs over for the others, and sat down, too.

Bend looked at Jack and Pen, both of whom sat quietly, facing the fire and sipping wine. “Do you really see yourselves as dangerous, even after tonight?” he asked.

“I hope not,” Pen sighed. “The last thing I want would be to endanger this community. If I thought my going would ensure your safety, I wouldn’t even think of staying. But I’m fairly sure my mother and my grandmother would want me to come back if I could. I’m pretty much the last of my generation anyway, the one exception being a cousin who’s off trying to convert unsuspecting ‘heathens’ in Asia, and who already thinks I’m the spawn of Satan. My one brother died in the last middle eastern war, and I’m what’s left. So my ‘mothers’ as I call them both would be quite happy to say I’d gone to study somewhere and decided not to come back, especially since they’d know I

was with my great-grandmother. And I think they'd be quite content to stay in the valley without me, knowing that I'm participating in something meaningful. Both of them are so dependent on modern medical technologies that they'd never consider coming themselves, but they'd be content with my decision, just as they were with Clara's. I suppose that the disintegration of families in my time will make it easier for me to simply disappear."

"I'm glad that the people ended up thinking that I can be trusted," said Jack. "As much as I would love to bring my family here, I still believe that there is a chance in my world to save something of tradition, life, history—and perhaps even the environment. But we also need to learn to understand other cultures and ways of thinking, because there is so much immigration going on in Europe. As long as people do not remove newcomers simply because they're not natives—which is happening in some places—I think there is a chance. So I want to raise my children to work for this. I might be condemning them to later misery, but something in me says that I must try. And, of course, I will always have the memory of this place to show me what is really possible."

Bend sipped from his cup and then said, "Earlier Pen asked me about religion here, and I replied that there essentially wasn't any. But I think I need to amend that. There is no established religion, and not many people seem to believe in a causal deity. But there is a kind of faith—in our own intelligence, and our ability to learn from experience and to try to come up with better solutions when we fail. I don't think there's any notion of progress for its own sake, or that progress (however we define it) must *not* occur—but there is an idea of trying to do everything deliberately. Nobody seems to mind happy accidents, and perhaps this will turn out to be one of them. And I don't think it's a matter of wanting always to be in control. Rather, we try not to be stupid. We try not to do things just because they *can* be done, or because it seems like a good idea at the time. We weigh options, as we did tonight, and we don't necessarily choose the expedient solution. So maybe what Jack will take away

with him is a little of this faith—and the process by which we practice it. No smells and bells, unless you count the lavender on the breeze at the moment, or the scent of the smoke; no fancy rituals, no vengeful or even benevolent god—no mythical monsters. Just thought, reflection, care, responsibility.”

Pen smiled, and said, “And then he can go and convert the unsuspecting heathens in Europe.”

Everyone laughed at that, and then got up to head for their respective beds. Bend handed their glasses to Ohashi, and then accompanied Pen down the stairs to the inn. They pulled the same chairs they had occupied earlier in the day into the open, and lingered to watch the sky, where the Milky Way spread out, a cloud-like mass of stars that ran diagonally across the valley. Pen spoke softly. “My grandmother once told me of a moment, when she was fairly young, and her grandfather was dying, that her family gathered not far from here to watch Mars rise in the sky. It was closer than it had been in recorded history, and it looked like a massive reddish star as it came up over these mountains, crossed the valley, and set along a path similar to the one the Milky Way takes. She and her parents drove south for the night and stopped off the highway just to look at what we’re seeing now. In those days, and in my time, people could seldom see the night sky without interference from light pollution of some sort, or from smog. And that’s part of why this place is so compelling to me. Do you ever become used to this? Do you ever *not* notice the abject wonder of what you have?”

“Maybe that’s also part of our ‘faith,’” replied Bend. “We take nothing for granted. We don’t attribute the natural world to any meaningful, purposeful ‘invention’—no watchmaker, no master designer. And although we try to understand the phenomena themselves, we never do seem to lose the wonder. Knowing that the rainbow is a product of prismatic action between sun and rain doesn’t make it any less astonishing or marvelous. And when we sit out at night like this, we also often wonder if whoever placed the insertion device into

that mine is out there somewhere. Not some godlike presence, but maybe a bunch of scientists who thought it might be a good idea to let people try to live well, rather than to exploit others and the land. Or perhaps they set up a bunch of these, and there are others doing what we're doing elsewhere, or 'elsewhen.' It's sort of our science fiction, in a way. We don't exactly live on a space ship (although the metaphor has been used before, and is somewhat apt), but we are living in the future, and, in a way, on another planet. The major 'unknown' now is what our children will do, and our children's children. What will they make of this place? Will we have taught them well enough that they won't go the way that our ancestors did? Again, it's a leap of faith. We did it for them, ultimately, as well as for ourselves. Everyone who came here achieved a substantially better life in every way that counts for us. If we have any real belief system here, that's where it lies: we believe in what we do, and we try to make sure our children find it believable as well."

"Well," Pen said, softly, "You've certainly converted me. It will take me a long time to express how grateful I am for being allowed to come back here."

They got up and walked back to the inn. "I think we'll be leaving in the morning," Pen said.

"I'll make sure we've got a big breakfast ready for a sendoff," smiled Bend. "We wouldn't want Jack to forget what great cooks we are."



Before the sun had started to tint the valley its morning pink, Bend awoke and headed for the pub, where Hand was already mixing up a batch of griddle cakes and veggie "sausages"—patties made of ground soy meal, onions, and savory spices. The aroma drew a small crowd of those who had already spent time with Pen and Jack, and a few who had met them only the evening before. Ohashi and Book walked down from the mote house with their guest, who had

changed into the clothing in which he had been found, and Clara walked arm-in-arm over from the inn with Pen. Safi and Theo came in with Wren and Lirit, Milk and her grown sons arrived with Song, and Arne, the shepherd, brought his two small children, two dogs, and a platter of lamb sausage links for the carnivores in the crowd, as well as a large wheel of fragrant cheese. Breakfast conversation was lively, and in the midst of the activity, Jack rose to toast the group with his coffee mug.

“I hope you people realize,” he said, “that you have inspired me to work hard in my own time and in my own country to make life better than it is. There are already many groups of people who think the way you do, but they are scattered all over the world. I will try to work to bring them together, because I have a vision now of what a community can accomplish. I will never forget you—but I will also never mention you!”

A cheer went up, and Bend got up to toast Jack in return. “We never expected you, but you and Pen have taught us a great deal since you came. And you have given us some hope that the world we left will not simply end; perhaps it can get better. If there is any way for that to happen, you will probably be the one who achieves it—or at least begins it.”

Again, the crowd cheered. Wren brought a package over to Pen, which she opened gingerly. It contained what looked like the clothes she had been wearing when she fell into the river. “The other children found your clothes after you left us, and we got together to mend what we could and cleaned up what you had left at Clara’s.”

“We figured that you probably shouldn’t have a strange new outfit when you go back,” grinned Clara. “Jack hadn’t lost his clothes, so we didn’t have to worry about him—but you came to us almost naked, so the children hunted around the river bank to see if they could find what you were wearing. Most of it was pretty close to where you came ashore.”

Since it was clear that Jack was anxious to leave, Pen went back to the inn to change. When she rejoined the group, the two visitors exchanged farewells with their new friends. Pen and Clara hugged tearfully, and Clara handed Pen a note for her “mothers.” Jack and Pen took turns embracing Ohashi, while Bend, Hand, and Book stood back, ready to lead the two up to the mine; eventually Jack and Pen reluctantly broke away, and began the hike up a wide trail. It led past the spring where Pen’s old ancestor had washed his ore, past the spot where she had apparently lost the trail and fallen into the river, and past the place where Jack had been found injured. A couple of kilometers into the foothills, they came to the entrance to the mine. Jack and Bend went in to calibrate the insertion device, and then emerged into the sunlight.

“It’s ready,” Bend said; then Jack and Pen began to embrace their new friends.

Bend reminded the two that they would need to get Pen back before Jack left to go home, so that she could return at the “moment” Bend had given Jack to program into the trigger. The group would monitor the area of the mine for several days, in case Pen changed her mind and decided to stay, or in case it took her longer to prepare to leave her home than she expected. No one wanted Pen to return and tumble into the river again, because it was rather unlikely that another log would be floating conveniently by.

Bend thought that she might want to spend more time with her family, and she agreed that she might, so he, Book, and Hand decided to take turns keeping watch until Bend decided to return south. After that the others would check intermittently for as long as seemed prudent.

“I’ve rather gotten used to answering your questions,” smiled Bend, taking Pen’s hands, “So I’ll stay around for a bit. Don’t be too long, though, or I’m likely to go back to my monkish ways.”

Pen grinned back, planted a hearty kiss on his mouth, and turned to head into the mine with Jack. She glanced back once to see Bend, blushing a bit and waving to them.

Seconds later, they left the mine again, in the same place, but another time.

