Moonshine

A Novel

By

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e-book published by Peduncle Press, Waldport, OR

ISBN 0-9665778-5-X

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance of characters to persons living or deceased is purely coincidental.

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To the Memory of

PETR BECKMANN

Tireless warrior for truth

Who understood that Access to Energy is the difference between life and death

PART I

PROLOGUE

To the siblings in the body of Ecos:

Today is the dawn of a new age. We have passed a watershed, a point of discontinuity in the course of history.

Humanity recognized the dangers of knowledge from the earliest times, as we know from the story of Pandora's Box and the myth of the Tree of Knowledge. The works of man's uncontrolled mind led inexorably to greater complexity and greater dissipation, culminating in the threat of nuclear annihilation. But only now have we acted upon this recognition.

The first act of the Peace and Conservation Party has been to lift the threat of nuclear destruction from the planet. North America has been declared a Nuclear Free Zone. All nuclear warheads and reactors are being destroyed. We have signed a treaty of perpetual friendship and nonaggression with the nonimperialist nations of the One Planet.

Now that we have withdrawn ourselves from the race toward nuclear destruction, we will renounce the motives that caused that race in the beginning: the desire to subjugate and to dominate the Cosmos. Instead, we will devote all our energies and resources to the attainment of harmony in Ecos.

The task, which awaits us, will not be easy. Ways that disrupt the peace of Ecos have become deeply ingrained within our society. Uprooting these evils, and implanting the proper spirit, will require all our self-sacrificing dedication. We must sacrifice everything for the Cosmos, which is All in All. Dangerous discriminatory concepts such as loving our "neighbor" as ourselves, or viewing our own species as somehow superior to others, will be forgotten. Soon they will become unthinkable. All our energy will be concentrated on love for the Cosmos and the search for ultimate harmony.

I have the utmost confidence that we will achieve this goal.

As a reminder of our dedication, this day will be commemorated as Universal Harmony Day from now in perpetuity.

Alexander Ramcott, Address to the Nation, Aug. 6, 2025

CHAPTER 1. KIDNAPPED

As a method of settling disputes, violence has become obsolete.
Alexander Ramcott, *Collected Works*

Over the roar of the tractor, she couldn't tell what it was. But Cassandra felt sure that the noise had come from the direction of the house.

Her father must have heard it too, because he abruptly cut off the engine, jumped down from the seat, and pushed Cassandra onto the floor.

"Keep your head down," he told her. "And stay here until I come back for you." He began running back toward the house as three more noises rang out, sharper than the first one.

Then, except for an occasional bird call, the buzzing of a fly, a few creaks from the warm engine, and the breeze rustling the trees in the apple orchard, there was silence.

She tried to get a little more comfortable, and wondered why her father didn't come back. Could he have forgotten his promise to let her sit on his lap and drive the tractor? No, he never forgot a promise. And he certainly would not forget this one, since it was her sixth birthday. But why did he want her to hide like this? She didn't understand.

The tractor's engine had cooled. She heard a car turn off the highway and pull into the driveway. It might be someone to see her father on business, or it might be someone coming to wish her a happy birthday. For a moment, she was tempted to raise her head to try to see who it was. But no, he had told her to stay down, and he always had his reasons. The tires screeched — the car must have been moving very fast. Her father would not be pleased about that.

She knew he did many important things, and she reminded herself of this as the minutes passed and her anxiety began to mount. It must be someone with very important business. Otherwise he wouldn't have left her here so long. The metal floor felt very hard and lumpy, and the pedals pressed into her side.

It seemed as if hours had gone by since they had set off so happily early that morning. She fingered the sprig of apple blossoms that he had stuck behind her ear. He had pulled her braids playfully, and she had recited the names of all the different apples that grew at Wyndham Hill. Red Delicious, Jonathan, Macintosh, and Golden Delicious. The best apples in the state, everyone said. But the blossoms had already wilted, and the sun was noticeably higher in the sky, beating down on her in the tractor's narrow cab.

Her anxiety turned to fear, and she began to sob. Why didn't he come? Could something have happened to him? Could he be hurt? Why wasn't her mother calling for her?

A sharp report pierced the air, and then another. Cassandra's fear turned to panic and despair. Something terrible must be wrong. For yet a little longer, her father's admonition kept her huddled against the floor of the tractor. But finally she could stand it no longer, and carefully climbed down. She had never disobeyed her father before.

On the way back to the house, she wanted to cry "Mommy! Daddy!" But the words stuck in her throat, and the tightness spread down around her heart. There was a strange green car in the driveway. As she rounded the corner of the house, she felt a surge of hope and burst into a run — the car was blocking her father's pick-up truck, which was still in the carport. He was here! He hadn't gone away. The second green car hadn't stayed in the driveway, but had pulled up close to the house, right into her mother's precious daffodil patch. At the sight of their crushed yellow heads, all her apprehension returned in a flood. She stopped and crouched beside the first car, unable to move. A voice in her head screamed at her to run and hide in the orchard, where she could see the tractor and the house. But another part of her demanded to know what had happened to her father. The part of her that demanded to know was stronger. She paused a moment to sound out the words painted on the doors of the cars, as her mother had taught her: "Child Protection Agency" and "Agriculture Inspection." Then she crept cautiously toward the house, intending to look in through the window on the porch.

She practically tripped over the body. It was a man in a green uniform. Like the ones who surrounded President Ramcott on the television evening news. Her father used to swear at them. The eyes stared out of a wax-colored face frozen in a grimace of fear. Flies covered the center of the chest, and blood was everywhere — on his clothing, on the porch, on the swing, even on the side of the house. Cassandra stepped back and stared at it in horror and shock. Who could have done such a dreadful thing?

She heard a buzzing in her head, and things began to look gray and fuzzy. Her skin felt cold and clammy, and her body seemed to float.

. . .

"Drink this," said a man's voice. Strong hands helped to hold her up, and someone lifted a cup of tea to her mouth.

"Who are you?" Cassandra asked. "And where are my father and my mother?" "We are your friends," the smaller of the two men said. "And you must be Cassandra."

"How do you know?" she demanded.

"Oh, we know a lot about you," he said in a soothing tone. "And we're here to help you."

She pushed the tea away, sat up straight, and looked at the two men suspiciously. They were not wearing the green uniforms that she had been taught to fear, but loose-fitting blue cotton shirts and pants. They were not very clean.

The telephone rang, and the taller one picked it up. "Yes," he said. "We have her. We'll drop her off at the docking point, on our way in. We've also found a large cache of illegal substances. The other problem has . . . ah . . . been handled."

When she recovered her senses, Cassandra could see that the kitchen where they had brought her had been turned upside down. All the cupboards had been emptied, the contents scattered untidily on the floor. How could her mother have allowed this? She had to find her parents. But the men were too quick for her; the taller one grabbed her and held her tightly when she tried to bolt through the back door. The shorter one knelt down and looked at her sympathetically. "Cassie, Cassie," he said earnestly. "I know you must feel upset right now. Please let us help you."

"I want my mommy and my daddy," she informed him.

"Don't worry," he said. "We're going to take care of you now. You'll be coming with us."

"No. My daddy will come for me. He said that he would."

"Cassie, I'm afraid that will not be possible," the man said quietly.

"My name is Cassandra Wyndham. And he promised," she insisted. "Cassandra," he said. "One who sees what others do not. What a terrible name for a child!" He tried to stroke her forehead, but she pulled away.

"I want to see my daddy now," she said, close to tears, and not wishing the man to see.

"No, Cassandra. I'm sorry, but that's how it had to be, for the protection of yourself and society too." Cassandra began to struggle, but the tall man simply held her a little more tightly.

"Look at this," interrupted a man wearing a green uniform and a pistol, as he burst through the kitchen door. He displayed a large cylindrical container. "More illegal substances. The storm cellar is full of them. We'll have to call for a truck."

"What are you doing with our plant food?" Cassandra demanded.

"Illegal substances," he corrected her. "They poison the earth."

"Plant food," she shouted back. "It makes the apples grow better. We grow the best ones in the state!"

The short man motioned for the one in the uniform to leave. "Come, Cassandra," he said. "It's time to go."

"I'm not going," she stated.

"I think you are," he said softly. He exchanged a look with his companion, who picked her up and carried her into the living room.

"No!" she screamed. They made sure that she could see everything: the carpet splattered with blood, her father's shotgun lying in the middle of the floor, and two large black plastic bags.

Then the men carried her out to the car, and the shorter one knelt beside her, speaking quietly, just into her ear. "You know about shotguns, don't you?" he asked.

She nodded. She knew about the gun, although her father had kept it carefully hidden, and had warned her not to speak of it to anyone.

"I'm sorry, but I must tell you," said the little man, putting his hands on her shoulders. "Your mother killed that man you saw on the porch. She made that hole in his chest. He was just standing on the porch, and she shot him."

He paused to let the words sink in. Cassandra stared at him, and he answered her wordless question. "We had no choice. She and your father would have killed the rest of us too. But we know it isn't your fault. We don't hold children responsible for the crimes of their parents. We're taking you to start a new life."

He opened the door for her, and Cassandra climbed in the car without resistance.

They drove through the orchard on the way to the highway, and she knew that the view through the back window was the last she would ever see of Wyndham Hill. She closed her eyes.

. . .

Eventually, the car stopped and someone opened the back door and lifted her out. It was nearly dark, and she could smell the ocean. She had to wait for what seemed like several hours in a dark building with some other frightened children, who were all sobbing and crying for their parents. Cassandra sat by herself in a corner. Closing her eyes, and even covering them with her fists didn't help. The body on the front porch was inside her head, and so were the words of the men in blue. She was barely aware of being herded into a small boat which waited at a

ramshackle dock, or of its putting out to sea. Most of the children were sick, but finally stopped crying. She huddled in one of the bunks, and waited for whatever would happen next.

Some time later, the hum of the boat's engine was replaced by the sound of voices. Someone opened the cabin and thrust in a lantern, holding it high to look them over. Hands reached for Cassandra first, and she did not resist.

"Where am I?" she asked, following the figure with the lantern along a pebble beach in the darkness.

"Home," the voice said. Its owner, a woman with gray hair and a fixed smile, stopped and bent down until their eyes were on the same level. "The Isle of Amity. Where misguided children learn to be good. You're a very lucky little girl. You'll try to learn what we teach you, won't you?"

"Yes," she whispered, and followed without a word.

Passing along a dark path that wound up from the beach among a cluster of darkened houses, they finally arrived at a long, low building in which a single dim light burned. There, she was given a new set of clothes — coarse grey pants and a grey cotton shirt; a place in the dormitory — the last cot in the row, under a window that didn't quite close; and a new name — Conserva.

CHAPTER 2. CAPTURED

> *In . . . the will is rooted my ability to free myself from everything. . . . Man alone can sacrifice everything, his life included. . . . An animal cannot; it always remains merely negative, in an alien destiny to which it merely accustoms itself.*
>
> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*

Meyer almost toppled backward in his chair as the low buzz of his distant early warning system startled him awake.

"Damn!" he said, rousing himself to peer through the peephole of the front door. It was too dark to see anything, but three pairs of feet clumped over the planks of his walkway. It wasn't going to be something simple like a sore throat, he thought anxiously.

He opened the door to admit two young apprentices carrying a litter.

Behind them came Marcus Lang, a sinister, grey-robed figure. To Meyer's dismay, the apprentices departed immediately after depositing their burden in the middle of his front room. A thin young woman, probably about twenty, with short curly brown hair plastered to her head with sweat and dried blood. The patient was obviously very sick. And very important, judging from her escort — Marcus Lang himself, the Counselor to the newly constituted Olympian Islands Cell.

The Counselor outlined the situation. "She was found on the cliff. We don't know who she is or where she came from. Or how she got here, although this harness may be from a parachute. She was carrying some interesting devices with functions we cannot as yet identify. We will find out all these things. . . . as soon as she is well enough to talk."

Meyer's curiosity was piqued — who could this young woman be?

The Counselor looked down on her sardonically, but the patient had closed her eyes and turned her face away. She tried to draw away from Meyer's touch, but was too weak to put up much resistance.

"Hmmm," Meyer said noncommittally. He was not certain how much affectation to use with Counselor Lang. The former chairman of the Psychosocial Research Program at the University of Washington had to have some sophistication about medicine. If he had wanted hands passed over the patient's energy fields, he would have taken the patient to Roscoe Vole at the so-called Institute of Healing. Clearly, he wanted this one to get better. But Meyer followed the forms that had become a habit. One could, after all, obtain a fair amount of information while pretending to be attuned to the meridians. This patient had a fever of about 104 degrees and was seriously dehydrated. Her pulse was rapid and thready. Her face and hair were caked with mud and blood from a small scalp laceration; her coveralls were torn and stained in several places with a mixture of blood, pus, and grime. Meyer rested his hand on her forehead for a moment longer than strictly necessary.

"The prognosis is not good," he said. "She is probably septic. I don’t know how much I can do. "

"We're counting on you, Practitioner Meyer," the Counselor said meaningfully, on his way out the door.

Not too subtle, are you, Meyer thought angrily. But as soon as the Counselor had gone, he rotated the shelf that was cluttered with bottles of herbs, revealing a modest stock of solutions, needles, and assorted drugs and equipment. In half an hour, he completed a cursory examination, ran a blood sample through his autoanalyzer (the sodium was getting dangerously high), planted a couple of blood cultures, and administered half a liter of fluid along with the first dose of an antibiotic. He explained each step, but the patient barely stirred. Until he tried to remove her left boot.

He swore under his breath. He never intended to be a sawbones, but a sawbones without an x-ray machine was really a travesty. Even in his days at Bellevue he could never have imagined that. He wondered whether such a machine still existed. It was surely illegal as it exposed people to more radiation than they would get in a lifetime from living at a nuclear power plant. With a sigh, he went to work with a razor blade; it was a shame to cut such fine leather. But as he suspected, the flesh beneath was purple and swollen. Fortunately, the boot had kept down the swelling, as well as serving as a splint. Probably it was just a bad sprain — no displacement as far as he could tell. In any case, it would need a cast, but that was a lower priority for the moment.

Meyer decided to thread the intravenous bottle through the sleeve and to try to remove the coveralls rather than cutting them, since they couldn't be replaced. He felt the fabric appreciatively. Clearly a synthetic. In places, he had to wet the fabric and cautiously tease it away from the skin Even so, he provoked some bleeding. The patient must have been on the cliff for at least 48 hours, he estimated, since the lacerations were already draining purulent material, and an abscess had formed around a large splinter in her right leg, with ominous red streaks radiating toward the groin. Yes, the nodes were already enlarged. Cleansing the wounds was a tedious job. Occasionally the patient cried out incoherently and thrashed around. She was moving everything except her left leg, he noted.

Finally, he took down a book with a spine labeled "The Healing Properties of Mushrooms," and a title page reading "Practical Orthopedics." After studying the diagrams and rehearsing the motions, he gently slipped a stockinet onto her bruised leg, carefully padded the bony prominences, and soaked several rolls of his precious plaster in water. He positioned the leg as well as he could, holding it until the plaster set. A waste of time and plaster, of course, if the patient didn't regain consciousness. But if he waited, he might have to do it while she was wide awake and complaining.

Having hung another bottle of fluids, Meyer felt satisfied that he had done all that he reasonably could, and lay down to rest his eyes.

. . .

"What's your name?" Meyer asked her, as she seemed to be awake for a moment.

He knew that she had heard the question, but she didn't respond. Stubborn. Well, in her place would he be any more cooperative?

"I'm Meyer," he said. "And you don't need to tell me your name. But do tell me what to call you. Make something up, if you like."

"Gina," she whispered.

"Gina," he said, "You're going to be all right."

"No," she replied, weakly but firmly. "I'm going to die."

"Certainly not," he responded, with more confidence than he felt, "not after all this work."

She looked at him angrily. "I never asked for your help. Now please leave me alone."

. . .

"It looks as though you fell over a cliff and tangled with some rocks and trees on the way down," Meyer said, as he cleaned out the wounds. The patient's blood pressu re was definitely better today, and she seemed to be awake, though apathetic.

"A fool. What a fool," she muttered.

"It seems to have been an accident," he suggested.

She turned her face away. She thinks I'm one of them, Meyer realized. A reasonable assumption, after all.

"You haven't had any more vomiting. Would you try to drink a little tea?"

"No," she said.

"Soon then," he said. "You'll probably be able to bear weight on your cast tomorrow, and you'll need to build up your strength."

"For what?" she asked him, brown eyes angry.

Unwilling to answer, Meyer turned away.

. . .

After the buzz, Meyer had a few seconds before the inevitable knock. He glanced hastily about the room and dimmed the extra light. The herbal side of his medical shelves was alr eady on display. The sight of the intravenous bottle would probably be acceptable. Otherwise, the tiny and sparsely furnished room was free of obvious anachronism.

The Counselor himself had made his way down the dark path with the aid of a lantern. Meyer felt a little tightness in his chest, as he invited Lang to sit in his own chair, and seated himself on the low stool with wheels.

"Well, Practitioner Meyer," Lang said. "We are anxiously awaiting your report."

"I'm afraid the news is not good," said Me yer, in his most sepulchral tone. "The patient apparently has toxic shock from her wounds. Her fever still spikes to 105, and she is delirious most of the time. She is developing a rash. Her blood pressure is dangerously low. . . ."

Lang impatiently wa ved aside the medical details. "What has she been saying?"

"I can't make much of it," Meyer said. "She raves about cliffs and demons and shadows in the night."

"Has she mentioned any places?" Lang wanted to know.

"Only Valhalla," Meyer said.

Lang snorted. "I trust you have been paying careful attention."

"Oh, yes," Meyer assured him. "I was hoping that some information about her place of origin might be helpful in her treatment. But she hasn't mentioned anything, and she will not answer any questions at all."

"I'm wondering whether it wouldn't be best to move her back to my quarters," Lang said. "In case she does say something helpful."

"Well," Meyer said, "that approach would have certain drawbacks. For one thing, the gastrointestinal symptoms. She vomits quite frequently. And she will surely die very quickly without fluids, which I am having to give by vein."

Lang, uninvited, went to look at the figure on Meyer's cot. The patient lay absolutely still, barely breathing. He noted the dripping fluids, and the lump made by the cast under the blankets.

"Did she break her leg?" he asked.

"I'm afraid so," Meyer lied. "It is a very nasty fracture, which I am not capable of treating properly. The cast helps to splint it, and might help the pain. But I'm afraid she'll never walk again."

Lang's eyes glinted. "When do you think she'll be able to talk?" he asked.

"Hmmm," Meyer said. "Difficult to say. Maybe a week, maybe two. Assuming there hasn't been brain damage."

Lang indicated that Meyer was to accompany him outside. "Do you have any idea what this is?" he asked, displaying in the light of his lantern a small object about the size of a fountain pen.

Meyer examined the object, turning it over several times. It was quite heavy, and the material at one end resembled a ruby laser. He was willing to bet that it was a communications device, powered by a miniature nuclear generator. But he kept his speculations to himself.

"Obviously not a toy," he said. "Did our mysterious patient have it with her?"

"It was lying at the bottom of the cliff," Lang said. "One of my apprentices found it, and that's what led us to the person who dropped it."

So she couldn't send for help, Meyer thought. How unfortunate.

"We need to know where this came from," Lang said. "But I shouldn't need to tell you that. You must let us know the moment that it might be productive to interrogate this girl."

"I'll send for you at once," Meyer promised.

"See that you don't delay," Lang said.

. . .

The patient was better, according to all the objective criteria. Vital signs were fine, her chemistries were normal, and her white count was coming down. Somehow or other, he was forcing her along the road to improvement. But she seemed determined to die nevertheless.

"Gina," he said, sitting down beside her bed. "You don't want to get well."

"Does it matter to you?" she asked.

"Yes, it does. Very much." He was amazed to realize just how much.

"Why?" she said scornfully. "So you can summon the Counselor and collect your reward?"

"Gina," he said, "if that had been my intention, I would have done it already. You know that, because you were conscious when Lang was here last night."

"Yes," she admitted apologetically. "I didn't mean to sound that way." "Will you please eat some soup?" he asked, taking her hand gently.

Their eyes met, and she squeezed his hand ever so slightly. He did not want to let go of her hand, and he sensed that she felt the same way. This was folly, he thought. Have five years of isolation made you feeble-minded? Or just lonely?

. . .

"This is my lab," he said, steadying her with a hand on her elbow as she experimented with walking on her cast. "This room, as you can see, was blasted out of the cliff. I am afraid that it is very limited. But I am able to make some pharmaceuticals, especially antibiotics, semisynthetic penicillins and the like. And some D-amino acid antibiotics: great drugs, and so easy to make. Bruce Merrifield discovered them in the mid-twentieth century. But they were too cheap. No hope for getting approval from the federal government. I could have gone to jail for distributing them back then, but what does it matter now? They're the least of my sins."

Gina shook her head. "And most people believed that the FDA, like the rest of the alphabet soup of agencies, was just protecting them!"

"This tank here is the home of my Penicillium. And here is the Staphylococcus that I grew from your wound and blood — a toxin-producing strain. I can even experiment a little; some remarkable organisms live in the bay. Here is the generator. Unfortunately, my supply of diesel fuel is nearly half gone."

"And that's a DNA synthesizer," she pointed out.

"Well, yes," he said.

"I don't want to see any more," she declared abruptly.

He closed the section of bookcase behind them, and sat down opposite her, trying to read the serious expression on her face.

"I suppose you could turn me into the Counselor now," he said. "Meyer the biochemist, discovered in the disguise of a sawbones on an out-of-the-way island in the Northwest. It would be a great coup for him."

"I suppose so." she said. "The disguise is a pretty good one. I wouldn't have suspected."

"It's not altogether an act," Meyer explained. "I really did graduate from medical school. Mainly to please my parents. I even did a rotating internship. But then I went off to a biochemistry lab at Berkeley, which is where I really wanted to be in the first place. My mother was ashamed. So was my wife. " He laughed a little, bitterly. "She dreaded that her friends might find out about my patents for sludge dissolver, drain cleaner, and a mineral extraction process. Although she didn't mind depositing the checks that rolled in every month from Genex, Atlantic Richfield, and Sybron."

"When did you come here?" Gina asked.

"About five years ago," Meyer calculated. "Three years before the messiah Ramcott came to power."

"Why?"

"The handwriting was on the wall," he said. "The lawsuits against the biotechnology companies. The power blackouts and the embargo on power production. The anti-intellectual riots at the universities. But you didn't really have to read anything except the financial page. If you had charted the movement of the stock and commodities markets since the crash of 1929, impending disaster was obvious."

"You mean you just looked at a chart, then packed up and left?" Gina asked skeptically.

"Not exactly," Meyer admitted. "My charts told me when to make the move; history told me what to do to save myself. Short the market, it said. Convert to cash and buy durables. Take a long position in gold. Send Naomi a postcard. I must admit that I profited from the debacle, and used the proceeds to outfit my fishing shack here on Maxwell Island."

"Naomi?"

"My wife. Ex-wife, probably. I owe all this to her."

"She helped you escape?"

"Oh, yes," Meyer said sardonically. "I had been procrastinating for weeks. Then one morning I found her things gone and a note propped up by the coffee pot."

"She just left you?" Gina asked.

"I can't say it was completely unexpected — she had been threatening to do something of the sort for a year. When she swooped down on the bank, she found that I had preceded her."

"And then you left?"

"No, not for over a year. It took a while to amass sufficient capital and to renovate and equip my lab. But I called my broker that very morning to place my orders. Why not? Naomi had taken everything that wasn't in the brokerage account, including the children she claimed I had sired. Also the dog, thank God."

"But how could you just give up like that? Without even putting up a fight. You could see what was happening to society, and to science. Why didn't you do something about it? Why didn't you at least warn people?" Gina asked indignantly.

Meyer was affronted. "There were some idealists who asked me that even back then," he said. "Fools, they were. They thought that the ecophile reign was a tide that would ebb, when it really was a tidal wave that would carry everything before it. They had the half-baked idea that a group of scientists could organize a resistance, or could at least survive the coming dark age." He shook his head in exasperation. "Most of them just got themselves killed by the new barbarians. And for what? After all their noble sacrifices, society got exactly what it was asking for — which was precisely what it deserved."

"Because people like you didn't care," Gina said bitterly. "You knew what was happening, and you said nothing. All you did was call your broker."

Meyer bit back any angry retort, and then, manufacturing an errand to do, stalked out of the house. As he checked the progress of the fish in his homemade smoker, he realized with a stab of anxiety that he positively enjoyed having Gina around, arguments or no. He adjusted the air intake vent, then stood up and stared morosely at the ocean. Folly, he told himself again. You have only one purpose — to see to her recovery. Plunging his hands into his pockets, he walked glumly down to the beach.

On his way back, he noticed a man, whom he didn't recognize. The man did not call out a greeting, but just watched Meyer attentively. A burly fellow, with lumpy, unpleasant features. Of course, Meyer thought. Lang has posted a guard.

. . .

Gina was lying back on her cot, exhausted and depressed. Her face was flushed and tear-streaked, her skin exfoliating from the effects of the toxin. To Meyer's dismay, he found himself admiring her. She might be pretty, beneath the rash and the blood that still adhered to patches of her undisciplined curls. Her features were delicate, her body thin but strong. Now that he no longer had to bathe her wounds for her, he permitted himself to notice her womanly shape, only partly concealed by her coveralls. They did become her better than his baggy old clothes, despite the stains and rents he had been unable to remove or repair. Alarmed by the feelings that his speculations had provoked, he looked away.

What a waste, he thought sadly. So bright, but embarked on a foolhardy adventure that was doomed from the outset. Probably an idealist — worse, one who practices what she preaches. He suppressed his curiosity about her technologic devices, and her knowledge of DNA synthesizers. He didn't really want to know where she came from — it was better that he know

as little as possible. He shuddered when he thought of what Lang had in store for her. How long could he keep her sick, he wondered. And what then?

"Please eat some supper," he urged, when she stirred again. "As far as Counselor Lang is concerned, you are unable to speak a sentence, but I really do care about your getting stronger."

. . .

"The Society for the Preservation of Science," she repeated. "Do you know about it?"

"I have forgotten about it," he said. "And I don't want to remember. Of course, I am curious about you. But I will not ask, and I will not allow you to tell me. It's not a matter of lack of courage," he hastened to assure her. "It is mere common sense. For both of us."

. . .

"Complications have set in," Meyer explained to the Counselor. Marcus Lang paced the length of Meyer's porch, barely concealing his impatience. "Yesterday, I was about to summon you because she was doing so well. I felt that within a couple days, she might be able to remember where she was, and even to sit up. She had actually swallowed a few sips of water without vomiting. But then she had a seizure, and her fever went up again. I am having to concoct an anticonvulsant medicine. I am pretty sure that it will work, but it takes some time. At the moment, she is postictal." Lang look puzzled. "I mean she just had a seizure, so now she is unconscious," he explained.

Lang did not seem altogether satisfied with the explanation. As the Counselor descended the stairs with a look of irritation, Meyer's heart beat erratically. Had he embellished the story too much? And what did the Counselor's parting words mean: "an early return visit." How early? Meyer ground his teeth. How much time did they have?

. . .

It was midnight, and Meyer found his eyes were suddenly wide open. Had he heard a noise? Perhaps his patient had stirred. He softly padded into the next room, and stood by her side. Cautiously, he reached down to feel her forehead. She grasped his hand, and pulled him toward her.

. . .

"It's been a long time," he whispered.

"Since your wife left?"

"No," he said. "Since the day I was born." He gently touched his forehead to hers.

. . .

For seven days and nights, the island was bathed in light. Hardly a wisp of cloud hid the face of the sun or the waxing moon. Such a span of fine weather was remarkable on these islands, even during midsummer. As they sat together, watching the moon through the window, Meyer thought he was on a different planet, where measures of time were suspended. He had no

idea what day of the week it was, and Lang had been nearly forgotten. He almost believed that an eternity of enjoyment lay before him. But Gina seemed unable to be at peace.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"You don't understand yet," she said sadly. "But you will."

. . .

The eighth day dawned, dull and overcast. Meyer chided himself for allowing the weather to have such a dampening effect on his mood, as he went about preparing a smoked salmon for breakfast.

Gina simply stared out the window.

He kissed her on the neck. "Don't tell me a few clouds are making you sad," he said.

"Listen to me," she said. "You have refused to hear this before, but this morning you must listen." She made him sit down at eye level.

"Tonight I must go back," she said softly. "Will you come with me?"

He stared at her, the bubble of his happiness burst.

"You really do have to know the story," she began, and this time he let her continue. "I am from the Society for the Preservation of Science. The group led by Andrei Witkowski." (Meyer flinched at this mention of a former colleague. Their last good-byes had not been cordial.)

"Yes, they did get away, with the help of a benefactor, just after Ramcott was elected. I was a college student at the time. About 50 of them now live on Safari Island."

Meyer did not try to conceal his astonishment. Safari Island was the nuclear waste dump.

"Only about half of the original group made it. And there are many things that we need. People especially." Meyer looked away. "I volunteered to come here for a reconnaissance and evaluation mission. To find out what sort of immediate threat the ecophiles are to us. And to attempt to establish contact with some potential allies. Like you, for example."

She sighed. "I was doing pretty well until someone, a teenage boy I think, climbed up the hill toward my camp one night. As I tried to move away from him, I lost my footing in the dark, and slid about halfway down the slope. He stayed on that cliff all night long, so I didn't dare use my light. But in any case, I couldn't move far because of my ankle, and I couldn't signal for help because I had lost my communicator. You know the rest."

Meyer nodded, and was filled with rage at Witkowski. Because of the Society and their hopeless ambition, Gina had spent two nearly fatal days alone on the cliff.

"But how did you get here?" he asked. "And how can you get back?"

"The arrangement was that a boat would come for me, either at the dark of the moon, or on an overcast night, if I were unable to communicate otherwise. If I am not there, they will simply leave."

"So tonight is the night," Meyer sighed, thinking of the greyness of the day. The end.

"I am afraid so," Gina said. "I do not want to go so soon. But I learned something about myself on that cliff that I only suspected before."

"And that is?"

"I can't stand pain," she said. "I cannot be questioned by the Counselor. Not under any circumstances."

"Don't worry," Meyer said, touching her cheek. "I will not allow him to take you. I will tell him you are too ill — that you are delirious, or have lost your memory."

"You know that won't work much longer. I must leave. Will you go with me to the boat?" she asked urgently.

Meyer stared at her. The idea had simply not occurred to him. "I must think about it," he stammered. "This is so sudden."

He set the breakfast in front of Gina, and paced the floor of the kitchen. Obviously, Gina had to leave. He would just have to resign himself to losing her. Yet he needn't lose her. What was here on this miserable island to hold him? His lab, his experiments — now no more than a dangerous hobby. His careful preparations for survival. Here, he was hidden in plain sight, with a survival skill, and a cache of luxuries to make life bearable. Even the Counselor depended on him to some extent. Chuck it all to run off with a woman nearly 25 years younger than he? Yes, he thought he loved her. But was he ready to risk his life for her? Was he really such a romantic? Of course, he would sacrifice himself if it were necessary, or if it were his duty, or even if it might do some good, he assured himself. But run off to Safari Island? With the Counselor no doubt in hot pursuit? Already, the existence of the rebels was known; Lang had the evidence in his hands. And where else could they be, besides on one of the three or four nearby islands?

As if she read his mind, Gina said, "If you don't go, I can't go either. They would suspect you of conniving my escape." Meyer had to concede that she was right. He had told Lang that she could neither walk nor talk. How could he possibly explain her disappearance? He was very inventive, of course, but there were limits to his remarkable talents.

"You could hit me on the head," he suggested, "and then tie me up." Gina just shook her head doubtfully.

There was also the guard to think of. Meyer saw him watching the path every time he left the house. He took care to keep Gina away from the windows during the daytime. Could they kill the man in cold blood? Meyer shuddered at the thought. Or try to disable him temporarily? But then he would be able to testify about Meyer's role in the escape. Perhaps he could be diverted in some way, to permit Gina sufficient time to get to the beach. But what if the boat didn't show up?

There was, of course, the possibility of hiding Gina in his lab. Then he would just have to make up a convincing story about how she had gotten away despite the guard. No good. Why should Lang have more scruples about interrogating a crusty middle-aged man than a mere girl?

Meyer noticed that his palms were sweating. He had far too many crimes against Ecos to confess to, as well as far too much knowledge about Gina and her friends.

He cursed himself for getting so emotionally involved. He couldn't even think straight. And how could he have failed to foresee all these problems? Of course, it wasn't his fault that she had been brought to him in the first place.

Killing the guard might be the only way. But how? With a knife? A stick? A rock? The guard was a burly fellow. And he, a scholarly, self-indulgent type who abhorred exercise and sported a bit of a paunch.

And could Gina walk all the way to the beach? She was doing pretty well with her cast, but had only had to manage a few steps around his shack.

Gina's eyes followed him sadly, back and forth.

About noon, he took a brief walk down to the dock, cursing at the drizzle. The guard was on duty; he seemed never to relax his vigilance. The walk was moderately long and rocky. Meyer had forgotten about the difficulty of walking on rocks with a cast. Especially if the plaster were to become wet and to soften. She might not be able to make it alone.

Gina still sat in the same spot, gazing disconsolately out the window. He sat beside her for a while, silent, his head in his hands.

"What are we going to do?" she finally asked.

"I don't know," he said.

"Promise me something," she said.

"What?" he asked.

"If I don't make it to the boat, promise that you will go to meet them. I will draw you a map. They come about midnight. They must be warned."

"It is not necessary," he said. "I will think of a way for you to get there. Even if I don't go with you."

"Promise," she insisted.

"It is not necessary," he repeated.

"Then you can easily promise," she pointed out.

"Very well," he said. "I promise."

"Thank you."

. . .

Meyer rummaged through his lab, trying to decide what, if anything, he might take along if he went, and what he might use as a weapon. His filet knife? A blunt object? He tried to imagine himself sneaking up behind the guard and knifing him between the ribs, or striking him in the head. Blood would spurt out. The man would fall down. He should then check to make sure that he was dead. Or what if he didn't fall down? What if he saw Meyer coming, murderous object in his hand? Could he manage to inject the man with something, through his thick clothing, without arousing his suspicion? Meyer had some potassium chloride. But even if he knocked the man out first, he doubted that he could start an IV in the dark to administer the fatal substance.

Leaving the safety of his carefully prepared haven to rush to certain discovery and the probability of a most unpleasant death seemed less and less appealing. He had to think up a way to divert the guard. He fried some potatoes and onions, and they forced themselves to eat. Frequently, they looked out the window. The drizzle continued, and the guard could occasionally be glimpsed in the distance. Gina practiced walking, grimacing with every step. Meyer found a piece of wood to serve as a cane. They lay down, determined to rest a little, while Meyer's mind tried to invent a diversion scenario. After discarding a dozen or so ideas, he could no longer lie still, not even to avoid disturbing Gina, and resumed his pacing.

. . .

At 11:00 p.m., Meyer sat once again with his head in his hands. Gina touched the back of his neck gently. "They won't be coming, love," she whispered. "Look at the moon."

Moonlight streamed through the window, and only an occasional wisp of cloud obscured the stars. Meyer felt a tremendous burden lift. The reprieve had been granted.

. . .

The next two days were bright and sunny, and Meyer struggled to overcome his sense of foreboding, to enjoy every minute that was given to them. He cooked his famous salmon soufflé, told her funny stories about New York, and explained the results of his last experiment with *Thiobacillus ferrioxidans.* Gina laughed at the stories but said little, often gazing at him sadly. She held his head in her lap for hours, stroking his hair and beard.

"It's going to be all right," he said.

"Yes, I know," she replied.

He had decided that his only hope would be to convince the guard that he himself was ill, and to allow himself to suffer the dubious ministrations of the healer while Gina tried to make her way to the boat. Perhaps they could be reunited at a later time. Meyer had no illusions about Vole's treatments. He even supposed that his death would be in Vole's best interest, and that the man was more likely to be competent at killing than at curing. But with Gina gone, he would not care.

Meyer refused to think about what would happen if Gina missed her rendezvous. She would simply have to be there, even if his ruse failed and he had to resort to violence.

That afternoon, clouds began to roll in from the sea. Meyer rehearsed his lines again, and practiced clutching his chest and rolling his eyes. Gina watched sadly.

"I'll miss you," he said.

When the buzzer sounded at 10:30 p.m., Meyer was incredulous. This cannot be happening, he told himself. Not just an hour before departure. He sent Gina back to her cot, hurriedly covered her, and with a sinking heart walked to the door. Two pairs of feet walked up the planks.

Two fists pounded on the door.

Two apprentices strode in, carrying a litter. Meyer tried to block their path, nearly fainting with anxiety.

"We've come for the prisoner," they announced.

"I'm sorry you've gone to the trouble, but the patient is much too sick to be moved tonight," Meyer protested. He recognized one of the apprentices as a patient he had treated several times, and tried speaking directly to him. But the boy avoided his eyes. "I was about to send for you earlier, but the seizures got out of control again today. I'm afraid that a trip through the rain will kill her, and then you will not be able to find out anything at all. If you will just wait one more day, I'm sure that your chances of success will be much better."

The apprentices gave no indication that they had heard him. They simply lifted Gina onto the litter, and carried it out the door. She kept her eyes closed, and didn't move a muscle.

"No!" Meyer cried, unable to restrain himself.

The one who seemed a little older looked back at Meyer with colorless eyes, and displayed a lipless smile. "Don't worry, Practitioner Meyer," he said. "The Counselor said he would take full responsibility."

. . .

The going was rough, especially in the dark. The feeble light from Meyer's flashlight was not sufficient to keep him from stumbling frequently. The apprentices had chosen to take the path along the cliff top to avoid passing through the most populated section of town. Meyer stopped to catch his breath. He cursed the grade and the drizzle and the trees, and most of all his moments of paralysis. Now, he wondered whether he had made the wrong decision. Given their

head start, he could not keep pace with the young people, even burdened as they were. On the other hand, neither was he anxious to catch up with them. What would they do if they realized they were being followed? Perhaps he should have taken the more direct route, hoping to precede them to Lang's headquarters. But then what? Should he knock on the man's door and berate him for checking the patient out against medical advice? As if the Counselor cared about the patient's medical condition. Possibly, Lang had decided that the patient wasn't going to recover, so he should get out of her whatever he could in the remaining time. Or, worse, Meyer thought with a shudder, Lang might have seen through his flimsy prevarications.

Ahead, he heard a shout and stopped to listen carefully. The sounds of footsteps and of bodies brushing past branches had ceased. The moon emerged from behind a cloud, filling Meyer with a sense of dread. He turned off his flashlight, and crept forward as quietly as possible.

He stopped when he saw them standing there, profiled by the moon, an empty litter between them on the ground. They stood silently, gazing over the edge of the cliff. The drop off was very steep at this point. From the water dashing against the rocks at its base, spray rose several feet into the air, white in the moonlight.

"For the love of Ecos!" the younger apprentice exclaimed. "Why did she do that?"

"What do you think?"

"I thought she was unconscious."

"It's your fault, Brook," the older one said.

"No, it's not!"

"Whatever will we tell Counselor Lang?"

Meyer didn't care to listen further. He covered his eyes, and sank to the ground.

. . .

Meyer awaited the summons, expecting it with every unusual sound, but it didn't come. He rehearsed his lines many times. Best to be ignorant of the outcome, he thought, and to take the offensive when told of it.

He held his old flannel shirt and trousers to his face one last time — yes, they still smelled of her — then put them carefully away, unable to bring himself to wash them. He wandered aimlessly on the beach. He found himself at the back door of the biomass plant three times, refilling a flask with moonshine. Vodka, Al claimed it was. Vile stuff, but effective.

Meyer deliberately avoided noticing the phases of the moon. The last sliver of the last quarter set about 4:00 in the afternoon.

The next morning, he awakened with a manic surge of energy and was down to the beach early, to catch a few fish. He walked into town to turn in his coupons for salt and potatoes. He noted that people seemed to treat him just the same as ever, and that life seemed to proceed with its usual desultory pace. Meyer thought that the woman in the potato booth had shorted him a little, but he didn't bother to protest. After all, he didn't understand why he was entitled to any of the bounty of Ecos at all; for some reason, he kept receiving a paltry "incapacity allowance." Insulting to be sure. The second year that all citizens had received a work assignment, Meyer had found himself classified as "disabled" rather than as an "alternative medical practitioner." Apparently, the jealous Healer Vole didn't want any competition, so Meyer had closed down his storefront clinic. It was just as well. He now had fewer patients to bother him. However, someone was interested in his welfare. Presumably the Counselor had decided to keep him

around. Who else could have arranged for the coupons, despite the fact that he was unable to contribute to the social good? Meyer steered his thoughts away from Marcus Lang.

When he arrived home, several patients were waiting outside for him. People had started to find their way to him again, now that the guard was no longer in evidence. He dispensed a few antibiotics, mixed in capsules with some herbs.

Then he retired to his lab to do the spring cleaning that he hadn't done in the spring. He discarded some old cultures, made a batch of new media, and alphabetized his bottles of pills. He polished the fermentation vat, arranged his notebooks more neatly, and dusted the old journals that lined the shelves. He outlined an experiment to try with the new strain he had recently isolated. Then he found himself scrubbing out the sink for the second time. The lab being spotless, Meyer dusted the bottles of herbs in his front room, and swept the walkway leading to the house. He took some sandpaper to a rough spot on the door. As darkness fell, he finally stopped for supper, nearly exhausted by his unaccustomed exertion. After eating a little oatmeal washed down with a swig of moonshine, he sat down on his bed. He decided that he was too weary to take off his clothes. So he would just remove his boots and nap for a moment.

About 11:30 he awoke. His bedroom blinds were open, but the window was black. No moon tonight. What of it, he thought. He stumbled into the kitchen to fix himself another drink and ran into the table. The table where she had sat. Or had that been a dream? You're hearing things, old man, he told himself as the tape of his own voice replayed. "It won't be necessary," it said. There was no stop button, so the tape continued: "All right, I promise."

He poured the drink onto the floor. "You've been drinking too much swill," he declared, and headed back toward the bedroom, via the front door.

His feet remembered the way. He had walked by the spot, quite incidentally of course, many times in the past few days. Lost in thought, he stood on the beach. He did not hear the approach of the boat.

"Are you there?" a voice startled him from the blackness.

"I'm here," Meyer replied.

"Who are you?" the voice asked.

"A friend," Meyer said, after some hesitation. Had he been a friend? He felt ill, remembering. "But you must go away. She is not here. . . . She is dead."

A light shone into his eyes. "Who are you?" the voice asked again.

"A friend," Meyer repeated. "They brought her to me when she was sick."

"Did she die of her sickness?"

"No."

"How then?"

"She killed herself," he shouted angrily. "She just killed herself. She jumped off the cliff."

The voice was silent for several minutes, but the light did not waver.

"Do you know why?" it asked quietly.

"Why do you think?" Meyer nearly choked on his rage. "She was a fool. All of you are fools. And you — you might as well have killed her yourself."

"I know you," the voice said.

"Don't tell me. I don't want to know who you are."

"You're Dr. Meyer," it said. "Do you remember me? Andrei Witkowski."

"I said I didn't want to know," Meyer shouted, "And I don't want to get involved in any of your damnable schemes to save the world."

"It's too late," Andrei said. "It appears that you've already made your choice. You've come here, haven't you?"

"Not to help you," Meyer said bitterly. "Now go. Before you get yourselves killed as well."

. . .

Meyer knew what he had to do. His instinct for self-preservation, so long his first priority, had not deserted him. But the effort required simply seemed too great.

For five days Meyer neither slept nor ate. Gnawing the ends of his beard, he paced the floor of his cabin, ignoring the tentative knocks of those who found their way to his shack to consult him. His only solace was the ersatz vodka that Al dispensed. Once, imagining the way to be clear, he crept from his shack to the beach, intending to fish, and found himself face to face with an old woman he sometimes treated. Although she was only bringing him a basket of potatoes, he found his knees trembling, and he had to master an impulse to run the other way.

Your life is no longer your own, he told himself. You dare not even venture into town for fear you might meet Marcus Lang. Even though you know that eventually you must confront him. Hmmf! Old fool, do you imagine your guilty knowledge is plain for all to see? Blast the Safari Islanders and Gina Lawrence too, for coopting you into their conspiracy. Well, you must learn to dissemble. You must take the initiative, stride boldly into Marcus Lang's quarters and make the man believe that you know nothing. Attack! He sighed and took another swig of moonshine. Tomorrow, he told himself. Or perhaps the next day. Sometime soon, though.

So the summons, when it came, was an unspeakable relief. Meyer unfolded the piece of paper that Lang's apprentice had brought, and felt a huge weight rise from his shoulders.

The apprentice blinked his pewter colored eyes. "You're to come at noon," he said. "The Counselor was very specific."

"Mmmf," Meyer replied. "That's just what it says here." He wondered whether he should bother to make repairs to his personal appearance. The blond, pallid fellow just stood there. "Oh, run along," Meyer said irritably. "I know the way. And I'll be there at the appointed hour." The youth fled.

. . .

Lang's quarters had once been a lavish waterfront estate, and the mansion still bore traces of its former opulence. The handsome main building was a huge stone structure with a large window facing the sea. Marcus Lang had, of course, appropriated it for his own use. The three outbuildings — formerly guest houses, Meyer speculated — served as the quarters of his apprentices, one of whom was chopping wood in the back yard. Brook was his name, Meyer recalled. Brook suffered from migraines; they had proved quite resistant to treatment, too.

Sirica Paxson, the messenger, greeted Meyer at the door of the stone mansion, promptly at noon. "The Counselor will be with you shortly," he said, and then left Meyer alone in the atrium.

Meyer was not surprised; he had expected the psychologist to make him wait. He recalled Lang's formidable reputation as the director of the Psychosocial Research program at the University of Washington. A behaviorist, Lang was, and the author of several well-known treatises: on group dynamics, social control, and positive reinforcement. Meyer had once read

The Aesthetics of Persuasion (when the weather had been too inclement for fishing). But he didn't believe that Lang had rejected the possible use of aversive consequences. Not when they were necessary. Especially if they were necessary for "survival of the culture," which Lang apparently considered to be society's highest value.

The Counselor himself appeared, smiling. Meyer felt the chill of fear. Then he thought of Gina, and the banked embers of his rage began to burn.

"Practitioner Meyer," Lang greeted him. "How kind of you to grant my request." The man looked as sleek and sly as a fox.

Well, here's one rabbit you won't run to ground, Meyer thought.

Meyer said nothing. The Counselor escorted him to the study. "Please, sit," Lang said, indicating a chair.

"Thanks," Meyer said curtly, "but I prefer to stand."

"Oh?"

"Yes," Meyer replied. "I have very little to say to you, so it shouldn't take long."

"Indeed. By all means, say it," Lang invited, clearly thrown off stride. "You removed a patient from my care prematurely," Meyer said heatedly. "She was in no condition to be moved. Her death is therefore your responsibility."

Lang snorted. "Hardly. She threw herself off the litter and over the cliff, my apprentices reported. Her death, therefore, is certainly not my responsibility."

Meyer feigned astonishment. "They told you that? And you believed them? My dear Counselor Lang, that girl could scarcely sit unassisted. She certainly couldn't have walked a step on her shattered ankle. How, pray tell, was she to fling herself from the litter, run to the cliff edge and cast herself over? Impossible. I'm quite sure of that."

Lang frowned uncertainly. Meyer saw a tiny flicker of doubt in Lang's eyes, and pressed his advantage.

"It was dark," Meyer said angrily. "They probably stumbled on the rocky path and dropped the litter. The impact probably knocked the poor girl over the edge of the cliff. Such incompetence! Sending two boys to transport such a grievously ill patient."

Lang stroked his beard. "I heard a somewhat different story."

Meyer laughed bitterly. "Undoubtedly."

Lang stared unblinkingly at Meyer. "And I suppose that the patient said nothing at all to you in the time she was under your care?"

Meyer bristled. "Quite the contrary. She said a great deal." Lang's eyes flickered avidly. "I was winning her confidence, you see. She had come to trust me." He looked at Lang accusingly. "In a few more days, I would have extracted from her everything you wanted to know. As it is," he sighed heavily, "I only have fragments."

"Tell me," Lang commanded.

"Why, certainly," Meyer responded. "They seem unimportant and garbled to me, but I suppose they may be of some interest to you. Let me see." He closed his eyes as if in thought. "She told me that she had come from the mainland, that a plane had dropped her at night. Apparently there is a small group existing there — holdouts, she called them. I don't know how they manage to survive. They farm and fish and scavenge, she said. But there must be more that she didn't tell me."

"For what purpose did she come here?" Lang asked.

Meyer shrugged. "I'm not certain. Presumably the group is small and needs to make contact with others. She didn't say. Oh, and she had these hidden in a pocket of her coveralls."

He held out several thin wafers of aluminum. Meyer scarcely breathed, waiting for Lang to take the bait. The Counselor took the thin cards and fingered them in evident puzzlement. Well done, Witkowski, Meyer thought grudgingly. Evidently your little scheme will work. It's gratifying to know that you and your gang can do something right. "Presumably these were to serve as identification cards," he suggested.

"How?" Lang asked suspiciously, turning them over.

"If you examine the cards under ultraviolet light, you'll see that they bear an interesting message."

Lang looked at Meyer skeptically. "What message?"

"The words 'Vancouver Freedom Fighters,' and a number. Apparently, the number was also written on the skin of the cardholder." He sighed. "Once I found the cards in the girl's pocket, it was just a lucky guess that led me to shine my Wood's light on them, and on the girl's hand. I wager that you will find that one of the settings on her flashlight controls an ultraviolet beam, and that the function of one of the other seemingly useless devices was to transcribe the cards' numbers onto her converts' skin."

Lang stared appraisingly at Meyer. "She had such a number?"

"Oh yes," Meyer said. Fortunately for his credibility, the body was at the bottom of the sea.

Lang placed the cards on his desk. "I shall have to examine these," he said. Looking past Meyer out the window, he shook his head. "Vancouver. I would never have imagined it."

"Mmm," Meyer agreed. Close, but not too close.

"And that's all you learned?" Lang asked.

"All?" Meyer bristled. "Of course that's all. What a pity she didn't live to tell us the whole tale. I'm certain her story would have been very interesting. It's a shame that because of your precipitous decision, we'll never hear it."

Lang glared briefly at Meyer, then crossed the room to the door. "Brook! Paxson!" he roared, and then stood with his back to Meyer, staring out the window. Perceiving himself to have been dismissed, Meyer turned and walked slowly from the room, and then from the house. To his surprise, no one stopped him.

CHAPTER 3. VIGIL

The glow that lights the sky at night
Is power plant poisons shining bright.

Children's Learning Rhyme

The moon hung over Safari Island, its pale disk breaking through the clouds. Conserva stood up, hoping the additional elevation (five and a half feet) would help her see what she had been sent to this cliff top to observe. Hugging herself against the spring wind gusting off the ocean, she spoke to the island across the channel.

"Come on," she urged. "Glow."

Nothing happened. The madrone at her back creaked a little in the wind, the moon edged somewhat higher in the sky, and Safari Island crouched like a huge dumb beast, mysterious and forbidding.

A ragged cloud passed in front of the moon, plunging Safari Island into darkness, as if someone had blown out a candle. Conserva shivered and slid down the tree, to huddle once again on the ground. Against her will, a scrap of the children's rhyme repeated itself in her mind.

At dark of moon the water beasts
On careless children make their feasts.

She shivered again, this time not from cold. Orcas, dolphins, whales, seals: these were the names of the water beasts. Everyone knew that these man-shaped swimmers would seize unwary children, dragging them underwater and bearing the drowned bodies back to their lairs. Although it was only moonless nights that one need fear (the cowardly water beasts needed darkness to commit their abominations), no one walked the seashore after dusk, just to be sure. And, of course, no one swam in the ocean, or went out upon the sea in little boats. Why tempt the water beasts? Only Instructor Paxson's seagoing craft ensured safety: it floated well off the water on a cushion of air and made a ferocious roaring sound that frightened the beasts away.

And yet, one day two summers ago when she had been beachcombing for artifacts in the tide pools at South Point, one of the water beasts — a seal — had appeared in the bay. It had spyhopped several times and vanished. Moments later, it had surfaced again, just at her feet. She could have reached down and touched it. Too startled to run, she had simply stared at it. It had stared back at her steadily, fathomless brown eyes unblinking. After several moments, it had sunk out of sight, leaving as magically as it had appeared. Later, Conserva had realized that for the moments they had looked at one another, she had felt no fear. Had there been reason for fear? She was puzzled, but she did not tell her instructor what had happened, nor asked the

questions that had come, unbidden, to her mind. So the riddle of the seal's benign ey es was to be unanswered, but the memory would become for her a secret gift.

She steered her thoughts away. Part of her, she knew very well, delighted in secrets, persisted in asking why, had frivolous and unproductive ideas. "Unsuitable thoughts," her instructor labeled them, and how she struggled for mastery over this unruly part of her mind! Senseless or aberrant ideas might be tolerated in children; they would not be condoned in an adult. Her questions were supposedly a sign of a primitive upbringing. Nowadays, the instructors said, we are aware of the seemly limits of knowledge.

. . .

"Is one hundred the biggest number?" Cassandra asked her mother. "Well, Cassie, let's see. I can think of a bigger one — one hundred one."

"One hundred two!" Cassandra said.

"One hundred three!" her mother replied.

"One hundred four!"

. . .

Conserva clenched her fists angrily, and pushed the vision away. That was a different world, an evil one. She must fight the temptation to return to it: to dwell on memories w as a sign of serious illness.

Once they had gotten as far as five hundred before they had finished packing the apples. But, no! She must resist. Her name was Conserva, and her home was the Isle of Amity. Ramcott had saved the world from nuclear destruction, and her instructors had rescued her from a primitive world of violence. And tonight was a night for observation, not fantasies.

Conserva stood up again, willing herself to see the glow. She flinched a little as she repeated the last line of the learning rhyme:

> The murdered island's fate is plain
> To those whose minds are free from stain.

She knew what she was supposed to see—what everyone else could see — so why didn't she see it? Was her mind so far from being "free from stain" that she was blind to what was obvious to others? Was she being resistant to the instruction that would free her from the bonds of her past? She resolved to study even harder. When she was a child, still asking ill-considered questions, she had asked her instructor what kind of a plant a power plant was. He had frowned and urged her to attend to her lessons, adding that when the time was right, she would know. For years she had repeated the rhyme, thinking that power plants flourished somewhere in the forest's dark undergrowth, blooming unhealthily at night. Finally, she had learned about the discovery of nuclear energy, and its first use in annihilating cities. And the story of Safari Island — the "murdered island" of the learning rhyme. Once, just one or two generations ago, it had teemed with life: deer, wild goats, wild pigs, and pheasant. Then, spent fuel rods from nuclear power plants had been illegally brought to the island in heavy containers, which were buried deep in the natural caves. Soon, death had come to Safari Island. First, the grasses and flowers had died, so that where once there had been a carpet of green and gold in the spring, only the brown, sere hills

and the grey rock skeleton of the island remained. Soon after, the animals had died, and their bones had been left where their starved, sick bodies had fallen, to mark the shame of the men who had dared to meddle with nuclear power.

Now the children took turns standing Vigil so no one would forget. Conserva wasn't sure what the fuel rods looked like, but they were said to be so "hot" that they lit the night sky with a glow that would last for thousands of years.

As each of her classmates had returned from their Vigils, eager to recount what they had seen, Conserva, in a state of frank perplexity, had been unable to suppress questions about the glow. Why did the island glow? Was it on fire? Why did it sometimes shine steadily, and other times flicker like flames? And how could anyone see the glow if the power plant poisons were buried in the caves on the other side of Safari Island? How could anyone see through rock? The class had answered her with laughter, and Conserva reminded herself, again, to keep silent. Now she had another question: why, on this of all nights, did the island not glow at all?

Perhaps the glow was intermittent. She would simply have to stay awake until it began. How she wished that her friend Una were with her, not only to compare what each saw, but for the company. However, each child stood Vigil alone, despite the learning rhyme's specific encouragement of group activities.

> Never one, seldom two,
> When three or four or more will do.
> Join the group in unity
> We're equal in fraternity.

Why then did it feel good to have a special friend? Conserva wondered. And why had she secretly wept for days after her friends Organa and Halcyon died, desperate with the sense that no one in the group could replace them? (The instructors had said that the red spots on their bodies were bad thoughts coming to the surface. Conserva had not had the red spots herself.) And why did joining hands and sharing the peace with the group bring no consolation? Indeed, it often made her feel resentful, reminding her of loss.

Abruptly, over on Safari Island, a light shone briefly, then died. Disbelieving, Conserva looked closely. It appeared again, but to her immense disappointment, it was only the moon shining on the spray that foamed up as the outgoing tide boiled through Race Rocks at the far west end of the island. She shouted something rude, and as if in response, the wind died down, leaving a calm like a summer's day. The water in the channel was, for a moment, still, and the moonlight poured in a narrow path from Safari Island's rocky shore, almost to Conserva's feet. It's like a road, she thought, a road I might walk across. With its usual impetuosity, the demon who lived in her mind slyly whispered that her fanciful picture of a road across the water might be more real than the glow she did not see. Appalled at such impertinence, she put her hands over her mouth as if to prevent her imagination from speaking aloud. Such thoughts, she reminded herself, require mind cleansing.

CHAPTER 4. WITNESS

Safari Island, place of doom
Where life may nevermore resume,
Atomic bodies self-exhume
To make the glow that pierces gloom
Lest evil once again consume
Every branch and every bloom.
Ecos will the night illume
To warn the ones who would presume.

Children's Learning Rhyme

To Conserva's mind, fogged by sleeplessness, the branches of the Tree of Life had taken on an air of malevolence. Twining about the walls of the Learning Center, they seemed to move closer and closer. Her chest and throat constricted, and she felt as if a trap had closed. Although ordinarily glad of a chance to be alone, this morning she felt relieved when other students began to file into the classroom. They seemed oblivious to the heavy atmosphere.

"Be One with Ecos." Astra, a fellow student, broke into Conserva's reverie with the vacant smile she usually affected after the morning rainbow bridge exercises.

"In Ecos are all," responded Conserva, automatically.

Remote as she was, Conserva was aware that many of the students had been indulging in forbidden whispers, and that excitement was high. Promotion ceremonies would be held during Temple service tomorrow. Each student would be assigned to that apprenticeship in which he or she could best serve Ecos — kelp gatherer, animal tender, woodcutter, oyster cultivator, potato farmer, learning facilitator, agricultural quota recorder, and so on. Conserva was unable to think that far ahead. Tonight was the last of the Witness examinations. Tonight, Conserva would be examined.

The students, some murmuring mantras, soon filled the space on the rough hewn benches. Conserva closed her eyes and tried to merge with her classmates and achieve a state of hypersentience. This morning, she was even less successful than usual; her empty stomach, stiff neck, and aching body kept intruding into her awareness. Her attention wandered, and she turned her head to gaze out the window just as Instructor Paxson entered. As they rose to respond to his "Be One with Ecos," he bestowed a tight, lipless smile on the students, and swept the classroom with colorless eyes. They came to rest on Conserva. She bowed her head again, feigning subservience.

Conserva noted that in the row ahead of her Sorrel and Vera were surreptitiously holding hands. Conserva frowned a little. If they were truly sharing, they would also be holding hands with the others in their row — Amica and Ecoson. But they weren't. Conserva wondered briefly whether her friend Una had been doing something like that with Sylvan, the boy who had

disappeared, the time that Conserva had answered for her at bed check. Instructor Paxson stepped to the lectern — a signal for the meditations to cease — and Conserva raised her head.

"Please open the *Collected Works* to page 343," he began. "Today's lesson concerns the social responsibilities of the citizens of Ecos. Most appropriate, I think, as most of you will soon graduate to apprentice status." Conserva felt the instructor's eyes on her again. "Vigil is the last step before beginning your life of service to Ecos. A service full of the joy of organic relationship. Astra, please begin."

Conserva opened the book and tried to attend to the reading. The bust of Chief Ecologist Ramcott reproached her. Pay attention, she told herself sternly. This is important.

"Student Conserva," the instructor said, "name some ways in which you will be socially responsible today."

"Ummm, I think today we prepare earth for planting," she said. "We will follow the correct rules to maintain the ecology."

"Is that all?" the instructor wanted to know.

Conserva tried to make her mind work. What answer did he want? She seldom had the right one in discussions about applying the Works, even if she could recite the maxims readily enough.

"Won't you be sharing with us?" he inquired, as if she could possibly have forgotten this was Witness day. "And isn't social accord based on the sharing of thoughts, and the communality of sentiment, withholding nothing?"

"Yes, of course," Conserva said, trying to avoid the expressionless gray eyes, which sought to discover traces of unshared sentiment. Fortunately, Astra and Sorrel were waving their hands in the air, eager to contribute some original ideas.

. . .

Conserva trailed her classmates as they walked across the Learning Center yard to lunch, wondering whether she dared approach her friend Una, who had graduated the year before. It was, of course, frowned upon for a mere student to socialize with apprentices. And indeed, Una had seemed rather distant on the infrequent occasions when they had met. Protector Taura sped by on her bicycle, her brown pigtail trailing behind — evidently off on an errand — and Conserva decided to take the risk. Slipping around a corner of the building, she headed for the younger children's dormitory, where Una was supervising lunch.

Conserva was about to stick her head in the window when the unmistakable profile of Instructor Paxson came into view. Flattening herself against the wall of the dormitory, she prayed he wouldn't look out the window. She needn't have worried.

"Instructor Paxson!" she heard Una exclaim in surprise. "What an honor. It's not often we receive a visit from you here." Conserva risked a look. Her instructor was smiling fatuously at Una, and was standing quite close to her. Una modestly lowered her eyes. Fascinated, Conserva could not tear her gaze away.

"Apprentice Una," the instructor began. "I have come to enlist your aid in the service of Ecos."

"Oh?" Una replied sweetly. "How can I be of help?"

"Um," the instructor began, "later today, during your meditation time, I would appreciate it if you would ah . . . stop by my quarters."

Conserva could hardly believe her ears. Instructor Paxson? Behaving in an inappropriately egocentric manner with Una? He evidently realized how improper his proposition must have sounded, because he began to stammer nervously in his haste to explain.

"You . . . that is, you are so good with children, you have such a kind and gentle nature, that I hoped you would agree to help me at my aviary. The injured birds that Ecos sends my way would benefit from . . . ah . . . the care of someone with true fellow feeling. Just yesterday a tern with an injured wing flew in. I have done what I could for it, but it seems depressed. Perhaps it needs some gentle ministrations."

Una smiled dazzlingly at him. "Why Instructor Paxson! I would be pleased to come and render any assistance I could. But, what about my meditations?"

"Oh. Yes. Well, perhaps we could meditate together. In the aviary. As we tend the injured creatures of Ecos."

Una tossed her long blonde hair provocatively. Conserva saw her instructor swallow nervously several times. "What a splendid idea," Una agreed. "Perhaps we could even achieve hypersentience together!"

Paxson nodded vigorously. "Yes! Oh yes! With the birds! What an . . . ecologically correct sentiment! May I expect you then after the supper hour?"

"Oh yes!" Una exclaimed breathlessly. Instructor Paxson gazed at her soulfully for another moment, then bobbed his head several times and darted from the room. Conserva watched his departure in amazement. What had she overheard? Was what Una and Instructor Paxson planned to do a crime against Ecos? "Never one, seldom two," the Learning Rhyme said. Yet Instructor Paxson had suggested their being alone together! And there was no one more rigid in the interpretations of the writings of Ramcott than the instructor. Strange. Conserva saw him scurrying from the children's dormitory down the path to his quarters. More confused than ever, she looked about to make certain it was safe, then called softly to Una.

"You aren't supposed to be here," Una informed her through the window.

"I know," Conserva said, "but I want to ask you something."

"Conserva," Una said in a superior tone, "you should be relating to your group. That was always one of your shortcomings, as I recall. You never fully shared."

Conserva sighed. "But isn't this sharing?"

"In a way," Una agreed, "but it would be more productive to share with your group."

"Ecos take the group!" Conserva exclaimed crossly, then bit her tongue, startled by her own impertinence.

"Hush! How can you say that!" Una looked nervously around.

"I'm sorry," Conserva said, "But I really want to know what you say."

"About what?" Una asked impatiently.

"About Vigil. I have to witness tonight. I want to know what happened to you at Vigil. "

"You know what happens at Vigil," Una said. "Or didn't you go? Or perhaps you fell asleep."

Conserva suppressed her indignation. "No. I didn't fall asleep, but something didn't seem right. Tell me exactly what you saw. Please. I know they are going to ask me questions."

"All you have to do is tell about the glow," Una said. "What could be complicated about that?"

"What part of the island did it come from?"

"Why, the whole island," Una said.

"Was it steady, or did it shimmer?"

"It must have shimmered."

"Are you sure?"

"What difference does it make?"

Conserva continued. "What color was it?"

"Purple, of course," Una said, with increasing annoyance. "Everybody knows that it's purple. But why have you come to ask me these silly questions? If we're caught, I'll be punished."

"When you saw it, was it purple?" Conserva would not be put off.

"Of course."

"Are you positive?"

"Yes, I'm positive. Conserva, you must be an egocentric, and maybe out of harmony besides. Do you think that what you see might be different from what everybod y else sees?"

"Una, was there a shimmering purple glow that you saw yourself? And did it come from the whole island — even though the power plant poisons are only on one side of the island?"

Una was silent for a moment. "That's what it says in the Teach ings, and what everybody else says, too." Una twisted a strand of her blonde hair.

"But you're not sure?"

"Of course, I'm sure," Una said defensively. "Who are you to question the Teachings? You haven't even been promoted yet!"

"I know," Conserva said. "But . . . ."

Childish shrieks interrupted her, and, shrieking a little herself, Una hurried away. Disgusted, Conserva set off to her work assignment. There wouldn't be another opportunity to talk to Una before the Witness service this evening.

. . .

Preparing the ground for spring planting was a job she rather liked. Conserva was careful to dig the rows exactly the way Powell Egan had shown her, mixing some manure with the newly turned earth to encourage Ecos's bounty. The mounds and furrows she had made lay in straight, neat lines. She had done a good job, and she smiled a little in satisfaction. They would plant beans in a few weeks, when the ground had warmed up.

She hoped that the bean crop would be better this year. Last year, a blight had kill ed many of the plants, reducing the yield by half, according to the agricultural quota recorders.

The Counselor had called on Healer Vole to give a diagnostic assessment, after the reports had been read in the Temple. "There exists on this island a cesspo ol of disharmony," Healer Vole had proclaimed. "A veritable pit of corruption. And like fog rising from the sea, disharmony seeps into the minds of the impressionable, who then infect all around them."

Even beans? Conserva had wondered how a person's dish armonious thoughts could influence the beans. Yet the healer had sounded quite certain. As they had shared the peace and closed their eyes, the better to attune themselves with Ecos, she had had a disquieting thought. What if she were the cesspool of dis harmony that the healer had referred to? The thought now returned to haunt her. Suppose that the bean blight was her fault!

"No!" she said angrily. She speared a clod of newly turned earth with her shovel and beat it into little pieces. That didn't ma ke sense. But she could not drive away the memory. The healer had continued: they suspected that illegal substances might be in use somewhere on the island. Like the substances used in the past. The ones that had assured beautiful crops for a time

— but had exacted a terrible price later, depleting the earth by wresting from it more than it was intended to give. Selfish plunderers, the healer had called such farmers. Poisoners of the earth! Entropy generators! Conserva shivered. She imagined the illegal substances in cylindrical green containers labeled Ashland Chemical, piled up on shelves in a basement. They were so real that she could almost count them. She tried to remember where she had seen such things — or were they, too, just a trick of her fevered imagination?

Across the field, Powell Egan finished making repairs to the windmill, and waved to her. Time to quit. First she had to find Brook in the adjacent field. He would stolidly continue with his rhythmic motions until he fell down with exhaustion, or until someone stopped him.

"How are you, fine," he said with a grin.

Conserva led him back to the tool shed in case he had again forgotten where it was.

"Eat!" he said cheerfully. Conserva shuddered. His state of harmony with Ecos could scarcely be doubted. "The mind cleansing," the children whispered when they saw him.

After cleaning the mud off her shovel and placing it in the tool shed, she joined Powell Egan at the stream. "Good work, Conserva" he said as they plunged their muddy hands into the icy water. "You must have been born to farming. If every student who came here worked as hard as you, we would be blessed indeed. I wish we could have you as an apprentice. Selfish of me, I know."

Conserva looked at him sidelong to reassure herself that he was serious. Remembering the abuse that had been heaped on him when the crops had suffered the blight last year, she hoped she had not contaminated this year's bean crop with disharmony. "Thank you," she mumbled. He smiled at her, and to her intense embarrassment, Conserva found herself close to tears. She turned to hurry away, but he called her back and pressed something into her hands. "Lunch," he said awkwardly. "Or dinner. I know they don't give you enough to keep a flea alive. Go on, now," he said, and hitching up his suspenders, walked toward the living quarters. Conserva tucked the package under her sweater and fled into the woods.

. . .

Unwrapping Egan's package, Conserva found a large hunk of bread, a square of yellow cheese, and a perfect Golden Delicious apple. One without a single wormhole. She inspected it very carefully. The skin was smooth and free of brown spots. The flesh felt firm. No mold grew around the stem. The shape was perfect. It had been picked at just the right time — it should be sweet and juicy. She had not seen an apple like that ... for years. She could scarcely remember when. Nature, and Farmer Egan, had lavished love and attention on that apple. At what cost, her ecologic training asked. Were there blighted orchards somewhere else, because this apple was so perfect? Had such an apple come about by normal means, or had there been tampering with the balance of Ecos? Might there even have been a crime involved? The use of an illegal substance? Conserva knew very well that she should ask these questions, and that they would be considered a fine contribution to class discussion.

From her vantage point, a clump of rocks just at the edge of a cliff, she could look out over all the nearby islands. There were four — Safari was the closest, and in the distance were the blurred outlines of three other deserted islands. No one lived there, her instructor had told her, because man had brought disharmony to them in the past, and they were now being left to heal themselves. She wondered again how disharmony spread. The thought that it could infect an entire island, rendering it uninhabitable, was a sobering thought. Perhaps she should pay more

attention to what her friend Una said. Perhaps she should strive harder for hypersentience, make greater attempts to share. Could disharmony be cured in this fashion? Everyone seemed to think so. Healer Vole recommended these measures almost as enthusiastically as his herbs. She recalled the effects of his repulsive concoctions with disgust, and defiantly bit into the apple. The taste was sweet, with just the right trace of tartness.

. . .

As the chanting droned, Conserva noticed her classmates were all breathing in unison, while she herself had to stifle a frequent urge to sneeze, as the burning herbs tickled her nostrils. She had never before been so intensely aware of being out of step. What was wrong with her, she wondered. Protector Taura, seated facing the students just below the platform at the front of the Temple, made an entry in her notebook, and thrust it back into her pocket. Her darting blue eyes seemed to have registered every detail of Conserva's appearance, and her habitual smirk seemed to have intensified. Conserva checked herself over; her uniform seemed to be complete, including the medallion. She had remembered to take it out of her pocket and hang it back around her neck after work. Nevertheless, Taura continued to study her.

At length, the meditation was over, and the main event of the service began.

"Conserva, come forward," the Counselor intoned, and Conserva's knees began to shake. Somehow she stood and walked down the aisle. She had never stood so close to the Counselor before. Clad in his formal green robe, he towered over her by half a foot.

"Be One with Ecos," he said, his probing brown eyes seeming to take in every detail at once.

"In Ecos are all," she responded.

"This is a Witness examination," he informed the assembled crowd. "All will be silent." The background noises all quieted.

"Have you undertaken the prescribed Vigil?" he asked Conserva sternly.

"I have," she replied, barely able to speak above a whisper.

"What is the purpose of the Vigil?" he inquired.

"That all might understand and remember the evil of the past, that humankind may never again violate Ecos," she replied, relieved that her numb brain could produce at least this much of the formulaic response.

"What was the evil of the past?" he continued. She resolved to avoid his eyes, as they frightened her almost speechless. She chose a spot on his shoulder to look at, and replied.

"Humanity disturbed the universe and shattered its harmony, attempting to establish dominion over Ecos, rather than submitting to the natural order."

"What was the result?"

"Widespread death and entropy," recited Conserva.

"Did Ecos restore itself?"

"Ecos, the creative, generative, and destructive power, healed itself to some extent, but scars remain." She crossed her fingers. Ecos be praised for her good memory. She had given the Counselor nothing to reproach her for so far. However, the worst remained.

"What scar remains in our part of the planet?"

"The glow from Safari Island, where humans buried nuclear wastes."

"Does the island hide their shame?"

"The island announces their shame to all generations."

"Describe the sign." he said. "In your own words. As accurately as you can," he added.

"A glow emanates from the island, visible at night," she recited.

"I know," he said curtly. "Tell me what you yourself witnessed. It is your perception, not a textbook description, that is of interest to us," he said.

"I saw a shimmering," she began tentatively. She couldn't remember the Counselor's having asked so many questions of the other students. From the vantage point of a seat on a straw mat during previous ceremonies, she had thought the Counselor was bored by this ceremony. But he didn't seem bored tonight.

"Go on," he encouraged her.

"As the moon rose, there was a shimmering from the direction of the island."

"Yes . . . " he said expectantly.

"That was all."

"Surely you can describe it more fully. Was it not a steady purple glow from most of the island?" he prompted.

"Well, no," Conserva hesitated. Would he possibly try to trick her into agreeing with something that obviously wasn't so? He always insisted on precision in the quotations from Ramcott, and had he not just reminded her of his concern for correctness? She heard a faint stir from her classmates behind her.

"What did it look like then?" the Counselor demanded sternly.

"Like moonlight reflected from spray on the shore," Conserva said softly. "You think the glow from the island looks like moonlight. Are you sure you're not mistaken?" the Counselor leaned forward ominously. Conserva cringed a little.

"Well at first I was mistaken," Conserva admitted, in a barely audible voice. "I thought the glow was coming from the island. But when the moon went behind a cloud, the glow disappeared. So it must have been moonlight."

Only the sound of someone coughing at the back of the temple disturbed the silence. Conserva wondered if everyone could hear her heart beating — it was surely pounding loudly enough for all to hear. She had tried to give the correct answers — but with a sinking sensation realized fully what she had just said.

"Take your seat for meditation," the Counselor said. She did not have to look at him to know he was displeased.

She crept back to her seat, and stared at the packed earth floor of the temple. The chant that followed was not the one that welcomed a student to the community of the fully sentient and aware, but an abbreviated version of the usual dismissal. As the students filed out, Conserva overheard the whispers of her classmates.

"What did she say?"

"She must have fallen asleep instead of keeping Vigil."

"She was probably so busy talking to herself that she forgot to look at the island."

"She got the island mixed up with the moon. Can you believe it?"

"Maybe she is going blind. I have seen her pour out her herbal health infusion."

"She tends to live in a daydream, you know. But I didn't realize just how bad it was."

Conserva found herself escorted back to the Learning Center by Instructor Paxson, who motioned her into the Counselor's office, without a trace of his usual lipless smile. Idly, she noted the inscription on the door: "Marcus Lang, Counselor to the Olympian Islands Cell." The spacious room was decorated with an imposing photograph of the Founder and Chief Ecologist, the usual models of the Tree and Chain of Life, and several maps of the Cascadian Bioregion.

The Counselor, seated at an enormous polished wooden desk, gestured for her to sit on a small stool provided for her in front of the desk.

His brow furrowed slightly, its height emphasized by the manner in which his dark brown hair was combed back from his face. He regarded her thoughtfully for a long moment. A smooth, manicured hand stroked his pointed, neatly groomed beard.

Conserva's palms began to sweat.

"Read the history," the Counselor finally said, handing a file to her instructor.

"Student of Ecosection IIB, Form 11, named Conserva, is nearing the normal time of Promotion. Several serious irregularities have become manifest, and despite the most conscientious efforts by our faculty, she has not responded appropriately. We are most disappointed in her performance, which is quite unexpected in one who scored so high on the aptitude examinations. In the interest of Ecos, we wish to restore her to the right path before her course becomes irreversible. We are becoming quite concerned about the state of her health. I regret to say that the question of disharmony has been raised. Her witnessing, I fear, has confirmed our misgivings. Her perceptions are aberrant." Paxson paused for a moment and fixed Conserva with an impassive stare.

For a seemingly interminable time, the Counselor himself read through Conserva's file. "Academics are plus at least two standard deviations," he said, "but that in itself means nothing, or can be dangerous. We must ever guard against pridefulness." He glowered at her for a moment, and then returned to his reading. "The citizenship records are something else. Lack of enthusiasm in group participation. Never initiates self-criticism. Reluctant to share in group guidance sessions. Asks inappropriate questions. Inattentive at meditation. Searches the beach for artifacts. Appears to seek solitude. I could go on, but that is more than enough. The Witness Examination is merely confirmatory evidence of her tendency to impose her views on the environment." He paused, and Conserva clenched her jaw. He had tricked her with his questions. He had not wanted to know the answers at all. He had simply wanted to trap her.

"This is indeed extremely serious," he said at last, turning an accusing glance on the instructor, whose hands trembled noticeably. "I don't think there is much doubt about the situation. Nevertheless, we must not be hasty. Let us postpone the final determination until she has undergone a course of treatment in residence with the healer. Get her the proper document, and send her to the Institute of Healing without delay."

The Counselor turned his attention to other matters on his desk. The instructor wrote something on a piece of paper, and stamped it several times. Conserva perceived herself to hav e been dismissed: an unpleasant task checked off on a list.

The Counselor's words followed her down the corridor. "Sirica, you have disappointed me. What good is a child with knowledge, who has not learned the correct attitude? Our first failure. Still, perhaps it is not too late to salvage the situation."

. . .

Numbly, Conserva headed down the path to the Institute of Healing. There seemed to be no other place to go. Normally, it might have been a pleasant evening — less fog than usual, an occasional glimpse of the moon. Even the air smelled spicy and warm. Summer would soon be here. But the moon might as well belong to some other planet, because it wasn't shining for her. How could it — was she not an outcast from Ecos? She had tried to deny it, but there it was. She did not feel at one with the trees. She had only unfriendly thoughts for the rain and the

winter wind. She squashed insects without one twinge of regret. She didn't even like most of her classmates, and she hated having to share with them. She even wished that the plant blight would attack Healer Vole. She shuddered at her own evil thoughts. Well, the Vigil had proved it, if she had had any doubts. She was definitely sick.

Her mind had been warped, probably beyond repair. And perhaps it was not entirely due to her early barbaric upbringing. It might be partly her own fault. Had she not sought out the Lending Library, instead of the edifying literature supplied by the instructors? The imaginary characters in the forbidden books —Scheherazade, Cyrano, Jean Valjean — were far more real to her than the flesh-and-blood members of her group. And how she missed them! Shortly after a watchful Taura had replaced the indolent Protector Swenson, the Lending Library had disappeared. What if the Counselor knew that she was also guilty of the crime of reading unapproved literature! She wondered whether she should confess.

Yes, that was definitely the first step to healing. But, she now realized, it was also quite impossible. Until this evening, she had tried to deny that she was sick. She had persuaded herself that her sense of not belonging was simply due to stubbornness and lack of sufficient effort. Now she knew better. The problem was, her case was probably incurable.

Too late, a clanging bell penetrated her introspection, as Taura's bicycle careened around a corner. In trying to leap aside, she tripped and fell onto a rotten wooden fence. The fence collapsed and Conserva was dimly aware of a crack, and a searing pain in her leg before she passed out.

CHAPTER 5. SUMMONS

May not a singular necessity supersede the common rule of veracity?
Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*

The instructor's hovercraft roared into the bay, and into Meyer's consciousness, like a chimera from a bad dream. The pilot shut down the motor a hundred feet from the dock where Meyer sat. As the fragile white shell settled and drifted closer, Meyer could see the pilot's face through the plastic bubble of the windscreen. It's the Lizard, Meyer noted, the young, blond, dull one with no lips. The Counselor's former apprentice. Over the years, he had invented insulting names for the ecophiles, as that helped quell the anxiety he felt whenever he had to face one of them. Or repress the bitter memories, in this case.

Sirica Paxson leaped awkwardly from the hovercraft, struggling to secure it to the dock before the current carried it away. Meyer stayed where he was, making no move to help. Just an old man sitting in the spring sunshine, he said to himself. He could refuse his cooperation in such small matters; there would be no repercussions. A petty victory.

"Ah, the perfect Aryan," Meyer called out, as the instructor came striding with his usual air of confidence, his rubber boots noisy on the uneven, rotting boards of the dock. "If you had a riding crop — no, I believe they were called swagger sticks — you could beat it on your thigh. That would suit you — oh yes. And black leather boots, of course, very high, very well polished." He gauged the weather in the instructor's stormy face, and decided to curb his chivvying.

The Lizard made an exasperated sound. "I haven't the time to listen to your babble today. You have no more sense than a cormorant. You know perfectly well that none of us would wear leather. We would never murder one of Ecos's sentient creatures to wear its hide. Why do you ever speak such nonsense?"

"Ah," Meyer agreed. "I must have confused you with someone else."

"With whom?" the Lizard asked, suspiciously. Meyer wondered how anyone could have such a literal mind.

"With someone who came for my grandfather," Meyer said, "before my father was born."

The man looked puzzled. He clearly took himself very seriously; Meyer wondered whether anything could make Paxson laugh. Fortunately, he was too ignorant to be insulted, yet. Best not to tempt fortune.

"But why have you come for me now?"

"We have a patient for you at the Institute of Healing," Paxson informed him, fixing Meyer with eyes the color of pewter. "Perhaps you'll stir your useless bones and try to earn your keep. After all, you say you're a doctor."

Meyer started with mock astonishment. "What — someone has fallen ill! Doesn't harmony with that cosmic force of yours — Ecos, isn't it — ward off illness?"

"You are really quite unbearable," Paxson remarked. "I don't see why the Counselor tolerates you. The patient is obviously not in harmony with Ecos."

"So, what have I to offer, then? Quack that I am, I cannot even diagnose disharmony, let alone treat it. Why don't you call on someone who can summon the Healing Force?"

"We have, though I'm not sure why we bother, for a silly girl who has failed to see the light at Vigil. She has a high fever and a draining wound, but the little fool refuses to drink her herbal infusion or to allow the healer to proceed with the acupuncture treatment."

"Ah," Meyer said, "a noncompliant patient. A sure sign of disharmony. Fit only for the old sawbones."

"Quite. She is fearfully retarded in the socialization process. The healer feels that her prognosis is guarded. However, she has not yet had the opportunity to complete the treatment." The instructor spoke of his student with obvious distaste. "Here's the authorization for your visit. We expect you to be there this afternoon, so that the healer can get on with her real therapy," the Lizard concluded pompously. He handed over the papers, relieved to have his odious errand completed.

As the hovercraft receded, Meyer did not feel the accustomed sense of relief. "Vigil," he muttered. He had heard about that ritual. It had probably been invented by Marcus Lang himself, as an exercise in perception for the students at his famous school. His patient had not seen the fabled glow because there was, of course, none to see. Yet, as far as Meyer knew, this girl was the first student ever to say so. After all, the desolation on Safari Island was plain enough. If one believed that nuclear wastes were the cause, one might as well also imagine that they glowed. In reality, Safari Island's ruin had been brought about decades ago by overpopulation and overgrazing, after weekend sportsmen had tired of hunting the animals with which they had stocked their artificial game preserve. Such a dead, deserted place was a perfect site for an nuclear waste dump. Meyer admired the genius who had thought of using his island for that purpose. He must have made a fortune on the venture, before the regulators put a stop to it.

As for his newly assigned patient, she must obviously suffer from a serious case of indiscretion. For this he had no cure. If not suggestible enough to experience the usual hallucination, why didn't she just lie, and save everyone a lot of trouble — especially himself. A lie was a small enough price to pay for life, even life in this dreary refuge.

Out on the mud flats the wading birds, routed by the hovercraft's passage, had resumed their activities — old men, trousers rolled, hands clasped behind them, wading companionably in the shallows. But Meyer's peace was ruined. He shivered, although the sun was warm on his shoulders. He had survived far more dangerous situations, he told himself. This is just a routine visit to see a patient.

He fingered his wristwatch, which occasionally reminded him of his reluctant link with the exiled scientists. When it vibrated, a message was being recorded for him by the radio concealed in the madrone near his shack. Fortunately, Meyer didn't need to transmit very often; his medical advice was needed less frequently since he had instructed Parsons and his assistant. They had simply appeared without warning one dark night, with some books. Meyer had not been pleased. But to allow them to continue in their ignorance — an ignorance apparent in the first questions they had asked — would have been intolerable. So Professor Meyer had held a crash course, in his very own offshore medical school.

Now Meyer could forget about the Safari Islanders, most of the time. Occasionally they ordered some pharmaceuticals, which he supplied in trade for the aluminum-air power cell, the source of the electricity that made his life tolerably comfortable, and the aluminum sheets for recharging it. They had certainly known how to tempt him into cooperation, when his supply of

diesel had been running low. But his assistance ended with the pharmaceuticals. Despite several appeals, Meyer had refused to contribute his scientific talents to their enterprise, or to seek inquisitive minds to rescue from this decaying society. He was merely protecting himself. Each month when the exiles made a landing in "his" little bay, he was terror-stricken. Surely the visitors would be discovered, and Meyer's own role, minor as it was, exposed. And despite its meagerness, it would surely be enough to cost him the last refuge he was ever likely to secure.

Meyer shuddered when he thought about the risks that others took. The Safari Islanders, of course — but they at least had boats in which they could attempt to escape. What about Al, who worked under the very nose of the ecophiles? Unquestionably, it was only laxity and incompetence on the part of the Agriculture Inspector and the former Protector that had saved Al — so far. Meyer had deliberately avoided learning about the other things (besides moonshine) that Al dispensed from the biomass plant when the farmers brought in their contributions. But he could see the suspicious containers in the cache left by the Safari Islanders. And surely others besides the scientists monitored ham radio frequencies. It would be only matter of time before they too found the source — the loft at the biomass plant.

Meyer's reluctance to get more involved was not just lack of courage, he told himself, but plain common sense. His fears were entirely realistic. Al would be discovered, sooner or later. And so would the Safari Islanders. Counselor Lang had come perilously close to learning about them ten years ago. How could that small group of exiles still cherish the hope of nursing their science through this dark age?

Meyer angrily pushed aside thoughts of the scientists. Usually, he managed to avoid thinking of them unless something forced him to remember. He must be careful not to allow his mind to wander, he told himself.

At present, Meyer had only one problem. The one the Lizard had just brought. Unfortunately, the problem could not be dodged. Having learned medicine as a survival skill, Meyer had taken on a commitment. An uncomfortable commitment, which he sometimes tried to deny.

Meyer gathered up a small stock of surgical tools and medicines, carefully mislabeled. In this society, all living biota from mollusks to viruses had their right to life — so the Green Laws stated — and meddling with Ecos' plan was strictly forbidden. A remedy was permitted only if its effect was to enhance natural healing. A perilous matter of definitions. Meyer sighed wearily. He would go to his patient and trust in his own cleverness to mask his scientific identity. It had always saved him before — perhaps it would deliver him once again. What choice had he?

CHAPTER 6. HEALING

Health care, as opposed to disease care, is the art of orchestrating the social factors that must be harmonized if there is to be health in the individual member of the societal organism.

Roscoe Vole, Founder of the Center for Harmony and Wellness

"She's in there," Healer Vole said, removing one gaunt hand from the sleeve of his gray robe and gesturing with a long grimy fingernail toward a room at the back of the Institute of Healing. He walked ahead, and Meyer followed him, noting that the healer's domain, like the healer himself, was coated with layers of accumulated grime, including the sticky residues of the various herbs that he burned. An acrid odor clung to the man and permeated the building.

Meyer's uneasiness mounted. Treating patients who made their surreptitious way to his shack on the bay was quite different from practicing medicine under the jealous eye of the healer. When the sick or injured came to Meyer, he just did whatever he thought was best. But here, there were other considerations — such as Healer Vole's fanaticism about "natural" remedies. And diplomacy was not Meyer's strong suit. Fortunately, he was rarely summoned to the Institute of Healing — this was the first time in over a year. Meyer suspected that his visits were never Vole's idea.

"She's really quite uncooperative," Vole pronounced as he opened the door of a dark, tiny room, heedless whether the patient heard him or not. "She resists our best efforts to redistribute her vital forces. A most troublesome case."

Meyer put a rein on his tongue.

The thin flushed figure in the bed, who appeared to be about 16, looked exhausted. She was not pretty, neither was she plain. Her hazel eyes, small features and rather pointed chin gave her appearance a certain distinctiveness, an elfin quality. At this moment, her long straight brown hair was plastered damply to her forehead and her eyes glittered with unshed tears. At the healer's appearance, she crept a little further under the tattered blanket.

"Conserva," the healer said admonishingly, "you must cease resisting our efforts to restore you to harmony. You are a most ungrateful child."

As Meyer put his bag on the little table beside Conserva's cot, Vole continued. "People, as Ecos taught us, are the phenomenological interface of a myriad of energy fields. Health consists in the balance and flow among them." Vole illustrated the idea with some flowing gestures. "As healers, we simply set aside all concerns about the outcome of our therapy, and concentrate on the act of healing. The process is the key," he said reverently. "It is the healing mediation of Ecos."

"Yes," Meyer agreed equivocally, "but Conserva — "

"Ah yes, Conserva." The healer turned his eyes upon the girl. "She resists us. Her vital forces are in such turmoil that I cannot even center myself to begin the assessment. When I pass my hands over her energy fields, I find nothing but asymmetries. Most troublesome. As she is

in such an obvious state of disharmony, I obtained the Counselor's permission to send for you. Doctors, I recall, were intimately acquainted with disharmony. In the old days, they devoted their entire lives to the study of diseases — most curious. Ecos has shown us the folly of dwelling upon pathology. . . But I digress. Perhaps your primitive methods may be of some use in this case."

The healer — having no stomach to observe barbarisms — withdrew, probably to see to a few young people who were waiting in the atrium. When they were alone, the patient looked at Meyer curiously. "Who are you?" she asked. "You don't wear the robes of a healer."

"That's because I'm not a healer," he answered her. "I'm a physician. As you heard him explain, there's a difference these days."

"I know who you are," she whispered excitedly. "You're that old man who lives on the beach beneath Vigil Cliff. You sewed up Vera's arm when she fell out of the tree. She told me. And you gave Dale some little pellets when she had a cough."

"What happened to you?" Meyer inquired, motioning her to silence about his past history.

"I fell down, trying to get out of the way of a bicycle, and landed on a fence."

Meyer grumbled something about inevitability, hesitating to express openly his opinion of the bicycling protector.

"May I examine your leg?" Meyer asked.

"Yes, of course, but it may be a waste of time. They say that I am in such a state of disharmony that there may be no hope." She looked at Meyer for confirmation or denial, but when he made no reply, she frowned and shook her head.

Meyer rolled up her pant leg past the wound, from which ominous red streaks were radiating. He arranged some instruments and some towels to absorb the blood and pus. If it's so important to combat evil humors, he said to himself, I wonder why it never occurs to them to drain pus?

"Where were you born?" he asked.

"Far away," Conserva said. "in a very primitive place, they say. There was a long trip here when I was about six." A few tears overflowed. Meyer had evidently touched on a suppressed memory.

"With luck, it was a place where they still believed in tetanus toxoid when you were an infant. I'll give you a booster, but there's no way to get antitoxin." Conserva watched curiously, as he injected a bit of fluid into her arm. Meyer hoped that would suffice. He had seen several cases of tetanus recently — severe "disharmony" indeed! — but Conserva had no spasm in her jaw muscles, at least not yet.

"Now will you swallow a couple of these for me please?" He handed her two capsules, and she washed them down with a little water. He gave her several more, with instructions to take them four times daily. He explained what he was going to do, and to his surprise she bore the pain stoically. In fact, she seemed to tolerate the procedure better than he himself did. He had the nausea, lightheadedness, and cold sweat that sometimes came over him when he saw open wounds. Clearly, surgery was not his calling. Even the pictures in his precious *Hamilton Bailey's Textbook of Emergency Surgery* could make him ill.

When he had finished extracting the wood splinters and probing the wound for pus pockets, he heard the healer moving around in the outer room. Conserva heard him too, and looked anxiously at Meyer. "What do I tell him about the medicine?" she asked. "Dale didn't tell our group guidance staff person about hers."

Meyer raised his eyebrows. "Leave the explanations to me," he said. "I'm more experienced than you."

Exhausted, his patient soon fell asleep. Meyer sat at the side of her cot, unwilling to go into the other room and face Vole. Conserva mumbled something and on impulse he took one of her hands in his. She looked wary and troubled even in sleep; he felt a grudging sympathy for her. "Little troublemaker," he said, knowing she could not hear him. After a while he sighed, got up stiffly, and quietly left the room, shutting the door behind him.

Vole was accompanying another patient into a room. After a quick look at the patient's eyes and skin, Meyer guessed the diagnosis to be hyperthyroidism. Vole directed Meyer to wait in the little room that appeared to serve as his office, and Meyer couldn't help overhearing his conversation with the patient. "An excess of energy," Vole said. "We need to insert a few needles along the energy meridian to dissipate the excess flow." Meyer shook his head. Radioactive iodine had been outlawed years ago. Every nuclear medicine department in the nation had been found to violate the new, impossible standards for permitted radiation exposure. So, the healer was using acupuncture. And not very skillfully. Meyer winced at a cry from the next room.

Meyer looked at the titles on the bookshelf. *A Barefoot Doctor's Manual,* and *Secrets of the Chinese Herbalists.* And, of course, Roscoe Vole's own best-selling classics: *Therapeutic Powers of Northwest Wildflowers, Hypersentience: Other Life Awareness, Regeneration through Electro-Acuscopy.* They had once been widely acclaimed in popular magazines as handbooks of "alternative therapy."

Meyer recalled having seen Vole himself on television, Channel 5 in Seattle: "Today's Natural Health Pearl," or something like that. It must have been during the biochemistry meeting, when Meyer had tuned in for the stock market report. Vole had been advertising a seminar at the Center for Health and Wellness, a glorified health food store that he had founded and then franchised. Cynically, Meyer had immediately decided to invest in stock options in the wellness industry. (He had made a handsome profit, and never had had to purchase any stock.) Meyer sighed. Now he, the "allopathic physician," was the quack, in the eyes of the world.

Medicine had been the first science to be noticeably affected by the wave of antitechnologic sentiment that had swept the country soon after the turn of the century. His own medical school had eventually succumbed and had established a Department of Nonallopathic Medicine. The fad had not been a serious threat to the survival of the republic. But a similar trend in other fields — which were, Meyer had to admit, more important to public health than was medicine itself — had had far more serious implications. The country's large population had been dependent on the availability of cheap energy. But windmills and biomass generators, aspects of technology deemed non-inimical to Ecos, provided piddling rations of electricity. The unlimited solar energy promised by the ecophiles continued to fall on the earth at a maximum influx of 1 kilowatt per square meter. But it could not be harnessed at an affordable cost, and in any case there was not enough energy for manufacturing the collectors.

Of course, many of the arguments against runaway technology made sense. And a series of disasters — droughts, an invasion by locusts in the Midwest, an epidemic of a bizarre new disease that rapidly devastated the body's immune system — all had given credence to the idea of a planet out of touch with Ecos. But the seeds of ecophilia had been sown years earlier. A small group of eco-radicals, calling themselves Stewards of the Earth, had started the bioregional movement in the 1970s. Their small-scale rural experiments had attracted little notice. No one had taken seriously their claim to be healers of the planet.

Their prescription had called for replacing a "colonizing" existence — requiring large, centralized institutions and dependent on "technoscience" — with a "climactic" framework based on small, decentralized institutions relying on "ecoscience." Humankind, they had said, had reached the stage of a climax community — a steady-state situation, which could endure for thousands of years, as long as it remained undisturbed by growth and development.

The ecological movement had attracted thousands of alienated youth, lured by the promise of a utopia in which they would no longer have to struggle to cope with the demands of a technological, industrialized civilization. Meyer doubted that many of them had foreseen the consequences of their ideas. He suspected that Roscoe Vole's main interest in the movement had been the ready market it had created for the products and seminars of his Center for Harmony and Wellness. On the other hand, maybe Vole really did believe his own claptrap about healing touch, herbs, and hypersentience. In either case, poetic justice had been done. Vole was here in this dank corner of the Cascadian Bioregion, with the herbs he professed to love. It had been his own choice.

Or had it, Meyer wondered. The ecophile network had just started its exponential growth phase in the late 1980s when the antinuclear and peace activists had joined, contributing their formidable organizing abilities. The atomic bomb was, after all, the quintessential symbol of technoscience gone awry. In the early days of the Third Millennium, the Peace and Conservation Party had grown with incredible swiftness. Once a charismatic leader had arisen — ecologist-activist Alexander Ramcott — there had been no stopping the new movement.

After a "suitcase bomb," a small nuclear weapon of undetermined origin, had been detonated in a nuclear power plant near Detroit in 2023, destroying both the reactor and the containment building, Ramcott and his followers had been poised to march into power via the democratic process. Unlike most political figures, Ramcott had proceeded at once to implement his campaign promises, backed by a groundswell of public support. The United States, renamed the Lower North American Bioregion, had been declared a nuclear free zone, and "technoscientists," those who had tried to manipulate nature, had been set to dismantling their own work.

Fortunately, Meyer had made his profits before the stock market crash in 2025, and had had his refuge prepared. Maxwell Island had been his fishing retreat for years. He had become a familiar figure; his presence had never been questioned.

Meyer abandoned this profitless line of thought when Vole returned. Vole seated himself at his desk, in a chair that was noticeably higher than the one placed for the visitor. Probably not accidental, Meyer thought. Pointedly ignoring Meyer, Vole made an entry in a folder — lengthy enough to make the insult plain. Meyer took the opportunity to study the healer. It was difficult to recognize him as the former television personality. He had the same air of self-approbation, and wore a similar amulet, but he no longer had a public relations staff to see to his personal appearance. Nor did he have to outshine any competitors. He apparently shaved about once a week, and his straight yellow-grey hair straggled around his shoulders. His skin was sallow, his teeth decaying. His temporal muscles appeared wasted, giving his face an ascetic appearance. The man probably followed his own advice about the benefits of fasting.

"So," Healer Vole said, scratching himself unself-consciously. "What is your opinion about the patient?"

"I have examined her," Meyer said, and Vole prepared to take notes. Did the healer keep dossiers? Meyer wondered. Perhaps Vole was hoping for a realignment of the political forces on the island. Caution was definitely in order. "Of course, my primitive techniques qualify me to

do only the most rudimentary of procedures, and to work on the patient piecemeal, as it were. I removed some splinters from her leg, and I see no reason why she should not recover satisfactorily." Noting the healer's expression, Meyer hastily amended his statement. "That is, I see no reason why her leg should not recover. As to the recovery of the whole organism, I can make no prediction. The state of disharmony, from which she believes she suffers, seems to occupy her thoughts a great deal."

"As it should," Vole responded. "Those out of harmony with Ecos are never at peace with themselves."

"It would seem to be a most challenging case," Meyer said. It would not hurt, he told himself, to flatter the healer's ego a little, to gain some information about this patient. "If I may ask, how do you hope to restore the disrupted balance? And what do you think is the prognosis?"

Vole pondered for a moment. "To start with the basics," he said, with an air of condescension, "I believe we could realign her energy fields temporarily. The problem is that she has a history of resisting the integration of her ego into the group, the community, and the cosmos. Without such integration, lasting harmony within the individual becomes impossible."

"I see," Meyer said. "It must be discouraging for you."

"Personal feelings are unimportant," the healer said. "We must remain selfless at all times."

"'Concern for fellow creatures must always come before any personal interests,'" Meyer quoted from Ramcott.

"Indeed so," the healer said reverently. "The essence of social responsibility." The healer's voice had the ring of moral righteousness, his eyes the gleam of religious conviction. Meyer had always assumed that the healer's goal had been primarily to profit from the gullibility of the public. Now he wasn't sure.

"So your concern for the patient comes first?" Meyer inquired.

"That is one of the basic fallacies of allopathic medicine," Vole said, with an air of superiority, "and it leads to egotism. No, no. The welfare of the community of Ecos must always come before personal interests. Even if it means an admission of personal failure."

"Failure?" Meyer asked.

"As in this case," the healer said. Meyer thought Vole sounded quite sure of himself. "Our most vigorous therapy has a slight prospect of restoring the student Conserva to a state of harmony. But if we fail — as I fear we will — we will simply have to steel ourselves to send her to the House of Tranquility on the mainland. The mind cleansing may be the only hope for salvaging a useful member of society. She deserves that chance. Even though it means that we failed, and must own up to it."

Meyer repressed his outrage. "A difficult professional decision, I'm sure."

The healer pushed his chair away from the desk, and Meyer felt that he had been dismissed. "I can see that her wound is of trivial significance, compared with her other problems," Meyer said, as he rose to leave. "But I must tell you that my treatment is not yet complete." Vole looked suspicious, and Meyer hastened to reassure him. "Most inconvenient, I realize, but these primitive methods take time."

"Indeed. How much time?" the healer inquired.

"Days. More than a week. But she must be brought to me. For making a deeper incision I need instruments that do not fit in my bag."

Vole regarded Meyer narrowly. The treatment sounded sufficiently unpleasant — no doubt Vole thought it might do her good. "Very well," he agreed. "I will send her in several days.

As he emerged from the healer's odious presence, Meyer took an appreciative breath of clean air. But he could not flee the conviction that Conserva's treatment was a farce. They knew they could not heal her, and Meyer suspected that they only awaited next month's ferry to ship her off to the mainland. Treating her wound was possibly a pretext to entrap him. In any case, she was as doomed as if the healer had held a gun to her head, or had infected her with an incurable disease. But of course she already had a deadly disease — a natural inclination to speak the truth — though not an incurable one, as his own example proved. So why had he asked to see her again? Why should he get involved in a hopeless case?

All at once, Meyer was overcome by a depression so profound that he sat down in the roadway and considered weeping. A doomed girl — younger this time — with a Staphylococcal wound infection. Not again. Not when he thought that his own wound was healed, after so many years. Well, he wasn't going to make the same mistake again.

His reverie was soon disturbed by the familiar figure in grey coveralls, with the notebook bulging from a pocket. She whizzed by on her bicycle, applied the brakes, and turned back to confront him.

"Be One with Ecos," Taura said: a command, not a greeting.

"In Ecos are all," Meyer grumbled.

"You are out late, Practitioner," Taura pointed out. "How may I serve you?"

You could bring me a glass of Scotch, Meyer thought irritably, but said nothing.

"I assume you must need something. Otherwise you would not be loitering in the roadway. Do not hesitate to ask," she persisted, pen poised expectantly above the notebook page.

"Rest," Meyer said, then capitulated with a sigh. Apologizing for his decrepit joints, he informed her of his errand and destination. Having duly recorded the data, she remounted the bicycle.

For just a moment he felt angry; then was overcome by weariness. That's just how things are, he thought. One must endure what cannot be changed. I'm an old man. I want my dinner, a warm fire, and a drink. If there was no more Scotch on earth, then Al's moonshine would have to do. I want to sit on the dock and watch the wading birds. I want peace. And Conserva ? his conscience interposed. "Little troublemaker," he said aloud fiercely, to no one in particular, and shuffled through the dark to his house.

CHAPTER 7. FERMENT

The sun — in the form of sunlight, wind, water, and biomass — is an inexhaustible source of pluralistic, humanistic, decentralized energy with minimal entropic potential.

Alexander Ramcott, *Collected Works*

Now that she no longer had a fever, Conserva started the course of treatment prescribed by Healer Vole. She was to spend her days tending the digester in the biomass plant and her evenings rereading and regurgitating the works of the Chief Ecologist.

The biomass plant was familiar to her because the collection of manure from laying hens, draft animals, and of course the outhouses, was the job of the young children at the Learning Center. Farmers also brought in cartloads of grass, compost, and other agricultural debris, which had to be logged in with Al the energy chargeperson. Each had a quota of biomass to contribute.

Despite his friendliness, and his cheerful willingness to help empty the heavy buckets, the children were usually frightened by their first sight of Al. His ugliness was quite extraordinary. His face was deeply pitted with scars, and dotted with pustules. Patches of stubble remained on his chin despite his effort to shave. He frequently had to blow his large red nose into a damp handkerchief, as he was doing when Conserva approached him to present her document from the healer.

He carelessly tossed her paper onto an untidy stack, and looked her over with his swollen red eyes. "So you're to be an energy recycler," he said. "Under the guidance of the energy recycling chargeperson. That's me. You can call me Al." He grinned at her and asked with a wink, "What'd you do?"

Conserva wasn't sure how to respond to his irreverent attitude and straightforward question. "I don't think it's something I did exactly. I'm here for treatment, they say, to improve my relationship with Ecos."

"Yeah," he said noncommittally. "Let me show you around."

Conserva followed him dutifully, and then with interest, as he limped around the compound, wheezing a little, and explained its operation.

The plant had several different size digesters, each with a small shed built around it. The largest was a partly buried cylindrical tank with the strange inscription "Texaco." Each morning, Al told her, some effluent was removed, and the anaerobic bacteria were fed a new bolus of biomass. They required a balanced diet, he explained, and each tank was a little different. Conserva noted that the area near the tanks was comfortably warm. The bacteria only worked well near a temperature of 35 degrees Centigrade, Al told her, and nearly a quarter of the methane that they produced was required to maintain that temperature. Besides pouring in the "slurry input," as Al called it, her job was to take samples at intervals to be sure that the pH,

whatever that was, remained in the proper range. Also, she had to turn on the stirrers several times daily, whenever there was adequate electricity available.

Some of the methane was piped to the nearby generator, and some was stored in inner tubes to be used for cooking at the Learning Center. The net output, Al said, was the equivalent of 280-kilowatt hours per day, from 2000 people, 500 chickens, 100 sheep and goats, and 50 horses, more or less. Enough to power maybe 20 old-fashioned houses. Conserva filed the numbers away along with other things she didn't understand, though Al seemed to be talking primarily to himself. The power station, he added, also received erratic input from the island's windmills, when the wind was blowing.

After the tour, Al left her mostly alone, making an occasional circuit of the compound to inspect gauges.

. . .

Conserva nearly spilled the sample, when someone coughed just behind her. The healer was making rounds unexpectedly that afternoon.

"Be One with Ecos," he said.

"In Ecos are all."

The healer motioned her to a spot near the compound's fence. He seated himself rather too close for her liking, and carefully rearranged his grey robe.

"Practitioner Meyer informed me that he wished to see you again to examine your injury," the healer began, watching her carefully. "In your present condition, I am hesitant to subject you to that influence, as I fear it could disturb your forces, which are gradually beginning to align themselves more harmoniously." He passed his hands in front of her a few times.

"However," he continued with narrowed eyes, "it is possible that you might be able to perform an important service to Ecos, and thereby actually facilitate the healing process."

"How might I serve?" asked Conserva, feigning humility. What did the healer really want with her?

"You are aware that there is a focus of disharmony somewhere on this island," the healer said, and Conserva guiltily averted her eyes. The healer moved even closer and lowered his voice. "We suspect it might be traced to this practitioner Meyer. There are rumors that he may be guilty of crimes against Ecos too unspeakable to describe to a young person. We need evidence, in order to decide on the best course of action. If you are willing to undertake the risk of visiting him again, you might be able to help. If so, you must be very observant, and report back everything to us, even those things that may not seem significant to you."

Conserva felt his eyes boring into her mind, but couldn't tell how far they were able to penetrate. Well, what did she have to lose? The dressing on her leg was becoming quite foul, and she had actually thought of slipping away to see Meyer about it. "Of course I will go," she said, cooperatively, although some instinct rebelled at the thought of spying. Well, she could decide later what to say.

"Good," the healer said. "But prepare carefully with meditations, and remember to tell me everything afterward. That will minimize the risk. I do not think he would dare to harm you in an obvious manner. It is the subtle effect on your mind that we must be concerned about. Be on guard, but see what you can discover. Even your penchant for asking questions might be, in this instance, of use to the community of Ecos."

Conserva nodded obediently.

"I will inform your supervisor that you are to be excused this afternoon." The healer brushed off his robe a little, and set out to find Al, an errand that seemed to take him a long time. Strange, Conserva thought. Just after the healer's arrival, she thought she had heard Al close by, snuffling into his handkerchief. She shrugged. Perhaps she had been mistaken.

. . .

The overgrown path to Meyer's shack wound below the Vigil cliff. As Conserva made her way through the weeds, the cliff towered over her—a reminder of a past now separated from her present life by a gulf broader than the channel between Safari Island and the Isle of Amity. Her future looked as bleak as the landscape of Safari.

Banished from the Learning Center, she had not even been allowed to return to the dormitory for her things. Someone had gathered up her spare pullover, her old pair of straw sandals, and a few toilet articles, and stuffed them into a bag under her cot in the Institute of Healing. Gone was her small collection of treasures from the beach, which she had gathered during ecology walks. Occasionally she had found a mysterious fragment of a dead civilization — a fragment of colored glass, a scarcely corroded metal container — and instead of disposing of the litter in the proper manner, she had surreptitiously stuffed it into a pocket. She knew that was wrong. The primitive past was full of evils that needed to be buried lest people again be tempted to commit crimes against nature. But even though she knew the danger of their superficial prettiness, she had found the attraction irresistible. She sometimes found herself wondering what the people had really been like as she examined the bits and pieces they had left behind. Why was she curious about criminals? It was part of her illness, she knew. She hoped that her permitted collection of rocks and natural specimens had simply been discarded — without examining the artifacts hidden beneath it — or she would have yet another eccentricity to explain to her mentors. But more dismaying than this worry was the peculiar loneliness she felt now that her few personal possessions were gone.

Finally, she arrived at her destination. The strange old man's hovel was built right against the side of the cliff. She clanged the crusted bell, and shivered in the salt breeze. A brown eye peered through the small shutter in the door, then Meyer, muttering something unintelligible, motioned for her to come inside.

The front room, austere but clean, was fitted out to serve as an examining room. Several shelves were full of weathered old books; the only one that looked new, nearly untouched, was the obligatory *Collected Works* of Ramcott. Carefully labeled bottles containing herbs lined the shelves. A desk, an examining table, a cabinet of instruments, and a small stool completed the furnishings. The orderliness contrasted with Meyer's rumpled personal appearance. His gray, curly hair and beard were bushy and unkempt, his workman's shirt with two bulging pockets had been patched many times.

Meyer didn't look altogether pleased to see her, and his large, hooked nose twitched — either from habit, or because of the strong organic odor that clung to her, overpowering the faint chemical scent of the room. She felt a little self-conscious.

"So how is the patient today?" Meyer inquired, somewhat gruffly.

"My leg doesn't hurt much, and my fever is gone. I have taken all the medicine you gave me."

"I can tell that you are now working in the temple of Ecos," he said.

"No," Conserva replied with a puzzled expression. "The biomass plant."

"Quite so," Meyer said, gesturing for her to climb up on the examining table. She displayed the wound, the dressing soaked through with drainage. Meyer removed it with the faintest expression of distaste.

"Hmmm. The redness is mostly gone. I shall just have to remove the packing and clean the wound."

Conserva occupied herself in examining the titles of books, while Meyer deftly completed his work. Mostly they seemed to be about healing. But there was a *World Almanac* from 1999, a *Road Atlas of the United States*, *The Basic Fix It Book*, and several others that looked particularly inviting.

"What was the medicine you gave me?" she asked.

"A variety of penicillin. It is made by a mold, and modified by me. Biological warfare. An artificially cultivated mold versus the Staphylococcus. We have probably committed a crime against Ecos, killing the billions of Staphylococci that were in that wound, and altering their habitat besides," Meyer said, mostly to himself, as he discarded the soiled dressings.

"Did the mold win?"

Meyer studied her for a long moment. "A natural question. Someone still asks it, after years of 'no winners or losers.' Yes, the mold has won."

"And is the . . . Staphylococcus like the bacteria at the biomass plant?" "Rather different," Meyer explained, adopting a professorial tone. "The digesters rely on fermentation, 'life without air,' as Pasteur called it. Staphylococci, on the other hand, are aerobes. The anaerobes live in the gut; the Staph on the skin."

Conserva opened her mouth to ask what he was talking about, but he turned away abruptly, as if he had already said too much. Could he know that her inquisitiveness had been encouraged by the healer? He gathered up some wooden sticks with cotton tufts on the end, and poured a brown liquid into a little bottle. "You must clean the wound yourself twice a day, just as I did, then wrap it to keep it clean. It will heal gradually, although it will leave a scar."

"What does it matter?" Conserva said glumly. Maybe I won't be able to see that, either. Can't you do something for my eyes?"

"There's nothing wrong with your eyes."

"Then what is wrong with me? I have done all the exercises and meditations, but I seem to be getting worse. I do not want to take any more herbs, because they cause disharmony of the stomach, and do not seem to help the disharmony in my mind."

"I'm just a doctor," he said, looking genuinely regretful. "I can't help you. . . because there's nothing wrong with you."

Conserva look at him in astonishment. Everyone knew there was something wrong with her. Even her classmates had always sensed that, although they had not been absolutely certain of it until yesterday.

Meyer shook his head. "You have a long walk back. I have some warm soup." He disappeared into the next room, and as Conserva heard some busy clattering, she could not restrain herself. She opened the well-worn book on Meyer's desk, and discovered that the inside title, *Textbook of Medicine*, did not match the outside title, *Energy Meridians.* She began to leaf through it, closing it hastily as Meyer's footsteps approached. Meyer made her sit at his desk, and watched her devour a large bowl of thick, tasty soup. Then he brought a plate of something pink and flaky.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's good," he said, as she soon verified for herself.

"Why don't you eat also?"

"I finished already," he lied. "Eat all of it. It's good for you." Meyer watched inscrutably from beneath bushy brows as she swallowed every bite.

"I have never tasted anything like this. What is it?"

"Did you have enough?" he asked evasively.

"Yes, you are very kind."

"Then you must hurry. If you are absent long, somebody will surely be seeing to your welfare. Especially if you come here. As you know, the sun needs your assistance in harnessing its energy for the benefit of the community."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "There are so many questions I want to ask you."

"You ask too many questions, girl. That is your problem," he declared.

"I have been told that before. Yet we are encouraged to ask questions," Conserva said in puzzlement.

"Only the ones to which the answers are written in Ramcott's book." Meyer laughed humorlessly, as he opened the door for her.

With her little bag of medicine and dressings in hand, Conserva set off thoughtfully. Several urgent questions were swimming around her mind, just below the level of accessibility. Only after beginning to shiver could she formulate the first one. "It wasn't cold in there, but there was no fire. Why wasn't it cold?"

There was something else, something that still eluded her. For the moment, her speculations were displaced by the rhyme that seemed to be whispered by the chill wind from the bay:

> Bay beneath the fearsome cliff,
> No safe anchor for a skiff.
> Children in the beasts' embrace
> Disappear without a trace.

And hadn't someone really disappeared? Whatever could have happened to Sylvan, she wondered, as she quickened her steps?

. . .

"Well," the healer said expectantly, filling his pen with soy ink, "what have you to report?"

Conserva thought for a moment. She would have to be very careful. She had decided to edit her reports to the healer, since she had begun to feel an affinity for Meyer. He seemed an outcast from Ecos, as she was. But he was the only person who would answer her questions — some of them at least.

"I went to see Practitioner Meyer. He looked at my wound, and pulled out the packing. It hurt quite a lot. He probed an instrument into my leg, then painted it with some brown liquid, and wrapped it up again. He gave me some of the liquid," she said, in a cooperative tone. He would probably find the medicine anyway, she thought.

"What did he say?"

"Hardly anything," she said. "And he is so grim looking that I didn't dare ask him much."

"What did you ask?"

"I asked him about the medicine he gave me."

"What did he say?"

"He said it was a very good medicine, with great healing powers."

The healer scowled. "Did he display any disrespect for Ecos?"

"I didn't think so," Conserva said. "And he had a copy of the *Collected Works* on his desk. What might he have done?"

The healer was clearly displeased. Apparently she had not told him anything helpful. Conserva was relieved when he returned to the subject of the evening lesson.

"What is the supreme law of nature?"

"The entropy law," responded Conserva quickly.

"What is another name for entropy?"

"Pollution."

"What is the most serious source of pollution?"

"Humankind," she replied for at least the twentieth time in a week.

"How can the rate of entropy increase be minimized?"

"By maintaining the energy flow-through at a low constant level, distributed in a manner compatible with the wholeness of the organism, to maximize the social good," Conserva recited.

"What is the social good?"

"The unity of all, living together in a finite world," Conserva continued, wondering what it meant.

"What is the duty of each?"

"To behave in an ecocentric manner, renouncing all egocentric tendency. To keep allegiance to the one planet, interconnected, with beauty and peace for all."

"What is the greatest danger to peace and interconnectedness?"

"The pollution of the noosphere by incorrect, entropy generating thought."

The healer set the book aside. "Enough," he said. "It is time for me to retire to my own meditations. For tomorrow, study the chapter on Organology and Relationship."

Conserva found the chapter but fell asleep with her head on the book. In her dream she saw molds and bacteria devouring the Tree of Life, until it was a pile of debris, ready to be fed to the digester. Then, from the digester, another tree grew, with its branches cunningly rearranged. The healer and the Counselor stood at the foot of the tree with a giant hacksaw blade, and sawed back and forth, back and forth, reciting the *Collected Works.*

. . .

"Of course," Meyer said. "They always do that. Teach the young to spy on the old."

"I thought I'd better warn you," Al said. "For some reason, that girl makes me want to talk. I found myself explaining all about digesters, and even felt tempted to expound on the unusual efficiency of the Isle of Amity's biomass plant. Courtesy of Doctor Meyer, and microbial genetics."

"Imagine the irony," Meyer grumbled, "if I were caught because of helping the ecophiles — improving the biodegradation of their garbage. What kind of crime would they name it, I wonder?"

"She seems quite an unusual child," Al said, with a worried frown. "Just the kind we would most want to help. And I'm afraid that they intend her no good."

"Just the type who could entrap us," Meyer snorted bitterly. "She's bait."

"On the other hand," Al said, "she's doomed. And we could help her. I could radio Safari Island."

"You came to warn me," Meyer retorted. "And I thank you. Now heed your own advice. Don't let your sympathy drown your common sense. You've let that happen before."

"You're right," Al conceded. "I thought at first that everyone was just becoming paranoid. But things really are getting worse. I talked it over with Mom on the radio last week. She thinks it's Taura's doing, since she became protector. Mom said to watch out fo r the gossip. That's how the neighborhood committee works in the rest of the country. The chief busybody makes up tales and attributes them to someone else. Then no one knows whom to trust, and some people become informers just because they think they' ve been informed upon. Of course, Taura's a neighborhood committee of one. The farmers are all looking at one another suspiciously. They never did that before."

"It would take a woman's subtle mind to fathom that one," Meyer said bitterly.

Al accepted the proffered jigger of his own moonshine. Meyer poured one for himself too, and raised it in a toast. "To life without air, and the fruits of decay: methane, and ethanol!"

. . .

Conserva almost looked forward to her shift in the biomass plant the nex t morning. Her duties did not require much of her attention, and she could ponder the events of the preceding day.

Conserva knew that an unformed question remained somewhere in her memory. Something to do with harmonies, and connections. She tried to re member each detail of Meyer's house and conversation. As her eyes roved over the bends in the tubing that carried away the methane, she suddenly stood up. That's it! she just stopped herself from exclaiming aloud. The picture in that book. It had spira ls connected by stairsteps. Just like the engraving on that bottle that washed up on the beach. There were letters connecting the steps — could they be like the ones in the book? A-T, G-C, I think. I must see that picture again. What can it mean?

The sound of her approaching supervisor recalled her attention to the matter at hand. After a perfunctory inspection, which revealed nothing in particular to criticize, he reminded her to clean out the sludge, and limped off in the direction of the tool shed where he seemed to spend a lot of time. Conserva didn't expect him back for a while. As his whistling died away — the tune that went with the "Water Beasts" rhyme — she crawled under the fence surrounding the compound. She had another question or two for Meyer.

CHAPTER 8. CODES

While the nation has at last acknowledged the dangers of nuclear war, less heed has been given, until now, to developments that could pose just as serious a threat to the existence of life on this planet. We stand at the crossroads, with the opportunity to control this technology before it bursts upon us. We lost a comparable opportunity when the first atomic bomb tests were allowed to proceed. Let us learn from that experience. Research in biotechnology must cease immediately.

Alexander Ramcott, speech before the Union of Sociobioethicists

Meyer looked positively chagrined to see her, though he hastily admitted her and closed the door.

"Are you mad, girl?" he asked. "Do you know what could happen to you if they find out that you're not wherever it is you're supposed to be?"

"Something worse than what will happen anyway?" She had mastered her shyness, realizing that although Meyer would bluster, he might answer her questions in the end.

"While you were out of the room yesterday," Conserva confessed, "I looked in one of your books. A picture there reminded me of something — a bottle I found on the beach one day. May I see it again?"

Meyer looked disapproving, but motioned for her to help herself to the bookcase. She took down a red one, and on page 4, she found the picture she wanted. She thought Meyer turned quite pale.

"What is this?" she asked him.

"Just a molecule," he said, "called deoxyribonucleic acid. It is found in all living cells."

"But we never learned about it, either in Theoretical or Practical Ecology."

"I should have looked through the books and torn out the pages," Meyer said, seemingly to himself.

"What does it do?" she persisted.

"It tells the cell what proteins to make."

"So what's so secret about that?"

"It is difficult to explain," Meyer equivocated.

"Won't you even try?" Conserva asked him.

"Why do you look through people's things?" Meyer retorted.

Intimidated by his angry look, she closed the book. Perhaps he was afraid of being accused of corrupting a minor, since this picture seemed to be a forbidden one. Conserva recalled the furor a year ago when one of the Lending Library books had been discovered on the premises of the Learning Center. The new Protector herself had visited the class, and given a stern lecture about the importance of the Review Board that selected appropriate literature. Unreviewed books were certainly matters of grave concern; the healer would want to know about Meyer's collection. Conserva resolved not to let any mention of the books slip out.

"I'm sorry," Conserva said. "It makes me angry when people look through my things too. They found the bottle, and called me a junk hoarder. 'Dispose of polluted garbage properly,' they

said. But can you tell me what the letters mean? And the other word on the bottle—'Genentech'?"

Meyer looked at her sadly. "If I were not so old and cynical. . . ."

Conserva waited, but he did not finish the sentence. Instead he continued, in a thoughtful rather than a critical tone, "You know all the wrong questions to ask, and you ask them nevertheless. You know the right things to say, yet you will not say them."

Conserva decided to try a less dangerous question. "What was the food you gave me yesterday?"

"Water beast," he said, laughing at her surprise. "One called salmon. Oh, I know the learning rhyme says to beware of the water beasts, but many things are other than as they appear. In fact, some are quite the opposite. Or have inverted subjects and objects."

Conserva listened closely, trying to decide how serious Meyer was. Despite his acerbic laughter, she suspected he was trying to say something important.

"Codes are useful for many things, besides protein manufacture. Unless you throw away the key!" He broke off abruptly and fixed Conserva with a wild look. "You realize, of course, that I am mad. Crazy. Addle-brained. Everyone knows it. Even your instructor."

Conserva wanted to ask why the room was so comfortably warm, but he gave her no opportunity to ask more questions.

"I am a fool," he said. "A raving maniac. Be sure to tell that to anyone who asks about me, especially the healer. Otherwise they will know that your disharmony is quite incurable. I have fits, look about wildly, and chatter incoherently."

"But you didn't until just now," she said in confusion. She found herself escorted to the door.

"Please go away," he said with a note of desperation. "You must not be caught coming here without permission. If you are, say that you had a headache, and thought I might be able to help. Tell them that I was so crazy you thought better of asking, and realized how stupid you were not to have gone to the healer. They might not believe you, but it's your only chance. Associating with me automatically places you under suspicion."

Conserva fled, and the closer she came to the plant, the more panic-stricken she felt at the prospect of being discovered. Ten minutes after she was back at her station, her supervisor hobbled in. She felt her pulse racing wildly in her temples, and hoped that the flush in her face wasn't too obvious. But he just nodded to her, and proceeded on his way. Conserva breathed an audible sigh of relief, and tried a few meditation exercises to calm herself for her meeting with the healer.

CHAPTER 9. NONCOMPLIANCE

> *Health is the virtue of adaptation to socially created reality. Health is a process, in which each individual is responsible to the society. Failure to achieve organic unity with the group and the environment naturally leads to distress, grief, and remorse, which are phenomenologically quite different from guilt feelings. Health is a task; competent performance is the responsibility of all citizens."*
>
> Alexander Ramcott, *Collected Works*

That this was not to be the usual appointment was apparent from the beginning. Seated next to the healer was Instructor Paxson, who scowled with annoyance as he thumbed through a thick sheaf of papers.

"Conserva," the healer began, "you have been under treatment for about a week now. It is time to assess your progress. We must not invest any more of society's resources an effort that will not prove fruitful."

Conserva felt that her thoughts were transparent to two sets of peering eyes. Surely they could tell that she had yet another deviation on her record today.

"You have been assigned to the beneficial task of completing the cycle of nature. This intimate contact with Ecos should have helped to restore balance to your mind." The healer placed his fingertips together, and rested his chin on them. "However, your performance has been less than satisfactory."

"But my supervisor has had no criticism of my work," Conserva protested.

"We're not talking about the amount of biomass processed, the amount of fuel produced," the healer said. "We're talking about your involvement with the process. Your attitude. Your moral cooperation in an enterprise that is essential to society. You have been going through the motions — but I sense a withholding of a part of yourself from total service — a certain lack of sincerity." He came toward her, stood over her, and placed his hands on her head.

Conserva could not help flinching a little. She wondered whether he could read her mind, and tried to distract herself with thoughts about harmony.

The healer concentrated for several tense minutes, and then withdrew to his chair with a shudder. "There, my suspicions are verified! Even from a distance I can feel the discordant vibrations. But at close range they are unmistakable. The taint in your character is even less well hidden than the unclean debris under your ecology specimens. There is disorder in your mind, a lack of discrimination, a definite tendency to regress to the wanton ways of your ancestors. You recite the correct words with your mouth, but in your heart you don't accept them!"

The instructor nodded, smirking slightly as he stroked his hairless chin.

Conserva was speechless. What could she say? Had they noticed her absence yesterday? Could they have followed her to Meyer's shack? Did they already have evidence of his crimes against Ecos, such as eating water beast, and were they testing her loyalty by giving her the opportunity to inform them of what they already knew? There was no way she could defend the

purity of her intentions, she realized. But wouldn't confessing her faults be helpful? She could not bring herself to say a word, even though she could almost hear the voices of her instructors in the Temple and the Learning Center urging her to speak up, to do the right thing. But she coul d not do so without incriminating Meyer.

"You see, she has nothing to say for herself!" the healer declared. "I have done all that I can. I have given her every benefit of the doubt. It is such a shame, when all one's toil is wasted."

Instructor Paxson shook his head regretfully. "The Counselor believes that the effects of an improper early upbringing can be overcome. But sometimes I wonder whether he is too optimistic. Will you recommend the mind-cleansing?" Conserva felt shocked, even though she had really known all along that this was inevitable.

"What recourse is there?" asked the healer, rising to leave.

"I don't see how the Counselor can disagree with you now," the instructor said, following the healer. His furrowed brow attested to his concern.

Conserva was left alone.

. . .

As the healer climbed the stairs, probably to dine on dandelion greens and rennetless goat cheese while the instructor reported to the Counselor, Conserva slipped out through a window.

Crouching beneath the open casement at the apprentice's dormitory, she made the soft bird cry that she and her friend Una had used to summon each other in their younger days. Such activities were strictly forbidden. Would her friend dare to respond?

She became aware of a presence, and knew at once that it was Una, although she could not see her friend in the blackness. Una drew her away from the building into the gardening shed.

"What in the name of Ecos are you doing here?"

"I have to talk to you. Now," Conserva whispered. "I don't know what is to become of me."

"I heard that you were at the Institute of Healing," Una sounded impatient. "Really, Conserva, what came over you at witnessing? I couldn't believe my ears. It hurts me to think that you could be that ill, but surely you would n't be making a joke about something so serious."

Conserva sighed. How could anyone even think that she might have been joking? Few things were punished more severely than jokes. But she set aside her emotions — it was information that she needed now. "Tell me," she pleaded. "About your friend Sylvan. He disappeared. What happened to him?"

"I don't know," Una said, her voice tightening with suppressed tears. "I had no idea he would do anything that was forbidden. But he must have gone to the beach, and the water beasts must have eaten him. How could he do that to me? It was such a shock!"

"How do you know that's what happened?" Conserva persisted.

"Couldn't he just have run away?"

"No, he wouldn't have!" Una wailed. "How could you even suggest suc h a thing!"

"I've thought of doing it myself," Conserva confessed. "They think I'm incurable, you know. They have recommended the mind cleansing."

"The way you stink, you need to be cleansed," Una said.

"Una!" Conserva exclaimed.

"They say it makes people feel better about themselves," Una said in a somewhat apologetic tone, perhaps regretful about her harshness.

"Do you know what the mind cleansing is? And where it is done?" Conserva whispered urgently.

"I don't know exactly. I have heard they send people to the mainland. And that afterwards they sometimes can't remember anything from one day to the next. Like Brook." For a moment, Una seemed torn by sympathy for her friend's plight. But then, she seemed to think better of that inappropriate emotion, and backed away as if fearing contamination. "It's only used when there's no other way. As the last resort for those who rebel against the harmony and oneness of Ecos. Or when people try to corrupt others! No, no, you're not taking me with you." And Una disappeared.

Conserva's first impulse was to weep at her friend's cruelty, but her survival instincts prevailed. What could Una do after all? She really didn't know what had happened to Sylvan. But if he did escape, that meant that she, too, might be able to. But how? She slipped out into the black night, and took a circuitous route toward the path leading to the beach. Did she have one friend in the world? If not, then her fate no longer mattered.

It was the dark of the moon, and she shivered at the thought of the water beasts. But could their lair be worse than the place of the mind cleansing?

CHAPTER 10. DECISION

Life is short, and Art long; the crisis fleeting; experience perilous, and decision difficult.
Hippocrates, *Aphorisms*

Meyer was dozing in front of the fire, thinking of going to bed, when the low insistent tone from the audioemitter on his top shelf roused him from his half sleep. Someone had just stepped on the pressure-sensitive plate beneath the first plank of his walkway. Irritated, and more than a little anxious, he hurried to the door and slid back the small shutter. It was Conserva, ducking under the low overhang of his porch. After a moment she knocked and for perhaps a minute Meyer leaned against the wall, willing her to go away. She didn't. When she knocked again, more insistently, Meyer reluctantly opened the door.

"Well," he said to her gruffly, "what do you want?" He was ashamed of himself for trying to bully the child into leaving him alone.

The small, forlorn figure set her chin and looked him in the eye.

"I want to talk to you," she said assertively.

Meyer hesitated. He could still send her away; he should send her away. It wasn't just a simple reluctance to get involved, he assured himself. His desire to avoid calling attention to himself was only incidental. The welfare of others was also in jeopardy. The Counselor was certainly suspicious, since there had already been one disappearance this year. Lang would certainly investigate a second one more thoroughly. Meyer didn't want to be quizzed about touchy subjects. He didn't want to be the one to betray his unsought colleagues, he told himself, even if their eventual discovery was inevitable.

On the other hand, if he sent Conserva away, wouldn't she tell them everything? What she had already learned from Meyer was far more damaging than she could possibly realize. Meyer wondered for a moment whether he might already be so hopelessly compromised that he might just as well try to help her.

But there was still more that she might find out. And if an effort to escape proved unsuccessful, the ensuing disaster would involve Safari Islanders as well as himself. Should he try to calculate the greatest good for the greatest number? At this point, he couldn't figure out what course was in his own best interest.

It was beginning to drizzle. He gave up. He couldn't just let her stand there.

Inside — the door closed firmly against the rain — he made Conserva sit in front of the fire and drink some chocolate from his hoard. He almost regretted the gesture when he saw her eyes gleam with unshed tears, and he tried to harden his heart for the inevitable onslaught.

"Drink it all," he said harshly, trying to give her no verbal opening of kindness through which she might press an attack. "If you get pneumonia, I'll have to treat that too. And I do have concerns other than your welfare."

He felt a twinge of guilt when he saw the disappointment in her face. "I thought you might help me," she began, and he held up a hand to stop her flow of words.

"Conserva," he said reasonably, "Surely you know by now that only one kind of assistance is permitted. And that you must get from the healer and your instructors."

She looked desperate. "They cannot help me."

"Have you really given them the chance?" Meyer asked, feeling a hypocrite to the bottom of his soul.

The stubborn, unyielding look he had seen earlier replaced the entreaty in her face. "Don't speak to me the way they do! I want to know the truth!"

"Indeed," Meyer replied, his heart beginning to beat irregularly. "And what is the truth?"

She looked at Meyer as if he disgusted her. "There really is no glow. Oh, I know what we're supposed to see, what they all say they see, what they even believe they see, but who has really seen it?"

When the old man did not reply, she continued. "Have you seen it? You live right across from Safari Island. Can you say there is a glow?"

He shrugged. "I myself have never stood Vigil. I have never looked for the glow." He strove for calmness. What was he to say — that wouldn't convict him of treason?

"I was wrong to think that you might help me," she said resignedly, putting her empty mug down on the floor beside her, preparing to go.

"Wait," Meyer said as she stood up, "wait a moment. Please." Before he turned her out into the rain, he needed time to think. He knew that this young person should be sent to Safari Island. But did he dare? The instructors were probably searching for her already. They would probably come here first. They might be discovered together. Striving for time to think, he asked her "Where will you go?"

"Away," she said defiantly. "Maybe to Wyndham Hill. I will stow away on the next ferry when they load the barrels of apples. Until then, I will just hide in the woods. I got the idea from reading *Treasure Island.* But I will ask a small favor of you."

"What?" Meyer asked in astonishment.

"A map," she said, heading for the bookshelf. "A Road Atlas has maps, doesn't it? I want to borrow the one for Washington State."

Suddenly Meyer felt deeply ashamed. This girl was emboldened by what was, for her, the equivalent of a death sentence. While he was being paralyzed by indecision.

"So you are determined to run away?"

She nodded. "I know now, of course, I was foolish to tell them that I did not see the glow. But now that I have, they. . . ."

"They have a problem," Meyer supplied. "You must be made to see what they say is there, and to believe that you were ill. After a mind cleansing, you will indeed assert that you see the glow, and you will believe your assertion."

Conserva nodded miserably. "Or it could be worse, according to what Una said. I could end up like Brook."

"Conserva," Meyer began delicately, "there is only one life. We all learn to live with what we must do. It's a lesson you would do well to attend to. You could still go to the Counselor. Or the healer," he said, with a meaningful look. "You could help yourself. They might even overlook your performance as a Witness if you reel in a big fish for them." Meyer could hardly believe he heard himself making such a suggestion. "But you can't hope to hide from them, and survive. Stowing away only works in novels."

"No," she said at once, "I can't go to them." Then, to leave no doubt in his mind, she added, "I won't." She ripped the map of Washington State out of his atlas, folded it carefully, and stuck it inside her shirt.

So. There it was. She hadn't betrayed him yet, and didn't intend to, but who could say what might happen if sufficient pressure were applied? Especially since she didn't have a talent for dissimulation. Blast the girl! Her troubles were certainly not his fault. And he hadn't asked for her protection. The ecophiles could have hauled him in at any time. Yet he still might be able to save himself, at least from the worst of the possible fates — unless they discovered his connections. Conserva looked at him reproachfully from the other side of the room.

"Isn't the point of it all to keep oneself alive, to go on?" he asked, more of himself than of Conserva. "Isn't that good enough?" He never did learn her answer, for at that moment the low tone that had heralded Conserva's arrival sounded again. Someone was coming down the path toward his house. One quick glance out the shutter confirmed his terrified suspicion. It was the Lizard, pausing to scrape mud from his boots onto Meyer's steps.

Time seemed to slow for Meyer. He felt that events were carrying him forward, and that he was no longer in control of his own affairs. A decision had been made for him, and he felt a great sense of relief. He knew exactly what to do. Crossing to the far wall, which held a bookcase built into the stone of the house, he reached beneath a shelf, found the locking mechanism, and whispered urgently to Conserva, "Come!"

Too surprised to speak, Conserva joined Meyer, and pulled the lever that he showed her. A section of the bookcase pivoted away from the wall. She opened her mouth to ask a question, but a thunderous pounding on the door drowned anything she might have said.

Meyer motioned her to silence. "In," he whispered, pointing into the dark recess.

"Open up, old man!" said a voice at the door.

Meyer gave Conserva a shove and she took two hesitant steps into the darkness.

"Yes, yes, yes!" he replied in a loud, impatient voice to the intermittent pounding. "Now you will know my secrets," he whispered to Conserva. "But never mind that. Concentrate on the learning rhymes. They tell you how to escape. Do what they say not to do. And remember — I am not brave. If they insist, I'll tell them everything."

The bookcase slid into its recess, the locking mechanism caught, and Conserva was hidden away. Had he told her enough? He hoped so.

As soon as Meyer opened the door, Paxson pushed past him into the room, extremely angry. Meyer closed the door and turned, prepared.

"It certainly took you long enough to answer," Paxson complained.

Meyer shrugged. "I'm an old man. My arthritis bothers me in this damp weather. I have to move slowly."

Paxson made a tour of the room, noting the empty mug on the floor. He poked his head into Meyer's tiny bedroom, and then came to loom over Meyer where the old man sat by the fire. "Are you alone?"

Meyer struggled to repress hysterical laughter. "It's a foul night for entertaining," he said to Paxson. "Who in his right mind would venture out?"

The young man frowned. "Someone not in her right mind. The girl Conserva is missing. We thought perhaps she might have come here."

Meyer gestured around him. "As you see, I have no patients this evening," he said ambiguously.

"Hmmm," Paxson made a dissatisfied noise. "In that case, you are to come with me."

"Indeed," Meyer replied, unsurprised. "And our destination?"

"The Counselor wishes to question you. We are to go at once."

"Ah," Meyer said. "May I get my boots and coat, before I go to await the train to the camps?"

Paxson shook his head. The old man was incomprehensible. "We'll go in the hovercraft. To the Counselor's. Dress — but make it fast."

Meyer retrieved his boots, coat, and an old tweed hat from a rack in the corner. He put them on, and then banked down the fire, turning to take a last look at the room. He wondered whether he would ever see it again. But instead of feeling maudlin, or regretful, he felt lighthearted. Almost giddy. A debt was to be called, and he was ready to pay it.

CHAPTER 11. WATER BEASTS

The strangeness of things often makes them seem formidable when they are not so.

Plutarch, *Caius Marius*

Conserva heard a locking mechanism click. Then lights came on — a white light, from no apparent source. By pressing her ear against the wall, she could hear some muffled conversation, some footsteps, a door slamming, then silence.

At first, all Conserva was aware of was her own fear. When the silence continued, fear yielded to her natural curiosity. She ventured to look around. She was in a rather large room, which must have been hollowed out of the cliff. Occasionally, a hissing, a purring, or a clicking noise would come from an array of machinery. Could she be in a time machine? And had she been transported to the future, or the past? The volumes of journals of esoteric title that lined one wall from floor to ceiling bore dates that stopped in 2024. But the polished metal and gleaming white plastics must have come from the future.

The machines were all plugged into the wall. Conserva was, of course, familiar with electrical devices, primarily lights, but had never seen so many of them. There were large tanks connected to lights and gauges. A cupboard with glass doors contained clean glassware of various odd shapes. Some bottles were filled with capsules similar to those Conserva had taken for her infection. Warm air blowing gently against her back came from an array of tanks and metal boxes, connected by tubing and wires. Aluminum plates were stacked beside the device, which bore a plate engraved "Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory."

Conserva was awed. Obviously, this was all from another world. But it had gotten here somehow. And Meyer had hinted that the other world still existed. If only one could figure out how to get there. She sat down at the one untidy place in the room — a desk littered with books and papers — to think about her situation.

It was absolutely clear that she dare not stay here long. It was possible that the Counselor had no suspicions about Meyer, and might send him back, after impressing him with his potent authority. But this didn't seem likely. The Counselor had suspicions about everybody — and rumors about Meyer's "unconventional" methods had circulated at the Learning Center, seemingly with the encouragement of the instructors. Those who had consulted him were reluctant to speak of it, for fear of incurring disapproval.

The instructors, as Conserva knew so well, had consummate skill at detecting forbidden things — and since very few of the things in this room were expressly permitted, they were by definition forbidden. She shuddered to think what they might do to this kindly, gruff old man. Whatever it was, she would probably be next. And it would undoubtedly be even worse than the mind cleansing. Meyer had told her she must escape. But how?

She sat down at a desk to think, and her eyes were attracted to a small box with blinking lighted numbers. A clock? she wondered. It had no hands, to be sure, but what else would "11:15" be but a time? The learning rhymes, something to do with the learning rhymes. And

opposites. Water beast, feast, disappear. . . .Were these rhymes for learning — or for making children behave? To keep them from doing something the instructors didn't want?

> The beasts come to the trysting-place
> Beneath the tall cliff's steepest face
> At midnight when the moon is dark,
> The orca's first to find its mark.

The orca. The big black and white one, with all those teeth. There was an orca carved from a huge driftwood log, on the beach next to Meyer's rotten old pier. But there was certainly no safe anchoring place for a skiff in that bay. Or was there?

Thinking of Meyer distracted her attention from the learning rhyme for a moment. What could they be doing to him? Would they be back tonight? Tomorrow at the latest. She paced the floor with clenched fists, recalling what Una had said about the mind cleansing — that one's memory might be wiped out. Was this to be her fate? Not even to know what day it was?

The machinery murmured, and the clock blinked 11:30. Nearly midnight. Midnight! And tonight there was no moon. Wasn't that what the learning rhyme said? Suppose the water beasts don't come to eat children at midnight? Did that mean she should go to the beach? Because the rhyme said not to go there? Her head began to ache. She decided she had to find her way to the beach, simply because there was nothing else to do. The thought was terrifying, but by the moment less terrifying than the alternative. Instructor Paxson could return at any time.

She saw Meyer's white coat hanging from a hook. She wondered whether he'd ever need it again, and wrapped herself up in it. It was a slick material; it might help to repel the cold wet drizzle. Fortunately, the locking mechanism was not hidden from the inside. Cautiously, she opened up the wall, and peered around the front room, lit only by the dying embers of the fire. The lights behind her dimmed. She restored the bookcase to its former position and rearranged some books to be sure the entry was concealed, her pulse thundering in her ears. She took a deep breath, and stepped out into the dark night.

She found her way to the pier, and sat down near the giant effigy of the orca. She gazed out toward Safari Island. How ironic it would be if the island decided to glow tonight. Well, she wouldn't be able to see it through the drizzle even if it did.

She didn't have long to wait for something to happen. She suddenly found herself directly in the beam of a spotlight. Could they have found her already? Conserva couldn't decide whether to try to run away, or simply to give herself up. As she stood there, paralyzed and blinking, she heard a soft whistle from the darkness.

Someone moved the spotlight out of her eyes, and said, "Well, I'll be a son of a gun. It looks like a ghost! But it must be the girl we heard about."

"What do you mean? And who are you?" Conserva asked, still frightened, but curious.

"We need to know who you are," he said.

"They call me Conserva. Are you a water beast?"

"Yes, I suppose so. I'm John, and this is Will. Nobody has come to look for water beasts in over a year, but we were hoping we might find you. Who sent you?"

"Meyer, I guess," Conserva blurted out, before wondering whether she should mention his name. These people certainly didn't sound like instructors, though.

"Meyer? Meyer!? That's pretty hard to believe. That old codger is much too careful for that! But he must have done something, because you're here."

"He didn't exactly send me. He just helped me think of it, and he hid me when Instructor Paxson was searching for me. I was afraid to stay at his house. They've taken him away. I don't know what will happen to him. Can you help him?"

"I'm afraid not. And we'd better not tarry. They just might be dedicated enough to come out in this foul weather, or to send one of their lackeys to search the beach. Let's just leave this cargo for Al, while we're thinking about what to do."

The men dragged a box over to the foot of the cliff, evidently locating a concealed cache. After exchanging it for another container, they conferred with each other, out of Conserva's hearing. One returned to the boat, rummaged around, and brought back a parcel.

"Take off your clothes," John instructed, "and put these on. We did come somewhat prepared for you. And have you got any identification?"

Conserva handed him the dog-eared card that students and citizens were required to carry at all times. As the young men thoughtfully turned their backs, she slipped out of her soiled coveralls and pulled on the sweater, trousers, and rain slicker. At least they were warm alth ough far too big. She handed them the clothing, and showed them the special pocket for the identification card. The map of Washington she folded carefully and put in the pocket of her pants.

"We'd better take this lab coat along. It'd be incriminating," John said. He took a knife and slashed the clothing into several pieces. "Bloodstains. What're we gonna do for bloodstains? Hmmm." He grimaced, cut himself on the wrist, and bled onto the clothes. After binding his wound with a scrap, he carefully placed the clothing out of the reach of the tide.

"We must hurry now," he said, as he lifted Conserva into the boat. He held her arm for just an extra moment. "Don't be scared, kid. You have friends, you know. We'll take care of you."

"How did you know I might be here?" Conserva wondered. "I didn't know it myself."

John said, "No time to explain now. But soon you will find out."

In amazement, Conserva noticed that the boat made no sound, and had no lights. John gave her a brief look through what he called a starlight viewer, which seemed to make the night as bright as day.

She could see that they were headed straight for Safari Island.

CHAPTER 12. INQUISITION

Dust will accumulate if a room is not cleaned regularly, our faces will get dirty if they are not washed regularly. Our minds may also collect dust, and also need sweeping and washing.

As to backsliders, if you don't hit them, they won't fall. This is also like sweeping the floor; as a rule, where the broom does not reach, the dust will not vanish of itself.

Our attitude toward a person who has made a mistake should be one of persuasion in order to help him change and start afresh and not one of exclusion, unless he is incorrigible.

Too much liberalism in that regard is a corrosive which eats away unity, undermines cohesion, causes apathy and creates dissension.

Alexander Ramcott, unpublished notebook, political studies
Section on the writings of Mao Zedong

Meyer seated himself on the low stool indicated by the Counselor's gesture. The large portrait of Ramcott, the fanatic who had started all this nonsense decades ago, peered myopically down at him from the wall behind the instructor's back. Meyer had always wondered at the inspiration the people appeared to take from such a vapid countenance. His eyes were tiny behind the thick lenses, his sparse beard served to emphasize the gauntness of his cheeks. A few strands of hair were combed over his bald skull. Why didn't he just shave his head, Meyer wondered, irrelevantly. An otherworldly smile turned up his lips faintly at the corners. There was definitely an ascetic line to the nose. Beware the saint turned politician, somebody once said. Yes, the light behind the leader's head definitely suggested a halo, Meyer noted.

Paxson settled himself just outside Meyer's field of vision and the Counselor switched on the single lamp that sat on his desk. A trick of the light made a Mephistophelean mask of his face, and Meyer felt his heart contract a little in fear. Not a true ascetic like Ramcott, Meyer thought. The cheeks were full, and the jowl sagged just a bit. Probably a bit of fat was concealed beneath the robe. The eyes were intelligent, the mouth set in a cruel line. An opportunist, Meyer judged, but not a true believer. Did that make him more or less dangerous?

Meyer reflected balefully that the Counselor would have been dead long ago had it not been for his own intervention. Ill with pneumonia, Lang had been loath to summon Healer Vole, since that would have meant exposing himself to Vole's ambition at a time when he was too weak to fight. As well, Meyer wagered, Lang had no illusions about the worth of Vole's claim to be a healer. Finally, the woman Lang had hired to nurse him had come to Meyer. Whether she came on her own initiative, or at the Counselor's request, Meyer was not able to determine. Reluctantly, he had agreed to accompany her to the Counselor's quarters. It had given him a perverse delight to see Lang ill and helpless, but he had, nevertheless, dispensed the penicillin. And Lang had recovered. Ah well, Meyer thought resignedly, the Hippocratic Oath doesn't take social responsibility into account. He had simply saved the patient's life, without inquiring into what he planned to do with it. Fool, Meyer chastised himself. On the other hand, the Counselor might have been succeeded by someone worse. Maybe even Healer Vole.

Meyer wondered, not for the first time, why Lang had been assigned here, and especially why he had remained. Ramcott had, of course, supplied him with a laboratory. The theories he

had developed in the Psychosocial Research Program at the University of Washington could now be tested: on the unfortunate inhabitants of the Olympian Islands Cell, himself included. The Safari Island glow might simply be a test of the hypothesis that the environment acts on the perceiving person, not the person on the environment. But such a socially responsible servant of Ecos certainly deserved a more prestigious post than this. Didn't he?

Meyer studied Lang, and the man stared back at him, unblinking. If he suffered from thwarted ambition, it was not apparent from his demeanor. There is much more to him than even I can fathom, Meyer thought. A most inscrutable fellow. And a fitting foe. Neutrality, or th e pretense of neutrality, no longer seemed possible.

"A young person has disappeared," the Counselor began, without formalities. "And this is not the first time," he added, pulling a sheaf of papers from a file on his desk.

So, you concern yourself with disappearances, Meyer thought bitterly. Although you would have caused the first one yourself, if Gina hadn't chosen death as her means of slipping through your fingers. Or have you forgotten about her? She, at least, is safely out of your grasp. I cannot say the same for Conserva. "Oh," Meyer said noncommittally. "I wasn't aware of any disappearances."

"Don't play games with me," Lang snapped. "You know very well what I mean. Here's the original report by Protector Taura. She interviewed you at the time."

"Oh, yes," Meyer said, fearing that the quickening of the pulse in his neck would be all too visible, as he wondered what fiction Taura might have invented. "I do remember her visit. She wakened me from my nap."

"You weren't very cooperative, she reported," Lang said accusingly. "In fact, you were quite sharp with her, and provided her with no useful leads."

"As I said, she woke me up, and for no good reason. I knew nothing about this person, not even his name, until she told me — Woody, or something like that, I believe it was. He should have known enough to stay away from the vicious water beasts. Education about such hazards is your duty, and that of the honorable Protector, certainly not mine. I was not patrolling the beach, I was sleeping."

"Your capacity for idleness is certainly well known," Lang said acidly. "Nevertheless, your evasiveness and defensive attitude aroused the Protector's suspicions that you were not being entirely frank with her."

"I know," Meyer complained, "she searched my abode, criticized my negligence about dusting under my bed, and made derogatory remarks about my personal appearance."

"Indeed," the Counselor said, as he put away the report. "But that is in the past. We have no definite evidence of a connection with the present problem. Yet. We are looking for the girl Conserva."

Meyer shrugged, prepared to stonewall. The Counselor smiled suddenly, inappropriately, and turned to the Lizard.

"Instructor Paxson, some tea for our guest. You'll have to go to the kitchen to fetch it," Lang said. Startled, the ungainly fellow lurched to his feet and scuttled from the room. Meyer raised his eyebrows at such unexpected courtesy. Careful, he told himself. Keep your wits about you. The Counselor is a man who gives nothing gratis. This is but another arrow in the professional interrogator's quiver.

Following Paxson to the door of his office, Lang made certain it was securely closed, then turned to face Meyer. "Let's cease posturing," he said wearily. "You and I understand each

other perfectly. We've been cordial enemies for well over a decade. So let's accord each other some respect and be frank."

Meyer smothered a smile. Even a biochemist could recognize such a crude psychological ploy. Quite insulting, really. Frank, indeed. Still, perhaps it would be best to play Lang's game for a little while.

"Very well," Meyer said agreeably.

Lang grimaced and massaged his temples. Crossing the room slowly, he dimmed his desk lamp and closed his eyes as if in pain. Migraine, Meyer thought. Strange — over the years two of Lang's apprentices had visited his shack complaining of migraine. He had dispensed codeine, mixed with some harmless herbs. Something was nagging at his memory. Blast it — what was the name of Lang's first apprentice? Brook! Yes, that was it. Brook. The one sent off for mind cleansing. Meyer suddenly shivered, although the room was far from cold.

Sighing, the Counselor bent to unlock a bottom desk drawer, and brought out a bottle and two glasses. Incredulously, Meyer noted the label, which Lang turned to face him — Laphroaig! Meyer almost fainted from anticipation. Lang poured three fingers of Scotch, and Meyer's hand moved of its own accord to accept the glass. Scruples were momentarily forgotten. Experimentally, he sniffed, closing his eyes. It seemed to be the real thing. He raised the glass to his lips and took a small mouthful. Laphroaig, all right. There was simply no mistaking the smoky, peaty taste. He swallowed, and the liquid slid silkily over his tongue, burning agreeably all the way down. He opened his eyes to find Lang watching him, an amused smile on his face.

"That's an illegal substance you're drinking, Practitioner Meyer," Lang chided him, raising his own glass. "We're committing a crime against Ecos." He drained his glass in a single swallow, and sat back in his chair, regarding Meyer. "I'm not an ecophile, you know."

That would explain certain things, Meyer thought, such as my own existence for so long.

Meyer took another mouthful of Scotch, and savored it reflectively. So this was what the man estimated his price to be. Cooperation, in exchange for a few glasses of Scotch.

As if to read his mind, Lang said, "I assure you that we could make quite a good bargain."

Meyer looked moodily into his glass. "If I had something that you wanted," he said. He wondered how long he could keep up this facade. Lang evidently thought that a bribe was the way to gain his cooperation. If the man only knew! Thirty seconds of pain, and he'd confess everything.

Lang waved his hand dismissingly. "All I want is a little information about the girl Conserva."

"Oh?" Meyer replied, feigning surprise. "Why do you care so much about one wayward girl?"

"I'd be happy to explain it to you," Lang said. Meyer found this seeming frankness a disturbing sign, and swallowed the last of his Scotch to quell his anxiety. "Her disappearance has simply served to remind me that the five children who have disappeared over the years undoubtedly went somewhere." He looked at Meyer inquiringly. "What's your guess, Dr. Meyer? Is there an enclave of reactionaries living close by? It would have to be close by, because the children certainly couldn't have traveled far. Some of them disappeared in the dead of winter."

He stroked his beard. "I haven't dared to keep a file on this matter — it's that sensitive. Also," he smiled ferally, "when I have the proof, I intend to garner the glory." He leaned back in his chair so that his face was hidden from Meyer and continued, a disembodied voice. "I don't

plan to spend the rest of my life on this godforsaken island. I've served my penance here. Being named Counselor to the Olympian Islands Cell was not exactly the reward I anticipated for my fervent support of the PCP in '23 and '24. In those days, I had something quite different in mind."

"You made a mistake," Meyer suggested.

"A serious one," Lang agreed."

"Mmm," Meyer said, pieces of the puzzle falling into place for him. "You overestimated the ecophiles' opinion of your value. Instead of seeing in you a pliable ally, they saw, quite correctly, an ambitious cynic. Far too useful to simply dispose of, but far too dangerous to have close at hand. And so you ended up here."

"Exactly," Lang agreed. "And I've been waiting all these years for a chance to redress that error. I'll demonstrate to them that I'm as true a believer as the most fervent ecophile. Identifying the location of the reactionaries' camp will be a tremendous coup. It could even result in my being considered for the post of Chief Ecologist."

"What?" Meyer asked in genuine interest. "Our estimable leader plans to step down?"

Lang smiled. "Do leaders ever 'step down' willingly? No, his health is not good. And I need hardly point out to you the benefits of having the new Chief Ecologist as an ally."

Meyer was too startled to reply. Lang as Chief Ecologist? Well, why not?

A knock sounded at the door. Lang made no move to answer it, presumably waiting for Meyer's reaction to his offer. Meyer struggled to conceal his interest, feigning a composure he was far from feeling.

"You seem to have a caller," Meyer remarked after a moment or two.

Lang sighed. "Dr. Meyer, you embarrass yourself by playing the fool. You could do yourself a great service by accepting my offer. I do not make it without serious consideration." When Meyer remained silent, he sighed again. "Very well. You disappoint me — I had thought you were an intelligent man." All trace of affability vanished, and he leaned forward. "What do you know about that wretched girl Conserva? Where did she go? Surely she must have told you something. How did she make contact with the reactionaries? You will tell me eventually, and it would be much better for you to tell me now. I will send the brainless Paxson away again."

Meyer flinched from the Counselor's intense, angry eyes. The game was over. Political considerations now outweighed Lang's wish to keep Meyer around for his medical skills. The inevitable had finally happened. Meyer consciously slowed his breathing; hyperventilation was beginning to fog his thinking. And somehow he had to prevent the Counselor from asking the next question: what did Meyer himself know about the dissenters?

The knocking resumed.

Meyer was suddenly, irrationally tempted to accept Lang's offer. Let's bring this to a conclusion, an interior voice said wearily. You can't win. But the moment of temptation soon passed. He thought of Gina, and his heart closed like a fist. "You'd better open the door before your lackey breaks it down," he told Lang.

Lang rose stiffly from his seat behind the desk, and unlocked the door. Paxson entered, bearing a tray with three mugs of tea — nauseatingly tepid, Meyer imagined. Gone was the bottle of Scotch and the glasses. Lang resumed his seat and bowed his head as if in meditation. Meyer suspected Lang was summoning the energy to don his public persona again. He sighed. He himself felt . . . absent. The effects of the Scotch, no doubt. He felt as if he were an actor who had blundered onto the wrong stage. Everyone seemed to know his part save Meyer. Yet he somehow had to find the right lines.

At last, Lang raised his head and regarded Meyer as if he had come to a decision.

"We think you are directly responsible for the girl Conserva's being missing."

Meyer seemed to ponder this remark for a moment. How much longer must they play out this charade? He sighed. "No, she is responsible for being missing, if indeed she is. How can you be certain that at this very moment she is not standing repentantly before the healer, expressing nothing but a desire to resume the daily rituals?"

"We are certain," the Counselor replied. But let us not stray from the issue at hand."

"That being?"

"Your responsibility."

"Ah," Meyer answered. "Then you do not believe that every individual is responsible for his or her own actions?"

The Counselor made an impatient gesture. "What we do believe is that while the girl Conserva was in a suggestible state, due in part to her wound, and in part to her innate condition of disharmony, you managed to influence her in an inappropriate fashion."

"What an insulting accusation," Meyer said primly, shaking his head at the irony. Marcus Lang, accusing him of psychological manipulation. "To do so would have been quite unprofessional. Even if I had had any interest whatsoever in influencing her."

Lang snorted. "Unprofessional! You dare talk of professionalism? You, who perform no function in our community apart from administering a few useless potions to the weak-minded? Why, your very presence here is a testament to that generosity of spirit to which Ecos adjures us all. Professionalism!"

Meyer resolved to let the personal affront pass. "Your generosity of spirit seems to be quite selectively bestowed. A little more of that scanty commodity and Conserva would not have run away."

Lang did not rise to the bait. "We know that the girl visited with you."

"Of course," Meyer answered testily. "I was treating her wound, at the healer's own request. You know that."

"We know about the authorized visits — an error for which we must be criticized. What we want to know about are the unauthorized visits."

"Unauthorized visits? How would I have known? From what you say, I assume she must have been AWOL. Perhaps she went to see her friends, or to take a walk. Why would a confused, unhappy girl want to visit an old dodderer like me? I'm really of no use to anyone, and I certainly do not provide entertaining company."

The Counselor was not to be thrown off the scent. "Quite so. We want to know what Conserva found so absorbing in her visits to you that she sneaked away from work to repeat them."

Meyer could barely see the Lizard nodding his agreement. Reptilian cretin! One could count on the Lizard to keep a watchful eye on everyone.

Meyer said nothing.

"Well?" the Counselor demanded.

"What would you have me say? Whatever my reply, it is bound to be provocative. I would do better to say nothing."

"Tell us what you talked about."

"Various things. Her wound, Ecos, her lessons, the teachings of Ramcott, cabbages and kings."

"Did she ask you questions about Safari Island?"

"Of course. The girl was obsessed with her inability to see the glow emanating from the waste dumps." Meyer felt no disloyalty about disclosing what Lang must already know.

"And what did you tell her?"

"That I myself had never stood Vigil and so could not describe the glow."

"A wise answer. Did she query you about the mind cleansing?"

Meyer nodded. "Yes, that too. But I was unable to answer her questions as I know nothing about the procedure. That is the province of the healer, as you know," Meyer reminded him.

"Hmmm, yes." The Counselor suddenly began a different line of questioning. "How long have you lived here?"

Surprised, Meyer answered cautiously. Are we finally coming to it, he asked himself. "About 15 years. Since before your time."

"Do you know why we tolerate you?"

"You are a tolerant people," he replied, trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

"In part, we tolerate you because, although you are evidently contaminated with the dangerous ideas of the past, you have never attempted to proliferate them. Instead, you have displayed a most becoming humility, and lived, insofar as you are able, in harmony with Ecos. Also, we tolerate you because your crude and barbaric skills are sometimes useful, primarily for older people who have lived only a small part of their lives in an ecologically healthful environment, and who thus bear many relics of the disease-ridden past. Your usefulness will diminish with each passing year.

"And it must be weighed against your ability to do harm. I fear that you have had an entirely unwholesome effect upon the girl Conserva."

He held up a hand to stifle Meyer's protests. "She displayed very little aberrant behavior before you treated her leg."

Meyer was shocked by the magnitude of the lie, but said nothing.

"And with each visit to you her disharmony grew, until, well, here we are. Tonight, after her evening recitation, she just vanished, only one day after seeing you. Is this a coincidence? Unlikely. So we ask you: what inappropriate thoughts have you been planting in this youngster's mind? Did you see in her a weak vessel, someone to be filled with the poisonous ideas of the old days, someone to infect with the self-destructive notions of a time that is happily dead, if not yet consigned to oblivion? What sedition did you preach?"

Meyer could barely restrain his applause. What a performance! Apparently, Lang was looking for a scapegoat. Meyer was perfect for the role. And after the public was satisfied, including Paxson, what would be next? A visit to the cellar? Imprisonment in some dark hole, there to await the Counselor's private pleasure? Meyer shuddered. No. Withstanding any of Lang's more direct methods of interrogation was simply out of the question. Very well, Meyer thought, if he had to be on stage, he would simply have to improvise.

He bared his teeth in a parody of a smile. "I've decided to answer your questions," he announced. "Perhaps Instructor Paxson would like to take notes." He winked roguishly at the Counselor. "You have my word as a man of science that I'll not disappoint you."

Lang clenched his jaw at the use of the term "science," a little too theatrically, Meyer thought. Lang began to tap his desktop in irritation. Control of the interview had slipped through his fingers. Meyer fairly beamed in delight.

"I am, as I said, a scientist." Paxson, somewhere behind him, tried unsuccessfully to stifle an exclamation of shock. The Counselor's eyes narrowed. "Oh, I did go to medical school

— to please my parents. Although I never practiced before coming here, I knew enough basic medicine to adopt it as my profession. It saved my skin as my colleagues were bei ng rounded up to be set to the task of dismantling nuclear reactors, and to be buried along with the reaction vessels and fissionables. My fate might have been even worse than theirs, for you see, I am a biochemist. A nucleic acid specialist. We were, as you may recall, the ones who dared to peer into the cell, into the DNA, into the blueprint for life itself, and then, . . .” he paused for dramatic effect, "to alter it."

"Enough!" the Counselor cried, and Meyer subsided, hoping that Lang was by now in a veritable sweat of anxiety about how much he would babble. To what degree would the ambitious Counselor Lang be compromised by a mention, in the presence of his lackey, of codeine, penicillin, and Scotch? Could Meyer hope that his possession of that in formation might ensure him a speedy death?

"Enough! How dare you taunt us with this litany of your crimes against Ecos?" Lang hissed. Meyer judged that the performance was proceeding brilliantly. "We can listen to you no further," Lang exclaimed.

"No?" Meyer inquired innocently. "But I have so many things to tell you! Imagine the intoxication of speaking the truth after more than a decade of silence. Imagine it! And what about Conserva? I promised to tell you how I corrupted her."

"Take him out of here," the Counselor instructed Paxson, gripping the sides of his desk. "You . . . technolator," he spat. "You disgrace the very concept of the humane ecoscientist. A cankerous sore, festering in the very midst of our community!"

Meyer restrained his applause as Paxson led him away.

CHAPTER 13. DISPOSITION

It is better for me to die than to live.

Jonah 4:3

Meyer settled into a dank room in the cellar, one with a lock on the door. Removing only his boots, he wrapped himself in the thin blanket the smirking Paxson had provided, and tried to compose himself for sleep.

True, his past behavior had been mostly determined by his desire for self-preservation. But hadn't the Counselor's words proved that his instincts had been accurate about the requirements for survival? Be that as it may, he felt vindicated now. That Marcus Lang was planning a final disposition for him he had no doubt. Well, he had done his best. For himself — and for Conserva. What a stroke of fortune, that this very night had been moonless. If she hadn't taken the ill-concealed cue from the rhymes by now, it was too late. Too late in any event to worry.

It seemed that he had hardly closed his eyes when a rough hand was shaking him awake. The Lizard stood over him, an inscrutable expression on his face.

"Ah, my Aryan friend," Meyer greeted him. "Has the time come already, the final solution been devised? Morituri te salutamus!"

"Nonsense, as usual," Paxson remarked acidly. "Come along and be quick about it. The Counselor has something he wishes to show you." Meyer's heart sank, hoping it wasn't Conserva, and he followed Paxson out into the chilly fog of early morning, across the yard to the Counselor's office. He heaved a sigh of relief when he saw only the man himself, obviously in a foul mood.

"Why, you look positively ill," Meyer commented merrily. "Didn't you rest well?"

"Look," the Counselor said, indicating a bundle of smelly, wet, stained clothing that lay heaped in the middle of the floor. When the old man made no move, he held the worn grey coveralls up by one finger and offered them to Meyer. Examining them closely, Meyer could see irregular, rust colored patches that looked like bloodstains, and a number of large rents and tears. "Open the pocket," the Counselor ordered. Reluctantly, Meyer did so, and stared at the name imprinted on the card.

"Conserva," Meyer said.

"Yes, Conserva," the Counselor agreed.

"And the body?" Meyer forced himself to inquire.

"Gone. Disappeared. Presumably the water beasts — "

"Not the water beasts!" Meyer exclaimed theatrically. "Who would condemn a fellow being to such a fate? And a youngster, too! It would be bad enough for an old codger like me, but a child?"

"Ah," the Counselor interjected, "but it is your mischief that has brought about this tragedy. You are not fit to live among the creatures of Ecos. We have tolerated your presence among us far too long. Your presence pollutes our planet."

The Lizard nodded in agreement.

Meyer put his hands over his eyes. "The cruel teeth of the water beasts!" he sobbed. "Rending and tearing innocent flesh! And the icy cold water! O unjust fate! O unkind gods!"

Finally Lang could bear no more. He turned to Paxson, who stood open-mouthed at this spectacle.

"You are to take this lunatic and dispose of him in an appropriate manner."

"But — " Paxson began.

"Rid us of this abomination!"

The instructor hastened to obey. The madman's noise began to subside as the cool morning air struck his face. The sun was feebly attempting to shine, and out on the kelp beds a flock of cormorants was wrangling over some morsel.

"The sea looks unusually cold for such a fine spring day, don't you think?" he asked conversationally. Taking the bait, Paxson looked at the bay, nodded thoughtfully, and led him aboard the hovercraft.

The hovercraft rounded the corner of the island and hugged the coast as they entered Safari Island Channel. On his left, Meyer saw the Vigil cliff towering over his little shack, and the crescent of pebble beach where Conserva's clothing had been found. He smiled.

"I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker/ And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat and snicker,/ And, in short, I was afraid," he quoted. "That's T.S. Eliot, you know."

The young man turned around, entrusting the controls to an apprentice, shaking his head at Meyer.

"Set a course for mid-channel," he said to the boy. "Call me when you're certain we're in the current. Come outside," he said to Meyer, and held the door open for him. They stood side by side on a little stern deck, nothing but a wooden rail separating them from the slate-grey water.

"Still spouting nonsense," Paxson said reproachfully to Meyer.

Meyer made no reply. He felt empty, light, and contented. It seemed there was nothing more to say.

"Tell me one thing if you will," Paxson asked, turning to Meyer. "In the old days, did you truly murder the innocent creatures of Ecos?"

"Oh yes," Meyer said happily. "Their blood is on my hands. And I didn't confine my depredations to the old days, Instructor Paxson. Why, my shack on the bay is a veritable ossuary! The skeletons of salmon and cod are knee-deep on my beach! To the end, I upheld my piscatory rights," he said, grasping the Lizard's arm and staring wildly into his eyes.

Paxson blanched, and shook off Meyer's hand as if it were diseased.

"Murderer," he whispered, visibly shaken. Turning his back on Meyer he stared down into the water. A sharp cry from his apprentice brought him back to reality.

"We're in the current!" the boy called out. Paxson waved a hand in acknowledgment, and at that moment two orcas breached just ahead of the hovercraft, graceful killers, a sign from Ecos.

"Yes!" Paxson called, and with one swift motion pushed Meyer overboard.

. . .

The old man floundered for a moment in the current, sank, and then reappeared, swimming with surprising energy, not a stone's throw from Safari Island. The orcas, Paxson saw, were considerably closer.

He turned away, satisfied.

"Back to town," he said, placing a friendly hand on the apprentice's shoulder. He felt expansive, pleased to have carried out the Counselor's orders in so creative a fashion. Could there have been a more fitting fate for the troublesome old madman? If he didn't drown outright, and if the orcas didn't eat him — although perhaps he was loathsome even to water beasts—why, the current would carry him onto the rocky beach at the southwest point of Safari Island. Let one who shared in the depredation of the earth be dispatched by his own poison. It was all so right. He knew the Counselor would be pleased.

"Home," he said to the apprentice.