

ON THE ROAD TO JORSLEM



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Our world was now truly theirs. All the way across Eyrop I could see that the invaders had taken everything, and we belonged to them as beasts in a barnyard belong to the farmer.

They were everywhere, like fleshy weeds taking root after a strange storm. They walked with cool confidence, as if telling us by their sleekness of their movements that the Will had withdrawn favor from us and conferred it upon them. They were not cruel to us, and yet they drained us of vitality by their mere presence among us. Our sun, our moons, our museums of ancient relics, our ruins of former cycles, our cities, our palaces, our future, our present, and our past had all undergone a transfer of title. Our lives now lacked meaning.

At night the blaze of the stars mocked us. All the universe looked down on our shame.

The cold wind of winter told us that for our sins our freedom had been lost. The bright heat of summer told us that for our pride we had been humbled.

Through a changed world we moved, stripped of our past selves. I, who had roved the stars each day now had lost that pleasure. Now, bound for Jorslem, I found cool comfort in the hope that as a Pilgrim I might gain redemption and renewal in that holy city. Olmayne and I repeated each night the rituals of our Pilgrimage toward that end:

“We yield to the Will.”

“We yield to the Will.”

“In all things great and small.”

“In all things great and small.”

“And ask forgiveness.”

“And ask forgiveness.”

“For sins actual and potential.”

“For sins actual and potential.”

“And pray for understanding and repose.”

“And pray for understanding and repose.”

“Through all our days until redemption comes.”

“Through all our days until redemption comes.”

Thus we spoke the words. Saying them, we clutched the cool polished spheres of starstone, icy as frostflowers, and made communion with the Will. And so we journeyed Jorslemward in this world that no longer was owned by man.

It was at the Talyan approach to Land Bridge that Olmayne first used her cruelty on me. Olmayne was cruel by first nature; I had had ample proof of that in Perris; and yet we had been Pilgrims together for many months, traveling from Perris eastward over the mountains and down the length of Talya to the Bridge, and she had kept her claws sheathed. Until this place.

The occasion was our halting by a company of invaders coming north from Afreek. There were perhaps

twenty of them, tall and harsh-faced, proud of being masters of conquered Earth. They rode in a gleaming covered vehicle of their own manufacture, long and narrow, with thick sand-colored treads and small windows. We could see the vehicle from far away, raising a cloud of dust as it neared us.

This was a hot time of year. The sky itself was the color of sand, and it was streaked with folded sheets of heat-radiation—glowing and terrible energy streams of turquoise and gold.

Perhaps fifty of us stood beside the road, with the land of Talya at our backs and the continent of Afreek before us. We were a varied group: some Pilgrims, like Olmayne and myself, making the trek toward the holy city of Jorslem, but also a random mix of the rootless, men and women who floated from continent to continent for lack of other purpose. I counted in the band five former Watchers, and also several Indexers, a Sentinel, a pair of Communicants, a Scribe, and even a few Changelings. We gathered into a straggling assembly awarding the road by default to the invaders.

Land Bridge is not wide, and the road will not allow many to use it at any time. Yet in normal times the flow of traffic had always gone in both directions at once. Here, today, we feared to go forward while invaders were this close, and so we remained clustered timidly, watching our conquerors approach.

One of the Changelings detached himself from the others of his kind and moved toward me. He was small of stature for that breed, but wide through the shoulders; his skin seemed much too tight for his frame; his eyes were large and green-rimmed; his hair grew in thick widely spaced pedestal-like clumps, and his nose was barely perceptible, so that his nostrils appeared to sprout from his upper lip. Despite this he was less grotesque than most Changelings appear. His expression was solemn, but had a hint of bizarre playfulness lurking somewhere.

He said in a voice that was little more than a feathery whisper, “Do you think we’ll be delayed long, Pilgrims?”

In former times one did not address a Pilgrim unsolicited—especially if one happened to be a Changeling. Such customs meant nothing to me, but Olmayne drew back with a hiss of distaste.

I said, “We will wait here until our masters allow us to pass. Is there any choice?”

“None, friend, none.”

At that *friend*, Olmayne hissed again and glowered at the little Changeling. He turned to her, and his anger showed, for suddenly six parallel bands of scarlet pigment blazed brightly beneath the glossy skin of his cheeks. But his only overt response to her was a courteous bow. He said, “I introduce myself. I am Bernalt, naturally guildless, a native of Nayrub in Deeper Afreek. I do not inquire after your names, Pilgrims. Are you bound for Jorslem?”

“Yes,” I said, as Olmayne swung about to present her back. “And you? Home to Nayrub after travels?”

“No,” said Bernalt. “I go to Jorslem also.”

Instantly I felt cold and hostile, my initial response to the Changeling’s suave charm fading at once. I had had a Changeling, false though he turned out to be, as a traveling companion before; he too had been charming, but I wanted no more like him. Edgily, distantly, I said, “May I ask what business a Changeling might have in Jorslem?”

He detected the chill in my tone, and his huge eyes registered sorrow. “We too are permitted to visit the holy city, I remind you. Even our kind. Do you fear that Changelings will once again seize the shrine of renewal, as we did a thousand years ago before we were cast down into guildlessness?” He laughed

harshly. "I threaten no one, Pilgrim. I am hideous of face, but not dangerous. May the Will grant you what you seek, Pilgrim." He made a gesture of respect and went back to the other Changelings.

Furious, Olmayne spun round on me.

"Why do you talk to such beastly creatures?"

"The man approached me. He was merely being friendly. We are all cast together here, Olmayne, and—"

"*Man. Man!* You call a Changeling a man?"

"They *are* human, Olmayne."

"Just barely. Tomis, I loathe such monsters. My flesh creeps to have them near me. If I could, I'd banish them from this world!"

"Where is the serene tolerance a Rememberer must cultivate?"

She flamed at the mockery in my voice. "We are not required to love Changelings, Tomis. They are one of the curses laid upon our planet—parodies of humanity, enemies of truth and beauty. I despise them!"

It was not a unique attitude. But I had no time to reproach Olmayne for her intolerance; the vehicle of the invaders was drawing near. I hoped we might resume our journey once it went by. It slowed and halted, however, and several of the invaders came out. They walked unhurriedly toward us, their long arms dangling like slack ropes.

"Who is the leader here?" asked one of them.

No one replied, for we were independent of one another in our travel.

The invader said impatiently, after a moment, "No leader? No leader? Very well, all of you, listen. The road must be cleared. A convoy is coming through. Go back to Palerm and wait until tomorrow."

"But I must be in Agupt by—" the Scribe began.

"Land Bridge is closed today," said the invader. "Go back to Palerm."

His voice was calm. The invaders are never peremptory, never overbearing. They have the poise and assurance of those who are secure possessors.

The Scribe shivered, his jowls swinging, and said no more.

Several of the others by the side of the road looked as if they wished to protest. The Sentinel turned away and spat. A man who boldly wore the mark of the shattered guild of Defenders in his cheek clenched his fists and plainly fought back a surge of fury. The Changelings whispered to one another. Bernalt smiled bitterly at me and shrugged.

Go back to Palerm? Waste a day's march in this heat? For what? For what?

The invader gestured casually, telling us to disperse.

Now it was that Olmayne was unkind to me. In a low voice she said, "Explain to them, Tomis, that you are in the pay of the Procurator of Perris, and they will let the two of us pass."

Her dark eyes glittered with mockery and contempt.

My shoulders sagged as if she had loaded ten years on me. "Why did you say such a thing?" I asked.

"It's hot. I'm tired. It's idiotic of them to send us back to Palerm."

"I agree. But I can do nothing. Why try to hurt me?"

"Does the truth hurt that much?"

"I am no collaborator, Olmayne."

She laughed. "You say that so well! But you are, Tomis, you are! You sold them the documents."

"To save the Prince, your lover," I reminded her.

"You dealt with the invaders, though. No matter what your motive was, that fact remains."

"Stop it, Olmayne."

"Now you give me orders?"

"Olmayne—"

"Go up to them, Tomis. Tell them who you are, make them let us go ahead."

"The convoys would run us down on the road. In any case I have no influence with invaders. I am not the Procurator's man."

"I'll die before I go back to Palerm!"

"Die, then," I said wearily, and turned my back on her.

"Traitor! Treacherous old fool! Coward!"

I pretended to ignore her, but I felt the fire of her words. There was no falsehood in them, only malice. I *had* dealt with the conquerors, *I had* betrayed the guild that sheltered me, *I had* violated the code that calls for sullen passivity as our only way of protest for Earth's defeat. All true; yet it was unfair for her to reproach me with it. I had given no thought to higher matters of patriotism when I broke my trust; I was trying only to save a man to whom I felt bound, a man moreover with whom she was in love. It was loathsome of Olmayne to tax me with treason now, to torment my conscience, merely because of a petty rage at the heat and dust of the road.

But this woman had coldly slain her own husband. Why should she not be malicious in trifles as well?

The invaders had their way; we abandoned the road and straggled back to Palerm, a dismal, sizzling, sleepy town. That evening, as if to console us, five Fliers passing in formation overhead took a fancy to the town, and in the moonless night they came again and again through the sky, three men and two women, ghostly and slender and beautiful. I stood watching them for more than an hour, until my soul itself seemed lifted from me and into the air to join them. Their great shimmering wings scarcely hid the starlight; their pale angular bodies moved in graceful arcs, arms held pressed close to sides, legs together, backs gently curved. The sight of these five stirred my memories of Avluela and left me tingling with troublesome emotions.

The Fliers made their last pass and were gone. The false moons entered the sky soon afterward. I went

into our hostelry then, and shortly Olmayne asked admittance to my room.

She looked contrite. She carried a squat octagonal flask of green wine, not a Talyan brew but something from an outworld, no doubt purchased at great price.

“Will you forgive me, Tomis?” she asked. “Here. I know you like these wines.”

“I would rather not have had those words before, and not have the wine now,” I told her.

“My temper grows short in the heat. I’m sorry, Tomis. I said a stupid and tactless thing.”

I forgave her, in hope of a smoother journey thereafter, and we drank most of the wine, and then she went to her own room nearby to sleep. Pilgrims must live chaste lives—not that Olmayne would ever have bedded with such a withered old fossil as I, but the commandments of our adopted guild prevented the question from arising.

For a long while I lay awake beneath a lash of guilt. In her impatience and wrath Olmayne had stung me at my vulnerable place: I was a betrayer of mankind. I wrestled with the issue almost to dawn.

—What had I done?

I had revealed to our conquerors a certain document.

—Did the invaders have a moral right to the document?

It told of the shameful treatment they had had at the hands of our ancestors.

—What, then, was wrong about giving it to them?

One does not aid one's conquerors even when they are morally superior to one.

—Is a small treason a serious thing?

There are no small treasons.

—Perhaps the complexity of the matter should be investigated. I did not act out of love of the enemy, but to aid a friend.

Nevertheless I collaborated with our foes.

—This obstinate self-laceration smacks of sinful pride.

But I feel my guilt. I drown in shame.

In this unprofitable way I consumed the night. When the day brightened, I rose and looked skyward and begged the Will to help me find redemption in the waters of the house of renewal in Jorslem, at the end of my Pilgrimage. Then I went to awaken Olmayne.

Land Bridge was open on this day, and we joined the throng that was crossing over out of Talya into Afreek. It was the second time I had traveled Land Bridge, for the year before—it seemed so much farther in the past—I had come the other way, out of Agupt and bound for Roum.

There are two main routes for Pilgrims from Eyrop to Jorslem. The northern route involves going through the Dark Lands east of Talya, taking the ferry at Stanbool, and skirting the western coast of the continent

of Ais to Jorslem. It was the route I would have preferred since, of all the world's great cities, old Stanbool is the one I have never visited. But Olmayne had been there to do research in the days when she was a Rememberer, and disliked the place; and so we took the southern route—across Land Bridge into Afreek and along the shore of the great Lake Medit, through Agupt and the fringes of the Arban Desert and up to Jorslem.

A true Pilgrim travels only by foot. It was not an idea that had much appeal to Olmayne, and though we walked a great deal, we rode whenever we could. She was shameless in commandeering transportation. On only the second day of our journey she had gotten us a ride from a rich Merchant bound for the coast; the man had no intention of sharing his sumptuous vehicle with anyone, but he could not resist the sensuality of Olmayne's deep, musical voice, even though it issued from the sexless grillwork of a Pilgrim's mask.

The Merchant traveled in style. For him the conquest of Earth might never have happened, nor even all the long centuries of Third Cycle decline. His self-primed landcar was four times the length of a man and wide enough to house five people in comfort; and it shielded its riders against the outer world as effectively as a womb. There was no direct vision, only a series of screens revealing upon command what lay outside. The temperature never varied from a chosen norm. Spigots supplied liqueurs and stronger things; food tablets were available; pressure couches insulated travelers against the irregularities of the road. For illumination, there was slavelight keyed to the Merchant's whims. Beside the main couch sat a thinking cap, but I never learned whether the Merchant carried a pickled brain for his private use in the depths of the landcar, or enjoyed some sort of remote contact with the memory tanks of the cities through which he passed.

He was a man of pomp and bulk, clearly a savorer of his own flesh. Deep olive of skin, with a thick pompadour of well-oiled black hair and somber, scrutinizing eyes, he rejoiced in his solidity and in his control of an uncertain environment. He dealt, we learned, in foodstuffs of other worlds; he bartered our poor manufactures for the delicacies of the starborn ones. Now he was en route to Marsay to examine a cargo of hallucinatory insects newly come in from one of the Belt planets.

“You like the car?” he asked, seeing our awe. Olmayne, no stranger to ease herself, was peering at the dense inner mantle of diamonded brocade in obvious amazement. “It was owned by the Comt of Perris,” he went on. “Yes, I mean it, the Comt himself. They turned his palace into a museum, you know.”

“I know,” Olmayne said softly.

“This was his chariot. It was supposed to be part of the museum, but I bought it off a crooked invader. You didn't know they had crooked ones too, eh?” The Merchant's robust laughter caused the sensitive mantle on the walls of the car to recoil in disdain. “This one was the Procurator's boy friend. Yes, they've got *those*, too. He was looking for a certain fancy root that grows on a planet of the Fishes, something to give his virility a little boost, you know, and he learned that I controlled the whole supply here, and so we were able to work out a little deal. Of course, I had to have the car adapted, a little. The Comt kept four neuters up front and powered the engine right off their metabolisms, you understand, running the thing on thermal differentials. Well, that's a fine way to power a car, if you're a Comt, but it uses up a lot of neuters through the year, and I felt I'd be overreaching my status if I tried anything like that. It might get me into trouble with the invaders, too. So I had the drive compartment stripped down and replaced with a standard heavy-duty rollerwagon engine—a really subtle job—and there you are. You're lucky to be in here. It's only that you're Pilgrims. Ordinarily I don't let folks come inside, on account of them feeling envy, and envious folks are dangerous to a man who's made something out of his life. Yet the Will brought you two to me. Heading for Jorslem, eh?”

“Yes,” Olmayne said.

“Me too, but not yet! Not just yet, thank you!” He patted his middle. “I’ll be there, you can bet on it, when I feel ready for renewal, but that’s a good way off, the Will willing! You two been Pilgriming long?”

“No,” Olmayne said.

“A lot of folks went Pilgrim after the conquest, I guess. Well, I won’t blame ‘em. We each adapt in our own ways to changing times. Say, you carrying those little stones the Pilgrims carry?”

“Yes,” Olmayne said.

“Mind if I see one? Always been fascinated by the things. There was this trader from one of the Darkstar worlds—little skinny bastard with skin like oozing tar—he offered me ten quintals of the things. Said they were genuine, gave you the real communion, just like the Pilgrims had. I told him no, I wasn’t going to fool with the Will. Some things you don’t do, even for profit. But afterward I wished I’d kept one as a souvenir. I never even touched one.” He stretched a hand toward Olmayne. “Can I see?”

“We may not let others handle the starstone,” I said.

“I wouldn’t tell anybody you let me!”

“It is forbidden.”

“Look, it’s private in here, the most private place on Earth, and—”

“Please. What you ask is impossible.”

His face darkened, and I thought for a moment he would halt the car and order us out, which would have caused me no grief. My hand slipped into my pouch to finger the frigid starstone sphere that I had been given at the outset of my Pilgrimage. The touch of my fingertips brought faint resonances of the communion-trance to me, and I shivered in pleasure. He must not have it, I swore. But the crisis passed without incident. The Merchant, having tested us and found resistance, did not choose to press the matter.

We sped onward toward Marsay.

He was not a likable man, but he had a certain gross charm, and we were rarely offended by his words. Olmayne, who after all was a fastidious woman and had lived most of her years in the glossy seclusion of the Hall of Rememberers, found him harder to take than I; my intolerances have been well blunted by a lifetime of wandering. But even Olmayne seemed to find him amusing when he boasted of his wealth and influence, when he told of the women who waited for him on many worlds, when he catalogued his homes and his trophies and the guildmasters who sought his counsel, when he bragged of his friendships with former Masters and Dominators. He talked almost wholly of himself and rarely of us, for which we were thankful; once he asked how it was that a male Pilgrim and a female Pilgrim were traveling together, implying that we must be lovers; we admitted that the arrangement was slightly irregular and went on to another theme, and I think he remained persuaded of our unchastity. His bawdy guesses mattered not at all to me nor, I believe, to Olmayne. We had more serious guilts as our burdens.

Our Merchant’s life seemed enviably undisrupted by the fall of our planet: he was as rich as ever, as comfortable, as free to move about. But even he felt occasionally irked by the presence of the invaders, as we found out by night not far from Marsay, when we were stopped at a checkpoint on the road.

Spy-eye scanners saw us coming, gave a signal to the spinnerets, and a golden spiderweb spurted into being from one shoulder of the highway to the other. The landcar’s sensors detected it and instantly signaled us to a halt. The screens showed a dozen pale human figures clustered outside.

“Bandits?” Olmayne asked.

“Worse,” said the Merchant. “Traitors.” He scowled and turned to his communicator horn. “What is it?” he demanded.

“Get out for inspection.”

“By whose writ?”

“The Procurator of Marsay,” came the reply.

It was an ugly thing to behold: human beings acting as road-agents for the invaders. But it was inevitable that we should have begun to drift into their civil service, since work was scarce, especially for those who had been in the defensive guilds. The Merchant began the complicated process of unsealing his car. He was stormy-faced with rage, but he was stymied, unable to pass the checkpoint's web. “I go armed,” he whispered to us. “Wait inside and fear nothing.”

He got out and engaged in a lengthy discussion, of which we could hear nothing, with the highway guards. At length some impasse must have forced recourse to higher authority, for three invaders abruptly appeared, waved their hired collaborators away, and surrounded the Merchant. His demeanor changed; his face grew oily and sly, his hands moved rapidly in eloquent gestures, his eyes glistened. He led the three interrogators to the car, opened it, and showed them his two passengers, ourselves. The invaders appeared puzzled by the sight of Pilgrims amid such opulence, but they did not ask us to step out. After some further conversation the Merchant rejoined us and sealed the car; the web was dissolved; we sped onward toward Marsay.

As we gained velocity he muttered curses and said, “Do you know how I'd handle that long-armed filth? All we need is a coordinated plan. A night of knives: every ten Earthmen make themselves responsible for taking out one invader. We'd get them all.”

“Why has no one organized such a movement?” I asked.

“It's the job of the Defenders, and half of them are dead, and the other half's in the pay of them. It's not my place to set up a resistance movement. But that's how it should be done. Guerrilla action: sneak up behind 'em, give 'em the knife. Quick. Good old First Cycle methods; they've never lost their value.”

“More invaders would come,” Olmayne said morosely.

“Treat 'em the same way!”

“They would retaliate with fire. They would destroy our world,” she said.

“These invaders pretend to be civilized, more civilized than ourselves,” the Merchant replied. “Such barbarity would give them a bad name on a million worlds. No, they wouldn't come with fire. They'd just get tired of having to conquer us over and over, of losing so many men. And they'd go away, and we'd be free again.”

“Without having won redemption for our ancient sins,” I said.

“What's that, old man? What's that?”

“Never mind.”

“I suppose you wouldn't join in, either of you, if we struck back at them?”

I said, "In former life I was a Watcher, and I devoted myself to the protection of this planet against them. I am no more fond of our masters than you are, and no less eager to see them depart. But your plan is not only impractical: it is also morally valueless. Mere bloody resistance would thwart the scheme the Will has devised for us. We must earn our freedom in a nobler way. We were not given this ordeal simply so that we might have practice in slitting throats."

He looked at me with contempt and snorted. "I should have remembered. I'm talking to Pilgrims. All right. Forget it all. I wasn't serious, anyway. Maybe you like the world the way it is, for all I know."

"I do not," I said.

He glanced at Olmayne. So did I, for I half-expected her to tell the Merchant that I had already done my bit of collaborating with our conquerors. But Olmayne fortunately was silent on that topic, as she would be for some months more, until that unhappy day by the approach to Land Bridge when, in her impatience, she taunted me with my sole fall from grace.

We left our benefactor in Marsay, spent the night in a Pilgrim hostelry, and set out on foot along the coast the next morning. And so we traveled, Olmayne and I, through pleasant lands swarming with invaders; now we walked, now we rode some peasant's rollerwagon, once even we were the guests of touring conquerors. We gave Roum a wide berth when we entered Talya, and turned south. And so we came to Land Bridge, and met delay, and had our frosty moment of bickering, and then were permitted to go on across that narrow tongue of sandy ground that links the lake-sundered continents. And so we crossed into Afreek, at last.

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Our first night on the other side, after our long and dusty crossing, we tumbled into a grimy inn near the lake's edge. It was a square whitewashed stone building, practically windowless and arranged around a cool inner courtyard. Most of its clientele appeared to be Pilgrims, but there were some members of other guilds, chiefly Vendors and Transporters. At a room near the turning of the building there stayed a Rememberer, whom Olmayne avoided even though she did not know him; she simply did not wish to be reminded of her former guild.

Among those who took lodging there was the Changeling Bernalt. Under the new laws of the invaders, Changelings might stay at any public inn, not merely those set aside for their special use; yet it seemed a little strange to see him here. We passed in the corridor. Bernalt gave me a tentative smile, as though about to speak again, but the smile died and the glow left his eyes. He appeared to realize I was not ready to accept his friendship. Or perhaps he merely recalled that Pilgrims, by the laws of their guild, were not supposed to have much to do with guildless ones. That law still stood.

Olmayne and I had a greasy meal of soups and stews. Afterward I saw her to her room and began to wish her good night when she said, "Wait. We'll do our communion together."

"I've been seen coming into your room," I pointed out. "There will be whispering if I stay long."

"We'll go to yours, then!"

Olmayne peered into the hall. All clear: she seized my wrist, and we rushed toward my chamber, across the way. Closing and sealing the warped door, she said, "Your starstone, now!"

I took the stone from its hiding place in my robe, and she produced hers, and our hands closed upon them.

During this time of Pilgrimage I had found the starstone a great comfort. Many seasons now had passed

since I had last entered a Watcher's trance, but I was not yet reconciled entirely to the breaking of my old habit; the starstone provided a kind of substitute for the swooping ecstasy I had known in Watching.

Starstones come from one of the outer worlds—I could not tell you which—and may be had only by application to the guild. The stone itself determines whether one may be a Pilgrim, for it will burn the hand of one whom it considers unworthy to don the robe. They say that without exception every person who has enrolled in the guild of Pilgrims has shown uneasiness as the stone was offered to him for the first time.

“When they gave you yours,” Olmayne asked, “were you worried?”

“Of course.”

“So was I.”

We waited for the stones to overwhelm us. I gripped mine tightly. Dark, shining, more smooth than glass, it glowed in my grasp like a pellet of ice, and I felt myself becoming attuned to the power of the Will.

First came a heightened perception of my surroundings. Every crack in the walls of this ancient inn seemed now a valley. The soft wail of the wind outside rose to a keen pitch. In the dim glow of the room's lamp I saw colors beyond the spectrum.

The quality of the experience the starstone offered was altogether different from that given by my instruments of Watching. That, too, was a transcending of self. When in a state of Watchfulness I was capable of leaving my Earthbound identity and soaring at infinite speed over infinite range, perceiving all, and this is as close to godhood as a man is likely to come. The starstone provided none of the highly specific data that a Watcher's trance yielded. In the full spell I could see nothing, nor could I identify my surroundings. I knew only that when I let myself be drawn into the stone's effect, I was engulfed by something far larger than myself, that I was in direct contact with the matrix of the universe.

Call it communion with the Will.

From a great distance I heard Olmayne say, “Do you believe what some people say of these stones? That there is no communion, that it's all an electrical deception?”

“I have no theory about that,” I said. “I am less interested in causes than in effects.”

Skeptics say that the starstones are nothing more than amplifying loops which bounce a man's own brain-waves back into his mind; the awesome oceanic entity with which one comes in contact, these scoffers hold, is merely the thunderous recycling oscillation of a single shuttling electrical pulse beneath the roof of the Pilgrim's own skull. Perhaps. Perhaps.

Olmayne extended the hand that gripped her stone. She said, “When you were among the Rememberers, Tomis, did you study the history of early religion? All through time, man has sought union with the infinite. Many religions—not all!—have held forth the hope of such a divine merging.”

“And there were drugs, too,” I murmured.

“Certain drugs, yes, cherished for their ability to bring the taker momentarily to a sensation of oneness with the universe. These starstones, Tomis, are only the latest in a long sequence of devices for overcoming the greatest of human curses, that is, the confinement of each individual soul within a single body. Our terrible isolation from one another and from the Will itself is more than most races of the universe would be able to bear. It seems unique to humanity.”

Her voice grew feathery and vague. She said much more, speaking to me out of the wisdom she had learned with the Rememberers, but her meaning eluded me; I was always quicker to enter communion than she, because of my training as a Watcher, and often her final words did not register.

That night as on other nights I seized my stone and felt the chill and closed my eyes, and heard the distant tolling of a mighty gong, the lapping of waves on an unknown beach, the whisper of the wind in an alien forest. And felt a summons. And yielded. And entered the state of communion. And gave myself up to the Will.

And slipped down through the layers of my life, through my youth and middle years, my wanderings, my old loves, my torments, my joys, my troubled later years, my treasons, my insufficiencies, my griefs, my imperfections.

And freed myself of myself. And shed my selfness. And merged. And became one of thousands of Pilgrims, not merely Olmayne nearby, but others trekking the mountains of Hind and the sands of Arba, Pilgrims at their devotions in Ais and Palash and Stralya, Pilgrims moving toward Jorslem on the journey that some complete in months, some in years, and some never at all. And shared with all of them the instant of submergence into the Will. And saw in the darkness a deep purple glow on the horizon—which grew in intensity until it became an all-encompassing red brilliance. And went into it, though unworthy, unclean, flesh-trapped, accepting fully the communion offered and wishing no other state of being than this divorce from self.

And was purified.

And awakened alone.

5

I knew Afreek well. When still a young man I had settled in the continent's dark heart for many years. Out of restlessness I had left, finally, going as far north as Agupt, where the antique relics of First Cycle days have survived better than anywhere else. In those days antiquity held no interest for me, however. I did my Watching and went about from place to place, since a Watcher does not need to have a fixed station; and chance brought me in contact with Avluela just as I was ready to roam again, and so I left Agupt for Roum and then Perris.

Now I had come back with Olmayne. We kept close to the coast and avoided the sandy inland wastes. As Pilgrims we were immune from most of the hazards of travel: we would never go hungry or without shelter, even in a place where no lodge for our guild existed, and all owed us respect. Olmayne's great beauty might have been a hazard to her, traveling as she was with no escort other than a shriveled old man, but behind the mask and robe of a Pilgrim she was safe. We unmasked only rarely, and never where we might be seen.

I had no illusions about my importance to Olmayne. To her I was merely part of the equipment of a journey—someone to help her in her communions and rituals, to arrange for lodgings, to smooth her way for her. That role suited me. She was, I knew, a dangerous woman, given to strange whims and unpredictable fancies. I wanted no entanglements with her.

She lacked a Pilgrim's purity. Even though she had passed the test of the starstone, she had not triumphed—as a Pilgrim must—over her own flesh. She slipped off, sometimes, for half a night or longer, and I pictured her lying maskless in some alley gasping in a Servitor's arms. That was her affair entirely; I never spoke of her absences upon her return.

Within our lodgings, too, she was careless of her virtue. We never shared a room—no Pilgrim hostelry would permit it—but we usually had adjoining ones, and she summoned me to hers or came to mine

whenever the mood took her. Often as not she was unclothed; she attained the height of the grotesque one night in Agupt when I found her wearing only her mask, all her gleaming white flesh belying the intent of the bronze grillwork that hid her face. Only once did it seem to occur to her that I might ever have been young enough to feel desire. She looked my scrawny, shrunken body over and said, “How will you look, I wonder, when you've been renewed in Jorslem? I'm trying to picture you young, Tomis. Will you give me pleasure then?”

“I gave pleasure in my time,” I said obliquely.

Olmayne disliked the heat and dryness of Agupt. We traveled mainly by night and clung to our hostelries by day. The roads were crowded at all hours. The press of Pilgrims towards Jorslem was extraordinarily heavy, it appeared. Olmayne and I speculated on how long it might take us to gain access to the waters of renewal at such a time.

“You've never been renewed before?” she asked.

“Never.”

“Nor I. They say they don't admit all who come.”

“Renewal is a privilege, not a right,” I said. “Many are turned away.”

“I understand also,” said Olmayne, “that not all who enter the waters are successfully renewed.”

“I know little of this.”

“Some grow older instead of younger. Some grow young too fast, and perish. There are risks.”

“Would you not take those risks?”

She laughed. “Only a fool would hesitate.”

“You are in no need of renewal at this time,” I pointed out. “You were sent to Jorslem for the good of your soul, not that of your body, as I recall.”

“I'll tend to my soul as well, when I'm in Jorslem.”

“But you talk as if the house of renewal is the only shrine you mean to visit.”

“It's the important one,” she said. She rose, flexing her supple body voluptuously. “True, I have atoning to do. But do you think I've come all the way to Jorslem just for the sake of my spirit?”

“I have,” I pointed out.

“*You!* You're old and withered! You'd better look after your spirit—and your flesh as well. I wouldn't mind shedding some age, though. I won't have them take off much. Eight, ten years, that's all. The years I wasted with that fool Elegro. I don't need a full renewal. You're right: I'm still in my prime.” Her face clouded. “If the city is full of Pilgrims, maybe they won't let me into the house of renewal at all! They'll say I'm too young—tell me to come back in forty or fifty years—Tomis, would they do that to me?”

“It is hard for me to say.”

She trembled. “They'll let *you* in. You're a walking corpse already—they have to renew you! But me—Tomis, I won't let them turn me away! If I have to pull Jorslem down stone by stone, I'll get in somehow!”

I wondered privately if her soul were in fit condition for one who poses as a candidate for renewal. Humility is recommended when one becomes a Pilgrim. But I had no wish to feel Olmayne's fury, and I kept my silence. Perhaps they would admit her to renewal despite her flaws. I had concerns of my own. It was vanity that drove Olmayne; my goals were different. I had wandered long and done much, not all of it virtuous; I needed a cleansing of my conscience in the holy city more, perhaps, than I did a lessening of my years.

Or was it only vanity for me to think so?

6

Several days eastward of that place, as Olmayne and I walked through a parched countryside, village children chattering in fear and excitement rushed upon us.

"Please, come, come!" they cried. "Pilgrims, come!"

Olmayne looked bewildered and irritated as they plucked at her robes. "What are they saying, Tomis? I can't get through their damnable Aguptan accents!"

"They want us to help," I said. I listened to their shouts. "In their village," I told Olmayne, "there is an outbreak of the crystallization disease. They wish us to seek the mercies of the Will upon the sufferers."

Olmayne drew back. I imagined the disdainful wince behind her mask. She flicked out her hands, trying to keep the children from touching her. To me she said, "We can't go there!"

"We must."

"We're in a hurry! Jorslem's crowded; I don't want to waste time in some dreary village."

"They need us, Olmayne."

"Are we Surgeons?"

"We are Pilgrims," I said quietly. "The benefits we gain from that carry certain obligations. If we are entitled to the hospitality of all we meet, we must also place our souls at the free disposal of the humble. Come."

"I won't go!"

"How will that sound in Jorslem, when you give an accounting of yourself, Olmayne?"

"It's a hideous disease. What if we get it?"

"Is that what troubles you? Trust in the Will! How can you expect renewal if your soul is so deficient in grace?"

"May you rot, Tomis," she said in a low voice. "When did you become so pious? You're doing this deliberately, because of what I said to you by Land Bridge. In a stupid moment I taunted you, and now you're willing to expose us both to a ghastly affliction for your revenge. Don't do it, Tomis!"

I ignored her accusation. "The children are growing agitated, Olmayne. Will you wait here for me, or will you go on to the next village and wait in the hostelry there?"

"Don't leave me alone in the middle of nowhere!"

"I have to go to the sick ones," I said.

In the end she accompanied me—I think not out of any suddenly conceived desire to be of help, but rather out of fear that her selfish refusal might somehow be held against her in Jorslem. We came shortly to the village, which was small and decayed, for Agupt lies in a terrible hot sleep and changes little with the millennia. The contrast with the busy cities farther to the south in Afreek—cities that prosper on the output of luxuries from their great Manufactories—is vast.

Shivering with heat, we followed the children to the houses of sickness.

The crystallization disease is an unlovely gift from the stars. Not many afflictions of outworlders affect the Earthborn, but from the worlds of the Spear came this ailment, carried by alien tourists, and the disease has settled among us. If it had come during the glorious days of the Second Cycle we might have eradicated it in a day; but our skills are dulled now, and no year has been without its outbreak. Olmayne was plainly terrified as we entered the first of the clay huts where the victims were kept.

There is no hope for one who has contracted this disease. One merely hopes that the healthy will be spared; and fortunately it is not a highly contagious disease. It works insidiously, transmitted in an unknown way, often failing to pass from husband to wife and leaping instead to the far side of a city, to another land entirely, perhaps. The first symptom is a scaliness of the skin; itch, flakes upon the clothing, inflammation. There follows a weakness in the bones as the calcium is dissolved. One grows limp and rubbery, but this is still an early phase. Soon the outer tissues harden. Thick, opaque membranes form on the surface of the eyes; the nostrils may close and seal; the skin grows coarse and pebbled. In this phase prophecy is common. The sufferer partakes of the skills of a Somnambulist, and utters oracles. The soul may wander, separating from the body for hours at a time, although the life-processes continue. Next, within twenty days after the onset of the disease, the crystallization occurs. While the skeletal structure dissolves, the skin splits and cracks, forming shining crystals in rigid geometrical patterns. The victim is quite beautiful at this time and takes on the appearance of a replica of himself in precious gems. The crystals glow with rich inner lights, violet and green and red; their sharp facets adopt new alignments from hour to hour; the slightest illumination in the room causes the sufferer to give off brilliant glittering reflections that dazzle and delight the eye. All this time the internal body is changing, as if some strange chrysalis is forming. Miraculously the organs sustain life throughout every transformation, although in the crystalline phase the victim is no longer able to communicate with others and possibly is unaware of the changes in himself. Ultimately the metamorphosis reaches the vital organs, and the process fails. The alien infestation is unable to reshape those organs without killing its host. The crisis is swift: a brief convulsion, a final discharge of energy along the nervous system of the crystallized one, and there is a quick arching of the body, accompanied by the delicate tinkling sounds of shivering glass, and then all is over. On the planet to which this is native, crystallization is not a disease but an actual metamorphosis, the result of thousands of years of evolution toward a symbiotic relationship. Unfortunately, among the Earthborn, the evolutionary preparation did not take place, and the agent of change invariably brings its subject to a fatal outcome.

Since the process is irreversible, Olmayne and I could do nothing of real value here except offer consolation to these ignorant and frightened people. I saw at once that the disease had seized this village some time ago. There were people in all stages, from the first rash to the ultimate crystallization. They were arranged in the hut according to the intensity of their infestation. To my left was a somber row of new victims, fully conscious and morbidly scratching their arms as they contemplated the horrors that awaited them. Along the rear wall were five pallets on which lay villagers in the coarse-skinned and prophetic phase. To my right were those in varying degrees of crystallization, and up front, the diadem of the lot, was one who clearly was in his last hours of life. His body, encrusted with false emeralds and rubies and opals, shimmered in almost painful beauty; he scarcely moved; within that shell of wondrous color he was lost in some dream of ecstasy, finding at the end of his days more passion, more delight, than he could ever have known in all his harsh peasant years.

Olmayne shied back from the door.

“It's horrible,” she whispered. “I won't go in!”

“We must. We are under an obligation.”

“I never wanted to be a Pilgrim!”

“You wanted atonement,” I reminded her. “It must be earned.”

“We'll catch the disease!”

“The Will can reach us anywhere to infect us with this, Olmayne. It strikes at random. The danger is no greater for us inside this building than it is in Perris.”

“Why, then, are so many in this one village smitten?”

“This village has earned the displeasure of the Will.”

“How neatly you serve up the mysticism, Tomis,” she said bitterly. “I misjudged you. I thought you were a sensible man. This fatalism of yours is ugly.”

“I watched my world conquered,” I said. “I beheld the Prince of Roum destroyed. Calamities breed such attitudes as I now have. Let us go in, Olmayne.”

We entered, Olmayne still reluctant. Now fear assailed me, but I concealed it. I had been almost smug in my piety while arguing with the lovely Rememberer woman who was my companion, but I could not deny the sudden seething of fright.

I forced myself to be tranquil.

There are redemptions and redemptions, I told myself. If this disease is to be the source of mine, I will abide by the Will.

Perhaps Olmayne came to some such decision too, as we went in, or maybe her own sense of the dramatic forced her into the unwanted role of the lady of mercy. She made the rounds with me. We passed from pallet to pallet, heads bowed, starstones in our hands. We said words. We smiled when the newly sick begged for reassurance. We offered prayers. Olmayne paused before one girl in the secondary phase, whose eyes already were filming over with horny tissue, and knelt and touched her starstone to the girl's scaly cheek. The girl spoke in oracles, but unhappily not in any language we understood.

At last we came to the terminal case, he who had grown his own superb sarcophagus. Somehow I felt purged of fear, and so too was Olmayne, for we stood a long while before this grotesque sight, silent, and then she whispered, “How terrible! How wonderful! How beautiful!”

Three more huts similar to this one awaited us.

The villagers clustered at the doorways. As we emerged from each building in turn, the healthy ones fell down about us, clutching at the hems of our robes, stridently demanding that we intercede for them with the Will. We spoke such words as seemed appropriate and not too insincere. Those within the huts received our words blankly, as if they already realized there was no chance for them; those outside, still untouched by the disease, clung to every syllable. The headman of the village—only an acting headman; the true chief lay crystallized—thanked us again and again, as though we had done something real. At

least we had given comfort, which is not to be despised.

When we came forth from the last of the sickhouses, we saw a slight figure watching us from a distance: the Changeling Bernalt. Olmayne nudged me.

“That creature has been following us, Tomis. All the way from Land Bridge!”

“He travels to Jorslem also.”

“Yes, but why should he stop here? Why in this awful place?”

“Hush, Olmayne. Be civil to him now.”

“To a *Changeling* ?”

Bernalt approached. The mutated one was clad in a soft white robe that blunted the strangeness of his appearance. He nodded sadly toward the village and said, “A great tragedy. The Will lies heavy on this place.”

He explained that he had arrived here several days ago and had met a friend from his native city of Nayrub. I assumed he meant a Changeling, but no, Bernalt's friend was a Surgeon, he said, who had halted here to do what he could for the afflicted villagers. The idea of a friendship between a Changeling and a Surgeon seemed a bit odd to me, and positively contemptible to Olmayne, who did not trouble to hide her loathing of Bernalt.

A partly crystallized figure staggered from one of the huts, gnarled hands clutching. Bernalt went forward and gently guided it back within. Returning to us, he said, “There are times one is actually glad one is a Changeling. That disease does not affect us, you know.” His eyes acquired a sudden glitter. “Am I forcing myself on you, Pilgrims? You seem like stone behind your masks. I mean no harm; shall I withdraw?”

“Of course not,” I said, meaning the opposite. His company disturbed me; perhaps the ordinary disdain for Changelings was a contagion that had at last reached me. “Stay awhile. I would ask you to travel with us to Jorslem, but you know it is forbidden for us.”

“Certainly. I quite understand.” He was coolly polite, but the seething bitterness in him was close to the surface. Most Changelings are such degraded bestial things that they are incapable of knowing how detested they are by normal guilded men and women; but Bernalt clearly was gifted with the torment of comprehension. He smiled, and then he pointed. “My friend is here.”

Three figures approached. One was Bernalt's Surgeon, a slender man, dark-skinned, soft-voiced, with weary eyes and sparse yellow hair. With him were an official of the invaders and another outworlder from a different planet. “I had heard that two Pilgrims were summoned to this place,” said the invader. “I am grateful for the comfort you may have brought these sufferers. I am Earthclaim Nineteen; this district is under my administration. Will you be my guests at dinner this night?”

I was doubtful of taking an invader's hospitality, and Olmayne's sudden clenching of her fist over her starstone told me that she also hesitated. Earthclaim Nineteen seemed eager for our acceptance. He was not as tall as most of his kind, and his malproportioned arms reached below his knees. Under the blazing Aguptan sun his thick waxy skin acquired a high gloss, although he did not perspire.

Into a long, tense, and awkward silence the Surgeon inserted: “No need to hold back. In this village we all are brothers. Join us tonight, will you?”

We did. Earthclaim Nineteen occupied a villa by the shore of Lake Medit; in the clear light of late afternoon I thought I could detect Land Bridge jutting forward to my left, and even Eyrop at the far side of the lake. We were waited upon by members of the guild of Servitors who brought us cool drinks on the patio. The invader had a large staff, all Earthborn; to me it was another sign that our conquest had become institutionalized and was wholly accepted by the bulk of the populace. Until long after dusk we talked, lingering over drinks even as the writhing auroras danced into view to herald the night. Bernalt the Changeling remained apart, though, perhaps ill at ease in our presence. Olmayne too was moody and withdrawn; a mingled depression and exaltation had settled over her in the stricken village, and the presence of Bernalt at the dinner party had reinforced her silence, for she had no idea how to be polite in the presence of a Changeling. The invader, our host, was charming and attentive, and tried to bring her forth from her bleakness. I had seen charming conquerors before. I had traveled with one who had posed as the Earthborn Changeling Gormon in the days just before the conquest. This one, Earthclaim Nineteen, had been a poet on his native world in those days. I said, "It seems unlikely that one of your inclinations would care to be part of a military occupation."

"All experiences strengthen the art," said Earthclaim Nineteen. "I seek to expand myself. In any case I am not a warrior but an administrator. Is it so strange that a poet can be an administrator, or an administrator a poet?" He laughed. "Among your many guilds, there is no guild of Poets. Why?"

"There are Communicants," I said. "They serve your muse."

"But in a religious way. They are interpreters of the Will, not of their own souls."

"The two are indistinguishable. The verses they make are divinely inspired, but rise from the hearts of their makers," I said.

Earthclaim Nineteen looked unconvinced. "You may argue that all poetry is at bottom religious, I suppose. But this stuff of your Communicants is too limited in scope. It deals only with acquiescence to the Will."

"A paradox," said Olmayne. "The Will encompasses everything, and yet you say that our Communicants' scope is limited."

"There are other themes for poetry besides immersion in the Will, my friends. The love of person for person, the joy of defending one's home, the wonder of standing naked beneath the fiery stars—" The invader laughed. "Can it be that Earth fell so swiftly because its only poets were poets of acquiescence to destiny?"

"Earth fell," said the Surgeon, "because the Will required us to atone for the sin our ancestors committed when they treated your ancestors like beasts. The quality of our poetry had nothing to do with it."

"The Will decreed that you would lose to us by way of punishment, eh? But if the Will is omnipotent, it must have decreed the sin of your ancestors that made the punishment necessary. Eh? Eh? The Will playing games with itself? You see the difficulty of believing in a divine force that determines all events? Where is the element of choice that makes suffering meaningful? To force you into a sin, and then to require you to endure defeat as atonement, seems to me an empty exercise. Forgive my blasphemy."

The Surgeon said, "You misunderstand. All that has happened on this planet is part of a process of moral instruction. The Will does not shape every event great or small; it provides the raw material of events, and allows us to follow such patterns as we desire."

"Example?"

“The Will imbued the Earthborn with skills and knowledge. During the First Cycle we rose from savagery in little time; in the Second Cycle we attained greatness. In our moment of greatness we grew swollen with pride, choosing to exceed our limitations. We imprisoned intelligent creatures of other worlds under the pretense of ‘study,’ when we acted really out of an arrogant desire for amusement; and we toyed with our world's climate until oceans joined and continents sank and our old civilization was destroyed. Thus the Will instructed us in the boundaries of human ambition.”

“I dislike that dark philosophy even more,” said Earthclaim Nineteen. “I—”

“Let me finish,” said the Surgeon. “The collapse of Second Cycle Earth was our punishment. The defeat of Third Cycle Earth by you folk from the stars is a completion of that earlier punishment, but also the beginning of a new phase. You are the instruments of our redemption. By inflicting on us the final humiliation of conquest, you bring us to the bottom of our trough; now we renew our souls, now we begin to rise, tested by adversities.”

I stared in sudden amazement at this Surgeon, who was uttering ideas that had been stirring in me all along the road to Jorslem, ideas of redemption both personal and planetary. I had paid little attention to the Surgeon before.

“Permit me a statement,” Bernalt said suddenly, his first words in hours.

We looked at him. The pigmented bands in his face were ablaze, marking his emotion.

He said, nodding to the Surgeon, “My friend, you speak of redemption for the Earthborn. Do you mean *all* Earthborn, or only the gilded ones?”

“All Earthborn, of course,” said the Surgeon mildly. “Are we not all equally conquered?”

“We are not equal in other things, though. Can there be redemption for a planet that keeps millions of its people thrust into guildlessness? I speak of my own folk, of course. We sinned long ago when we thought we were striking out against those who had created us as monsters. We strove to take Jorslem from you; and for this we were punished, and our punishment has lasted for a thousand years. We are still outcasts, are we not? Where has our hope of redemption been? Can you gilded ones consider yourself purified and made virtuous by your recent suffering, when you still step on us?”

The Surgeon looked dismayed. “You speak rashly, Bernalt. I know the Changelings have a grievance. But you know as well as I that your time of deliverance is at hand. In the days to come no Earthborn one will scorn you, and you will stand beside us when we regain our freedom.”

Bernalt peered at the floor. “Forgive me, my friend. Of course, of course, you speak the truth. I was carried away. The heat—this splendid wine—how foolishly I spoke!”

Earthclaim Nineteen said, “Are you telling me that a resistance movement is forming that will shortly drive us from your planet?”

“I speak only in abstract terms,” said the Surgeon.

“I think your resistance movement will be purely abstract, too,” the invader replied easily. “Forgive me, but I see little strength in a planet that could be conquered in a single night. We expect our occupation of Earth to be a long one and to meet little opposition. In the months that we have been here there has been no sign of increasing hostility to us. Quite the contrary: we are increasingly accepted among you.”

“It is part of a process,” said the Surgeon. “As a poet, you should understand that words carry meanings of many kinds. We do not need to overthrow our alien masters in order to be free of them. Is that poetic

enough for you?”

“Splendid,” said Earthclaim Nineteen, getting to his feet. “Shall we go to dinner now?”

7

There was no way to return to the subject. A philosophical discussion at the dinner table is difficult to sustain; and our host did not seem comfortable with this analysis of Earth's destinies. Swiftly he discovered that Olmayne had been a Rememberer before turning Pilgrim, and thereafter directed his words to her, questioning her on our history and on our early poetry. Like most invaders he had a fierce curiosity concerning our past. Olmayne gradually came out of the silence that gripped her, and spoke at length about her researches in Perris. She talked with great familiarity of our hidden past, with Earthclaim Nineteen occasionally inserting an intelligent and informed question; meanwhile we dined on delicacies of a number of worlds, perhaps imported by that same fat, insensitive Merchant who had driven us from Perris to Marsay; the villa was cool and the Servitors attentive; that miserable plague-stricken peasant village half an hour's walk away might well have been in some other galaxy, so remote was it from our discourse now.

When we left the villa in the morning, the Surgeon asked permission to join our Pilgrimage. “There is nothing further I can do here,” he explained. “At the outbreak of the disease I came up from my home in Nayrub, and I've been here many days, more to console than to cure, of course. Now I am called to Jorslem. However, if it violates your vows to have company on the road—”

“By all means come with us,” I said.

“There will be one other companion,” the Surgeon told us.

He meant the third person who had met us at the village: the outworlder, an enigma, yet to say a word in our presence. This being was a flattened spike-shaped creature somewhat taller than a man and mounted on a jointed tripod of angular legs; its place of origin was in the Golden Spiral; its skin was rough and bright red in hue, and vertical rows of glassy oval eyes descended on three sides from the top of its tapered head. I had never seen such a creature before. It had come to Earth, according to the Surgeon, on a data-gathering mission, and had already roamed much of Ais and Stralya. Now it was touring the lands on the margin of Lake Medit; and after seeing Jorslem it would depart for the great cities of Eyrop. Solemn, unsettling in its perpetual watchfulness, never blinking its many eyes nor offering a comment on what those eyes beheld, it seemed more like some odd machine, some information-intake for a memory tank, than a living creature. But it was harmless enough to let it come with us to the holy city.

The Surgeon bade farewell to his Changeling friend, who went on alone ahead of us, and paid a final call on the crystallized village. We stayed back, since there was no point in our going. When he returned, his face was somber. “Four new cases,” he said. “This entire village will perish. There has never been an outbreak of this kind before on Earth—so concentrated an epidemic.”

“Something new, then?” I asked. “Will it spread everywhere?”

“Who knows? No one in the adjoining villages has caught it. The pattern is unfamiliar: a single village wholly devastated, and nowhere else besides. These people see it as divine retribution for unknown sins.”

“What could peasants have done,” I asked, “that would bring the wrath of the Will so harshly upon them?”

“They are asking that too,” said the Surgeon.

Olmayne said, “If there are new cases, our visit yesterday was useless. We risked ourselves and did

them no good.”

“Wrong,” the Surgeon told her. “These cases were already incubating when you arrived. We may hope that the disease will not spread to those who still were in full health.”

He did not seem confident of that.

Olmayne examined herself from day to day for symptoms of the disease, but none appeared. She gave the Surgeon much trouble on that score, bothering him for opinions concerning real or fancied blemishes of her skin, embarrassing him by removing her mask in his presence so that he could determine that some speck on her cheek was not the first trace of crystallization.

The Surgeon took all this in good grace, for, while the outworld being was merely a cipher plodding alongside us, the Surgeon was a man of depth, patience, and sophistication. He was native to Afreek, and had been dedicated to his guild at birth by his father, since healing was the family tradition. Traveling widely, he had seen most of our world and had forgotten little of what he had seen. He spoke to us of Roum and Perris, of the frostflower fields of Stralya, of my own birthplace in the western island group of the Lost Continents. He questioned us tactfully about our starstones and the effects they produced—I could see he hungered to try the stone himself, but that of course was forbidden to one who had not declared himself a Pilgrim—and when he learned that in former life I had been a Watcher, he asked me a great deal concerning the instruments by which I had scanned the heavens, wishing to know what it was I perceived and how I imagined the perception was accomplished. I spoke to him as fully as I could on these matters, though in truth I knew little.

Usually we kept to the green strip of fertile land bordering the lake, but once, at the Surgeon's insistence, we detoured into the choking desert to see something that he promised would be of interest. He would not tell us what it was. We were at this point traveling in hired rollerwagons, open on top, and sharp winds blew gusts of sand in our faces. Sand adhered briefly to the outworlder's eyes, I saw; and I saw how efficiently it flushed each eye with a flood of blue tears every few moments. The rest of us huddled in our garments, heads down, whenever the wind arose.

“We are here,” the Surgeon announced finally. “When I traveled with my father I first visited this place long ago. We will go inside—and then you, the former Rememberer, will tell us where we are.”

It was a building two stories high made of bricks of white glass. The doors appeared sealed, but they gave at the slightest pressure. Lights glowed into life the moment we entered.

In long aisles, lightly strewn with sand, were tables on which instruments were mounted. Nothing was comprehensible to me. There were devices shaped like hands, into which one's own hands could be inserted; conduits led from the strange metal gloves to shining closed cabinets, and arrangements of mirrors transmitted images from the interiors of those cabinets to giant screens overhead. The Surgeon placed his hands in the gloves and moved his fingers; the screens brightened, and I saw images of tiny needles moving through shallow arcs. He went to other machines that released dribbles of unknown fluids; he touched small buttons that produced musical sounds; he moved freely through a laboratory of wonders, clearly ancient, which seemed still in order and awaiting the return of its users.

Olmayne was ecstatic. She followed the Surgeon from aisle to aisle, handling everything.

“Well, Rememberer?” he asked finally. “What is this?”

“A Surgery,” she said in lowered voice. “A Surgery of the Years of Magic!”

“Exactly! Splendid!” He seemed in an oddly excited state. “We could make dazzling monsters here! We

could work miracles! Fliers, Swimmers, Changelings, Twiners, Burners, Climbers—invent your own guilds, shape men to your whims! This was the place!”

Olmayne said, “These Surgeries have been described to me. There are six of them left, are there not, one in northern Eyrop, one on Palash, one here, one far to the south in Deeper Afreek, one in western Ais—” She faltered.

“And one in Hind, the greatest of all!” said the Surgeon.

“Yes, of course, Hind! The home of the Fliers!”

Their awe was contagious. I said, “This was where the shapes of men were changed? How was it done?”

The Surgeon shrugged. “The art is lost. The Years of Magic were long ago, old man.”

“Yes, yes, I know. But surely if the equipment survives, we could guess how—”

“With these knives,” said the Surgeon, “we cut into the fabric of the unborn, editing the human seed. The Surgeon placed his hands here—he manipulated—and within that incubator the knives did their work. Out of this came Fliers and all the rest. The forms bred true. Some are extinct today, but our Fliers and our Changelings owe their heritage to some such building as this. The Changelings, of course, were the Surgeons’ mistakes. They should not have been permitted to live.”

“I thought that these monsters were the products of teratogenic drugs given to them when they still were within the womb,” I said. “You tell me now that Changelings were made by Surgeons. Which is so?”

“Both,” he replied. “All Changelings today are descended from the flaws and errors committed by the Surgeons of the Years of Magic. Yet mothers in that unhappy group often enhance the monstrousness of their children with drugs, so that they will be more marketable. It is an ugly tribe not merely in looks. Small wonder that their guild was dissolved and they were thrust outside society. We—”

Something bright flew through the air, missing his face by less than a hand's breadth. He dropped to the floor and shouted to us to take cover. As I fell I saw a second missile fly toward us. The outworlder, still observing all phenomena, studied it impassively in the moment of life that remained to it. Then the weapon struck two thirds of the way up the outworlder's body and severed it instantly. Other missiles followed, clattering against the wall behind us. I saw our attackers: a band of Changelings, fierce, hideous. We were unarmed. They moved toward us. I readied myself to die.

From the doorway a voice cried out: a familiar voice, using the thick and unfamiliar words of the language Changelings speak among themselves. Instantly the assault ceased. Those who menaced us turned toward the door. The Changeling Bernalt entered.

“I saw your vehicle,” he said. “I thought you might be here, and perhaps in trouble. It seems I came in time.”

“Not altogether,” said the Surgeon. He indicated the fallen outworlder, which was beyond all aid. “But why this attack?”

Bernalt gestured. “*They* will tell you.”

We looked at the five Changelings who had ambushed us. They were not of the educated, civilized sort such as Bernalt, nor were any two of them of the same styles; each was a twisted, hunched mockery of the human form, one withropy tendrils descending from his chin, one with a face that was a featureless

void, another whose ears were giant cups, and so forth. From the one closest to us, a creature with small platforms jutting from his skin in a thousand places, we learned why we had been assaulted. In a brutal Aguptan dialect he told us that we had profaned a temple sacred to Changelings. "We keep out of Jorslem," he told us. "Why must you come here?"

Of course he was right. We asked forgiveness as sincerely as we could, and the Surgeon explained that he had visited this place long ago and it had not been a temple then. That seemed to soothe the Changeling, who admitted that only in recent years had his kind used it as a shrine. He was soothed even more when Olmayne opened the overpocket fastened between her breasts and offered a few glittering gold coins, part of the treasure she had brought with her from Perris. The bizarre and deformed beings were satisfied at that and allowed us to leave the building. We would have taken the dead outworlder with us, but during our parley with the Changelings the body had nearly vanished, nothing but a faint gray streak remaining on the sandy floor to tell us where it had fallen. "A mortuary enzyme," the Surgeon explained. "Triggered by interruption of the life processes."

Others of this community of desert-dwelling Changelings were lurking about outside the building as we came forth. They were a tribe of nightmares, with skin of every texture and color, facial features arranged at random, all kinds of genetic improvisations of organs and bodily accessories. Bernalt himself, although their brother, seemed appalled by their monstrosity. They looked to him with awe. At the sight of us some of them fondled the throwing weapons at their hips, but a sharp command from Bernalt prevented any trouble.

He said, "I regret the treatment you received and the death of the outworlder. But of course it is risky to enter a place that is sacred to backward and violent people."

"We had no idea," the Surgeon said. "We never would have gone in if we had realized—"

"Of course. Of course." Was there something patronizing about Bernalt's soft, civilized tones. "Well, again I bid you farewell."

I blurted suddenly, "No. Travel with us to Jorslem! It's ridiculous for us to go separately to the same place."

Olmayne gasped. Even the Surgeon seemed amazed. Only Bernalt remained calm. He said, "You forget, friend, that it is improper for Pilgrims to journey with the guildless. Besides, I am here to worship at this shrine, and it will take me a while. I would not wish to delay you." His hand reached out to mine. Then he moved away, entering the ancient Surgery. Scores of his fellow Changelings rushed in after him. I was grateful to Bernalt for his tact; my impulsive offer of companionship, though sincerely meant, had been impossible for him to accept.

We boarded our rollerwagons. In a moment we heard a dreadful sound: a discordant Changeling hymn in praise of I dare not think what deity, a scraping, grinding, screeching song as misshapen as those who uttered it.

"The beasts," Olmayne muttered. "A sacred shrine! A Changeling temple! How loathsome! They might have killed us all, Tomis. How can such monsters have a religion?"

I made no reply. The Surgeon looked at Olmayne sadly and shook his head as though distressed by so little charity on the part of one who claimed to be a Pilgrim.

"They also are human," he said.

At the next town along our route we reported the starborn being's death to the occupying authorities.

Then, saddened and silent, we three survivors continued onward, to the place where the coastline trends north rather than east. We were leaving sleepy Agupt behind and entering now into the borders of the land in which holy Jorslem lies.

8

The city of Jorslem sits some good distance inland from Lake Medit on a cool plateau guarded by a ring of low, barren, rock-strewn mountains. All my life, it seemed, had been but a preparation for my first glimpse of this golden city, whose image I knew so well. Hence when I saw its spires and parapets rising in the east, I felt not so much awe as a sense of a homecoming.

A winding road took us down through the encircling hills to the city, whose wall was made of squared blocks of a fine stone, dark pink-gold in color. The houses and shrines, too, were of this stone. Groves of trees bordered the road, nor were they star-trees, but native products of Earth, as was fitting to this, the oldest of man's cities, older than Roun, older than Perris, its roots deep in the First Cycle.

The invaders, shrewdly, had not meddled with Jorslem's administration. The city remained under the governorship of the Guildmaster of Pilgrims, and even an invader was required to seek the Guildmaster's permission to enter. Of course, this was strictly a matter of form; the Pilgrim Guildmaster, like the Chancellor of the Rememberers and other such officials, was in truth a puppet subject to our conquerors' wishes. But that harsh fact was kept concealed. The invaders had left our holy city as a city apart, and we would not see them swaggering in armed teams through Jorslem's streets.

At the outer wall we formally requested entry from the Sentinel guarding the gate. Though elsewhere most Sentinels now were unemployed—since cities stood open by command of our masters—this man was in full guild array and calmly insisted on thorough procedure. Olmayne and I, as Pilgrims, were entitled to automatic access to Jorslem; yet he made us produce our starstones as evidence that we came by our robes and masks honestly, and then donned a thinking cap to check our names with the archives of our guild. In time we met approval. The Surgeon our companion had an easier time; he had applied in advance for entry while in Afreek, and after a moment to check his identity he was admitted.

Within the walls everything had the aspect of great antiquity. Jorslem alone of the world's cities still preserves much of its First Cycle architecture: not merely broken columns and ruined aqueducts, as in Roun, but whole streets, covered arcades, towers, boulevards, that have lasted through every upheaval our world has seen. And so once we passed into the city we wandered in wonder through its strangeness, down streets paved with cobbled stones, into narrow alleys cluttered with children and beggars, across markets fragrant with spices. After an hour of this we felt it was time to seek lodgings, and here it was necessary for us to part company with the Surgeon, since he was ineligible to stay at a Pilgrim hostelry, and it would have been costly and foolish for us to stay anywhere else. We saw him to the inn where he had previously booked a room. I thanked him for his good companionship on our journey, and he thanked us just as gravely and expressed the hope that he would see us again in Jorslem in the days to come. Then Olmayne and I took leave of him and rented quarters in one of the numerous places catering to the Pilgrim trade.

The city exists solely to serve Pilgrims and casual tourists, and so it is really one vast hostelry; robed Pilgrims are as common in Jorslem's streets as Fliers in Hind. We settled and rested awhile; then we dined and afterward walked along a broad street from which we could see, to the east, Jorslem's inner and most sacred district. There is a city within a city here. The most ancient part, so small it can be traversed in less than an hour on foot, is wrapped in a high wall of its own. Therein lie shrines revered by Earth's former religions: the Christers, the Hebers, the Mislams. The place where the god of the Christers died is said to be there, but this may be a distortion wrought by time, since what kind of god is it that dies? On a high place in one corner of the Old City stands a gilded dome sacred to the Mislams, which is

carefully tended by the common folk of Jorslem. And to the fore part of that high place are the huge gray blocks of a stone wall worshiped by the Hebers. These things remain, but the ideas behind them are lost; never while I was among the Rememberers did I meet any scholar who could explain the merit of worshipping a wall or a gilded dome. Yet the old records assure us that these three First Cycle creeds were of great depth and richness.

In the Old City, also, is a Second Cycle place that was of much more immediate interest to Olmayne and myself. As we stared through the darkness at the holy precincts Olmayne said, "We should make application tomorrow at the house of renewal."

"I agree. I long now to give up some of my years."

"Will they accept me, Tomis?"

"Speculating on it is idle," I told her. "We will go, and we will apply, and your question will be answered."

She said something further, but I did not hear her words, for at that moment three Fliers passed above me, heading east. One was male, two female; they flew naked, according to the custom of their guild; and the Flier in the center of the group was a slim, fragile girl, mere bones and wings, moving with a grace that was exceptional even for her airy kind.

"Avluela!" I gasped.

The trio of Fliers disappeared beyond the parapets of the Old City. Stunned, shaken, I clung to a tree for support and struggled for breath.

"Tomis?" Olmayne said. "Tomis, are you ill?"

"I know it was Avluela. They said she had gone back to Hind, but no, that was Avluela! How could I mistake her?"

"You've said that about every Flier you've seen since leaving Perris," said Olmayne coldly.

"But this time I'm certain! Where is a thinking cap? I must check with the Fliers' Lodge at once!"

Olmayne's hand rested on my arm. "It's late, Tomis. You act feverish. Why this excitement over your skinny Flier, anyway? What did she mean to you?"

"She—"

I halted, unable to put my meaning in words. Olmayne knew the story of my journey up out of Agupt with the girl, how as a celibate old Watcher I had conceived a kind of paternal fondness for her, how I had perhaps felt something more powerful than that, how I had lost her to the false Changeling Gormon, and how *he* in turn had lost her to the Prince of Roum. But yet what was Avluela to me? Why did a glimpse of someone who merely might have been Avluela send me into this paroxysm of confusion? I chased symbols in my turbulent mind and found no answers.

"Come back to the inn and rest," Olmayne said. "Tomorrow we must seek renewal."

First, though, I donned a cap and made contact with the Fliers' Lodge. My thoughts slipped through the shielding interface to the storage brain of the guild registry; I asked and received the answer I had sought. Avluela of the Fliers was indeed now a resident in Jorslem. "Take this message for her," I said. "The Watcher she knew in Roum now is here as a Pilgrim, and wishes to meet her outside the house of

renewal at midday tomorrow.”

With that done, I accompanied Olmayne to our lodgings. She seemed sullen and aloof; and when she unmasked in my room her face appeared rigid with—jealousy? Yes. To Olmayne all men were vassals, even one so shriveled and worn as I; and she loathed it that another woman could kindle such a flame in me. When I drew forth my starstone, Olmayne at first would not join me in communion. Only when I began the rituals did she submit. But I was so tense that night that I was unable to make the merging with the Will, nor could she achieve it; and thus we faced one another glumly for half an hour, and abandoned the attempt, and parted for the night.

9

One must go by one's self to the house of renewal. At dawn I awoke, made a brief and more successful communion, and set out unbreakfasted, without Olmayne. In half an hour I stood before the golden wall of the Old City; in half an hour more I had finished my crossing of the inner city's tangled lanes. Passing before that gray wall so dear to the ancient Hebers, I went up onto the high place; I passed near the gilded dome of the vanished Mislams and, turning to the left, followed the stream of Pilgrims which already at this early hour was proceeding to the house of renewal.

This house is a Second Cycle building, for it was then that the renewal process was conceived; and of all that era's science, only renewal has come down to us approximately as it must have been practiced in that time. Like those other few Second Cycle structures that survive, the house of renewal is supple and sleek, architecturally understated, with deft curves and smooth textures; it is without windows; it bears no external ornament whatever. There are many doors. I placed myself before the easternmost entrance, and in an hour's time I was admitted.

Just inside the entrance I was greeted by a green-robed member of the guild of Renewers—the first member of this guild I had ever seen. Renewers are recruited entirely from Pilgrims who are willing to make it their life's work to remain in Jorslem and aid others toward renewal. Their guild is under the same administration as the Pilgrims; a single guildmaster directs the destinies of both; even the garb is the same except for color. In effect Pilgrims and Renewers are of one guild and represent different phases of the same affiliation. But a distinction is always drawn.

The Renewer's voice was light and cheerful. “Welcome to this house, Pilgrim. Who are you, where are you from?”

“I am the Pilgrim Tomis, formerly Tomis of the Rememberers, and prior to that a Watcher, born to the name Wuellig. I am native to the Lost Continents and have traveled widely both before and after beginning my Pilgrimage.”

“What do you seek here?”

“Renewal. Redemption.”

“May the Will grant your wishes,” said the Renewer. “Come with me.”

I was led through a close, dimly lit passage into a small stone cell. The Renewer instructed me to remove my mask, enter into a state of communion, and wait. I freed myself from the bronze grillwork and clasped my starstone tightly. The familiar sensations of communion stole over me, but no union with the Will took place; rather, I felt a specific link forming with the mind of another human being. Although mystified, I offered no resistance.

Something probed my soul. Everything was drawn forth and laid out as if for inspection on the floor of the cell: my acts of selfishness and of cowardice, my flaws and failings, my doubts, my despairs, above all

the most shameful of my acts, the selling of the Rememberer document to the invader overlord. I beheld these things and knew that I was unworthy of renewal. In this house one might extend one's lifetime two or three times over; but why should the Renewers offer such benefits to anyone as lacking in merit as I?

I remained a long while in contemplation of my faults. Then the contact broke, and a different Renewer, a man of remarkable stature, entered the cell.

"The mercy of the Will is upon you, friend," he said, reaching forth fingers of extraordinary length to touch the tips of mine.

When I heard that deep voice and saw those white fingers, I knew that I was in the presence of a man I had met briefly before, as I stood outside the gates of Roum in the season before the conquest of Earth. He had been a Pilgrim then, and he had invited me to join him on his journey to Jorslem, but I had declined, for Roum had beckoned to me.

"Was your Pilgrimage an easy one?" I asked.

"It was a valuable one," he replied. "And you? You are a Watcher no longer, I see."

"I am in my third guild this year."

"With one more yet to come," he said.

"Am I to join you in the Renewers, then?"

"I did not mean that guild, friend Tomis. But we can talk more of that when your years are fewer. You have been approved for renewal, I rejoice to tell you."

"Despite my sins?"

"Because of your sins, such that they are. At dawn tomorrow you enter the first of the renewal tanks. I will be your guide through your second birth. I am the Renewer Talmit. Go, now, and ask for me when you return."

"One question—"

"Yes?"

"I made my Pilgrimage together with a woman, Olmayne, formerly a Rememberer of Perris. Can you tell me if she has been approved for renewal as well?"

"I know nothing of this Olmayne."

"She's not a good woman," I said. "She is vain, imperious, and cruel. But yet I think she is not beyond saving. Can you do anything to help her?"

"I have no influence in such things," Talmit said. "She must face interrogation like everyone else. I can tell you this, though: virtue is not the only criterion for renewal."

He showed me from the building. Cold sunlight illuminated the city. I was drained and depleted, too empty even to feel cheered that I had qualified for renewal. It was midday; I remembered my appointment with Avluela; I circled the house of renewal in rising anxiety. Would she come?

She was waiting by the front of the building, beside a glittering monument from Second Cycle days. Crimson jacket, furry leggings, glassy bubbles on her feet, telltale humps on her back: from afar I could

make her out to be a Flier. “Avluela!” I called.

She whirled. She looked pale, thin, even younger than when I had last seen her. Her eyes searched my face, once again masked, and for a moment she was bewildered.

“Watcher?” she said. “Watcher, is that you?”

“Call me Tomis now,” I told her. “But I am the same man you knew in Agupt and Roum.”

“Watcher! Oh, Watcher! *Tomis* .” She clung to me. “How long it's been! So much has happened!” She sparkled now, and the paleness fled her cheeks. “Come, let's find an inn, a place to sit and talk! How did you discover me here?”

“Through your guild. I saw you overhead last night.”

“I came here in the winter. I was in Fars for a while, halfway back to Hind, and then I changed my mind. There could be no going home. Now I live near Jorslem, and I help with—” She cut her sentence sharply off. “Have you won renewal, Tomis?”

We descended from the high place into a humbler part of the inner city. “Yes,” I said, “I am to be made younger. My guide is the Renewer Talmit—we met him as a Pilgrim outside Roum, do you remember?”

She had forgotten that. We seated ourselves at an open-air patio adjoining an inn, and Servitors brought us food and wine. Her gaiety was infectious; I felt renewed just to be with her. She spoke of those final cataclysmic days in Roum, when she had been taken into the palace of the Prince as a concubine; and she told me of that terrible moment when Gormon the Changeling defeated the Prince of Roum on the evening of conquest—announcing himself as no Changeling but an invader in disguise, and taking from the Prince at once his throne, his concubine, and his vision.

“Did the Prince die?” she asked.

“Yes, but not of his blinding.” I told her how that proud man had fled Roum disguised as a Pilgrim, and how I had accompanied him to Perris, and how, while we were among the Rememberers, he had involved himself with Olmayne, and had been slain by Olmayne's husband, whose life was thereupon taken by his wife. “I also saw Gormon in Perris,” I said. “He goes by the name of Victorious Thirteen now. He is high in the councils of the invaders.”

Avluela smiled. “Gormon and I were together only a short while after the conquest. He wanted to tour Eyrop; I flew with him to Donsk and Sved, and there he lost interest in me. It was then that I felt I must go home to Hind, but later I changed my mind. When does your renewal begin?”

“At dawn.”

“Oh, Tomis, how will it be when you are a young man? Did you know that I loved you? All the time we traveled, all while I was sharing Gormon's bed and consorting with the Prince, you were the one I wanted! But of course you were a Watcher, and it was impossible. Besides, you were so old. Now you no longer Watch, and soon you will no longer be old, and—” Her hand rested on mine. “I should never have left your side. We both would have been spared much suffering.”

“We learn, from suffering,” I said.

“Yes. Yes. I see that. How long will your renewal take?”

“The usual time, whatever that may be.”

“After that, what will you do? What guild will you choose? You can't be a Watcher, not now.”

“No, nor a Rememberer either. My guide Talmit spoke of some other guild, which he would not name, and assumed that I would enroll in it when I was done with renewal. I supposed he thought I'd stay here and join the Renewers, but he said it was another guild.”

“Not the Renewers,” said Avluela. She leaned close. “The Redeemers,” she whispered.

“Redeemers? That is a guild I do not know.”

“It is newly founded.”

“No new guild has been established in more than a—”

“This is the guild Talmit meant. You would be a desirable member. The skills you developed when you were a Watcher make you exceptionally useful.”

“Redeemers,” I said, probing the mystery. “*Redeemers*. What does this guild do?”

Avluela smiled jauntily. “It rescues troubled souls and saves unhappy worlds. But this is no time to talk of it. Finish your business in Jorslem, and everything will become clear.” We rose. Her lips brushed mine. “This is the last time I'll see you as an old man. It will be strange, Tomis, when you're renewed!”

She left me then.

Toward evening I returned to my lodging. Olmayne was not in her room. A Servitor told me that she had been out all day. I waited until it was late; then I made my communion and slept, and at dawn I paused outside her door. It was sealed. I hurried to the house of renewal.

10

The Renewer Talmit met me within the entrance and conducted me down a corridor of green tile to the first renewal tank. “The Pilgrim Olmayne,” he informed me, “has been accepted for renewal and will come here later this day.” This was the last reference to the affairs of another human being that I was to hear for some time. Talmit showed me into a small low room, close and humid, lit by dim blobs of slavelight and smelling faintly of crushed deathflower blossoms. My robe and my mask were taken from me, and the Renewer covered my head with a fine golden-green mesh of some flimsy metal, through which he sent a current; and when he removed the mesh, my hair was gone, my head was as glossy as the tiled walls. “It makes insertion of the electrodes simpler,” Talmit explained. “You may enter the tank, now.”

A gentle ramp led me down into the tank, which was a tub of no great size. I felt the warm soft slipperiness of mud beneath my feet, and Talmit nodded and told me it was irradiated regenerative mud, which would stimulate the increase of cell division that was to bring about my renewal, and I accepted it. I stretched out on the floor of the tank with only my head above the shimmering dark violet fluid that it contained. The mud cradled and caressed my tired body. Talmit loomed above me, holding what seemed to be a mass of entangled copper wires, but as he pressed the wires to my bare scalp they opened as of their own accord and their tips sought my skull and burrowed down through skin and bone into the hidden wrinkled grayness. I felt nothing more than tiny prickling sensations. “The electrodes,” Talmit explained, “seek out the centers of aging within your brain; we transmit signals that will induce a reversal of the normal processes of decay, and your brain will lose its perception of the direction of the flow of time. Your body thus will become more receptive to the stimulation it receives from the environment of the renewal tank. Close your eyes.” Over my face he placed a breathing mask. He gave me a gentle shove, and the back of my head slipped from the edge of the tank, so that I floated out into the middle.

The warmth increased. I dimly heard bubbling sounds. I imagined black sulfurous bubbles coming up from the mud and through the fluid in which I floated; I imagined that the fluid had turned the color of mud. Adrift in a tideless sea I lay, distantly aware that a current was passing over the electrodes, that something was tickling my brain, that I was engulfed in mud and in what could well have been an amniotic fluid. From far away came the deep voice of the Renewer Talmit summoning me to youth, drawing me back across the decades, unreeling time for me. There was a taste of salt in my mouth. Again I was crossing Earth Ocean, beset by pirates, defending my Watching equipment against their jeers and thrusts. Again I stood beneath the hot Aguptan sun meeting Avluela for the first time. I lived once more on Palash. I returned to the place of my birth in the western isles of the Lost Continents, in what formerly had been Usa-amrik. I watched Roum fall a second time. Fragments of memories swam through my softening brain. There was no sequence, no rational unrolling of events. I was a child. I was a weary ancient. I was among the Rememberers. I visited the Somnambulists. I saw the Prince of Roum attempt to purchase eyes from an Artificer in Dijon. I bargained with the Procurator of Perris. I gripped the handles of my instruments and entered Watchfulness. I ate sweet things from a far-off world; I drew into my nostrils the perfume of springtime on Palash; I shivered in an old man's private winter; I swam in a surging sea, buoyant and happy; I sang; I wept; I resisted temptation; I yielded to temptations; I quarreled with Olmayne; I embraced Avluela; I experienced a flickering succession of nights and days as my biological clock moved in strange rhythms of reversal and acceleration. Illusions beset me. It rained fire from the sky; time rushed in several directions; I grew small and then enormous. I heard voices speaking in shades of scarlet and turquoise. Jagged music sparkled on the mountains. The sound of my drumming heartbeats was rough and fiery. I was trapped between strokes of my brain-piston, arms pressed to my sides so that I would occupy as little space as possible as it rammed itself home again and again and again. The stars throbbed, contracted, melted. Avluela said gently, "We earn a second youthtime through the indulgent, benevolent impulses of the Will and not through the performance of individual good works." Olmayne said, "How sleek I get!" Talmit said, "These oscillations of perception signify only the dissolution of the wish toward self-destruction that lies at the heart of the aging process." Gormon said, "These perceptions of oscillation signify only the self-destruction of the wish toward dissolution that lies at the aging process of the heart." The Procurator Manrule Seven said, "We have been sent to this world as the devices of your purgation. We are instruments of the Will." Earthclaim Nineteen said, "On the other hand, permit me to disagree. The intersection of Earth's destinies and ours is purely accidental." My eyelids turned to stone. The small creatures comprising my lungs began to flower. My skin sloughed off, revealing strands of muscle clinging to bone. Olmayne said, "My pores grow smaller. My flesh grows tight. My breasts grow small." Avluela said, "Afterwards you will fly with us, Tomis." The Prince of Roum covered his eyes with his hands. The towers of Roum swayed in the winds of the sun. I snatched a shawl from a passing Rememberer. Clowns wept in the streets of Perris. Talmit said, "Awaken, now, Tomis, come up from it, open your eyes."

"I am young again," I said.

"Your renewal has only begun," he said.

I could no longer move. Attendants seized me and swathed me in porous wrappings, and placed me on a rolling car, and took me to a second tank, much larger, in which dozens of people floated, each in a dreamy seclusion from the others. Their naked skulls were festooned with electrodes; their eyes were covered with pink tape; their hands were peacefully joined on their chests. Into this tank I went, and there were no illusions here, only a long slumber unbroken by dreams. This time I awakened to the sounds of a rushing tide, and found myself passing feet first through a constricted conduit into a sealed tank, where I breathed only fluid, and where I remained something more than a minute and something less than a century, while layers of sin were peeled from my soul. It was slow, taxing work. The Surgeons worked at a distance, their hands thrust into gloves that controlled the tiny flaying-knives, and they flensed me of evil with flick after flick after flick of the little blades, cutting out guilt and sorrow, jealousy

and rage, greed, lust, and impatience.

When they were done with me they opened the lid of the tank and lifted me out. I was unable to stand unaided. They attached instruments to my limbs that kneaded and massaged my muscles, restoring the tone. I walked again. I looked down at my bare body, strong and taut—fleshed and vigorous. Talmit came to me and threw a handful of mirror-dust into the air so that I could see myself; and as the tiny particles cohered, I peered at my gleaming reflection.

“No,” I said. “You have the face wrong. I didn't look like that. The nose was sharper—the lips weren't so full—the hair not such a deep black—”

“We have worked from the records of the guild of Watchers, Tomis. You are more exactly a replica of your early self than your own memory realizes.”

“Can that be?”

“If you prefer, we can shape you to fit your self-conceptions and not reality. But it would be a frivolous thing to do, and it would take much time.”

“No,” I said. “It hardly matters.”

He agreed. He informed me then that I would have to remain in the house of renewal a while longer, until I was fully adapted to my new self. I was given the neutral clothes of a guildless one to wear, for I was without affiliation now; my status as Pilgrim had ended with my renewal, and I might now opt for any guild that would admit me once I left the house. “How long did my renewal last?” I asked Talmit as I dressed. He replied, “You came here in summer. Now it is winter. We do not work swiftly.”

“And how fares my companion Olmayne?”

“We failed with her.”

“I don't understand.”

“Would you like to see her?” Talmit asked.

“Yes,” I said, thinking that he would bring me to Olmayne's room. Instead he conveyed me to Olmayne's tank. I stood on a ramp looking down into a sealed container; Talmit indicated a fiber telescope, and I peered into its staring eye and beheld Olmayne. Or rather, what I was asked to believe was Olmayne. A naked girl-child of about eleven, smooth-skinned and breastless, lay curled up in the tank, knees drawn close to the flat chest, thumb thrust in mouth. At first I did not understand. Then the child stirred, and I recognized the embryonic features of the regal Olmayne I had known: the wide mouth, the strong chin, the sharp, strong cheekbones. A dull shock of horror rippled through me, and I said to Talmit, “What is this?”

“When the soul is too badly stained, Tomis, we must dig deep to cleanse it. Your Olmayne was a difficult case. We should not have attempted her; but she was insistent, and there were some indications that we might succeed with her. Those indications were in error, as you can see.”

“But what happened to her?”

“The renewal entered the irreversible stage before we could achieve a purging of her poisons,” Talmit said.

“You went too far? You made her too young?”

“As you can see. Yes.”

“What will you do? Why don't you get her out of there and let her grow up again?”

“You should listen more carefully, Tomis. I said the renewal is irreversible.”

“Irreversible?”

“She is lost in childhood's dreams. Each day she grows years younger. The inner clock whirls uncontrollably. Her body shrinks; her brain grows smooth. She enters babyhood shortly. She will never awaken.”

“And at the end—” I looked away. “What then? A sperm and an egg, separating in the tank?”

“The retrogression will not go that far. She will die in infancy. Many are lost this way.”

“She spoke of the risks of renewal,” I said.

“Yet she insisted on our taking her. Her soul was dark, Tomis. She lived only for herself. She came to Jorslem to be cleansed, and now she has been cleansed, and she is at peace with the Will. Did you love her?”

“Never. Not for an instant.”

“Then what have you lost?”

“A segment of my past, perhaps.” I put my eye to the telescope again and beheld Olmayne, innocent now, restored to virginity, sexless, cleansed. At peace with the Will. I searched her oddly altered yet familiar face for insight into her dreams. Had she known what was befalling her, as she tumbled helplessly into youthfulness? Had she cried out in anguish and frustration when she felt her life slipping away? Had there been a final flare of the old imperious Olmayne, before she sank into this unwanted purity? The child in the tank was smiling. The supple little body uncoiled, then drew more tightly into a huddled ball. Olmayne was at peace with the Will. Suddenly, as though Talmit had spread another mirror in the air, I looked into my own new self, and saw what had been done for me, and knew that I had been granted another life with the proviso that I make something more of it than I had of my first one, and I felt humbled, and pledged myself to serve the Will and I was engulfed in joy that came in mighty waves, like the surging tides of Earth Ocean, and I said farewell to Olmayne, and asked Talmit to take me to another place.

11

And Avluela came to me in my room in the house of renewal, and we both were frightened when we met. The jacket she wore left her bunched-up wings bare; they seemed hardly under her control at all, but fluttered nervously, starting to open a short way, their gossamer tips expanding in little quivering flickers. Her eyes were large and solemn; her face looked more lean and pointed than ever. We stared in silence at one another a long while; my skin grew warm, my vision hazy; I felt the churning of inner forces that had not pulled at me in decades, and I feared them even as I welcomed them.

“Tomis?” she said finally, and I nodded.

She touched my shoulders, my arms, my lips. And I put my fingers to her wrists, her flanks, and then, hesitantly, to the shallow bowls of her breasts. Like two who had lost their sight we learned each other by touch. We were strangers. That withered old Watcher she had known and perhaps loved was gone, banished for the next fifty years or more, and in his place stood someone mysteriously transformed, unknown, unmet. The old Watcher had been a sort of father to her; what was this guildless young Tomis

supposed to be? And what was she to me, a daughter no longer? I did not know myself of myself. I was alien to my sleek, taut skin. I was perplexed and delighted by the juices that now flowed, by the throbbings and swellings that I had nearly forgotten.

“Your eyes are the same,” she said. “I would always know you by your eyes.”

“What have you done these many months, Avluela?”

“I have been flying every night. I flew to Agupt and deep into Afreek. Then I returned and flew to Stanbool. When it gets dark, I go aloft. Do you know, Tomis, I feel truly alive only when I'm up there?”

“You are of the Fliers. It is in the nature of your guild to feel that way.”

“One day we'll fly side by side, Tomis.”

I laughed at that. “The old Surgeries are closed, Avluela. They work wonders here, but they can't transform me into a Flier. One must be born with wings.”

“One doesn't need wings to fly.”

“I know. The invaders lift themselves without the help of wings. I saw you, one day soon after Roum fell—you and Gormon in the sky together—” I shook my head. “But I am no invader either.”

“You will fly with me, Tomis. We'll go aloft, and not only by night, even though my wings are merely nightwings. In bright sunlight we'll soar together.”

Her fantasy pleased me. I gathered her into my arms, and she was cool and fragile against me, and my own body pulsed with new heat. For a while we talked no more of flying, though I drew back from taking what she offered at that moment, and was content merely to caress her. One does not awaken in a single lunge.

Later we walked through the corridors, passing others who were newly renewed, and we went into the great central room whose ceiling admitted the winter sunlight, and studied each other by that changing pale light, and walked, and talked again. I leaned a bit on her arm, for I did not have all my strength yet, and so in a sense it was as it had been for us in the past, the girl helping the old dodderer along. When she saw me back to my room, I said, “Before I was renewed, you told me of a new guild of Redeemers. I—”

“There is time for that later,” she said, displeased.

In my room we embraced, and abruptly I felt the full fire of the renewed leap up within me, so that I feared I might consume her cool, slim body. But it is a fire that does not consume—it only kindles its counterpart in others. In her ecstasy her wings unfolded until I was wrapped in their silken softness. And as I gave myself to the violence of joy, I knew I would not need again to lean on her arm.

We ceased to be strangers; we ceased to feel fear with one another. She came to me each day at my exercise time, and I walked with her, matching her stride for stride. And the fire burned even higher and more brightly for us.

Talmit was with me frequently too. He showed me the arts of using my renewed body, and helped me successfully grow youthful. I declined his invitation to view Olmayne once more. One day he told me that her retrogression had come to its end. I felt no sorrow over that, just a curious brief emptiness that soon passed.

“You will leave here soon,” the Renewer said. “Are you ready?”

“I think so.”

“Have you given much thought to your destination after this house?”

“I must seek a new guild, I know.”

“Many guilds would have you, Tomis. But which do you want?”

“The guild in which I would be most useful to mankind,” I said. “I owe the Will a life.”

Talmit said, “Has the Flier girl spoken to you of the possibilities before you?”

“She mentioned a newly founded guild.”

“Did she give it a name?”

“The guild of Redeemers.”

“What do you know of it?”

“Very little,” I said.

“Do you wish to know more?”

“If there is more to know.”

“I am of the guild of Redeemers,” Talmit said. “So is the Flier Avluela.”

“You both are already guilded! How can you belong to more than one guild? Only the Dominators were permitted such freedom; and they—”

“Tomis, the guild of Redeemers accepts members from all other guilds. It is the supreme guild, as the guild of Dominators once was. In its ranks are Rememberers and Scribes, Indexers, Servitors, Fliers, Landholders, Somnambulists, Surgeons, Clowns, Merchants, Vendors. There are Changelings as well, and—”

“Changelings?” I gasped. “They are outside all guilds, by law! How can a guild embrace Changelings?”

“This is the guild of Redeemers. Even Changelings may win redemption, Tomis.”

Chastened, I said, “Even Changelings, yes. But how strange it is to think of such a guild!”

“Would you despise a guild that embraces Changelings?”

“I find this guild difficult to comprehend.”

“Understanding will come at the proper time.”

“When is the proper time?”

“The day you leave this place,” said Talmit.

That day arrived shortly. Avluela came to fetch me. I stepped forth uncertainly into Jorslem's springtime to complete the ritual of renewal. Talmit had instructed her on how to guide me. She took me through the

city to the holy places, so that I could worship at each of the shrines. I knelt at the wall of the Hebers and at the gilded dome of the Mislams; then I went down into the lower part of the city, through the marketplace, to the gray, dark, ill-fashioned building covering the place where the god of the Christers is said to have died; then I went to the spring of knowledge and the fountain of the Will, and from there to the guildhouse of the guild of Pilgrims to surrender my mask and robes and starstone, and thence to the wall of the Old City. At each of these places I offered myself to the Will with words I had waited long to speak. Pilgrims and ordinary citizens of Jorslem gathered at a respectful distance; they knew that I had been lately renewed and hoped that some emanation from my new youthful body would bring them good fortune. At last my obligations were fulfilled. I was a free man in full health, able now to choose the quality of the life I wished to lead.

Avluela said, "Will you come with me to the Redeemers now?"

"Where will we find them? In Jorslem?"

"In Jorslem, yes. A meeting will convene in an hour's time for the purpose of welcoming you into membership."

From her tunic she drew something small and gleaming, which I recognized in bewilderment as a starstone. "What are you doing with that?" I asked. "Only Pilgrims—"

"Put your hand over mine," she said, extending a fist in which the starstone was clenched.

I obeyed. Her small pinched face grew rigid with concentration for a moment. Then she relaxed. She put the starstone away.

"Avluela, what—?"

"A signal to the guild," she said gently. "A notice to them to gather now that you are on your way."

"How did you get that stone?"

"Come with me," she said. "Oh, Tomis, if only we could fly there! But it is not far. We meet almost in the shadow of the house of renewal. Come, Tomis. Come!"

12

There was no light in the room. Avluela led me into the subterranean blackness, and told me that I had reached the guildhall of the Redeemers, and left me standing by myself. "Don't move," she cautioned.

I sensed the presence of others in the room about me. But I heard nothing and saw nothing.

Something was thrust toward me.

Avluela said, "Put out your hands. What do you feel?"

I touched a small square cabinet resting, perhaps, on a metal framework. Along its face were familiar dials and levers. My groping hands found handles rising from the cabinet's upper surface. At once it was as though all my renewal had been undone, and the conquest of Earth canceled as well: I was a Watcher again, for surely this was a Watcher's equipment!

I said, "It is not the same cabinet I once had. But it is not greatly different."

"Have you forgotten your skills, Tomis?"

"I think they remain with me even now."

“Use the machine, then,” said Avluela. “Do your Watching once more, and tell me what you see.”

Easily and happily I slipped into the old attitudes. I performed the preliminary rituals quickly, clearing my mind of doubts and frictions. It was surprisingly simple to bring myself into a spirit of Watchfulness; I had not attempted it since the night Earth fell, and yet it seemed to me that I was able to enter the state more rapidly than in the old days.

Now I grasped the handles. How strange they were! They did not terminate in the grips to which I was accustomed: rather, something cool and hard was mounted at the tip of each handle. A gem of some kind, perhaps. Possibly even a starstone, I realized. My hands closed over the twin coolnesses. I felt a moment of apprehension, even of raw fear. Then I regained the necessary tranquillity, and my soul flooded into the device before me, and I began to Watch.

In my Watchfulness I did not soar to the stars, as I had in the old days. Although I perceived, my perception was limited to the immediate surroundings of my room. Eyes closed, body hunched in trance, I reached out and came first to Avluela; she was near me, almost upon me. I saw her plainly. She smiled; she nodded; her eyes were aglow.

—I love you.

—Yes, Tomis. And we will be together always.

—I have never felt so close to another person.

—In this guild we are all close, all the time. We are the Redeemers, Tomis. We are new. Nothing like this has been on Earth before.

—How am I speaking to you, Avluela?

—Your mind speaks to mine through the machine. And some day the machine will not be needed.

—And then we will fly together?

—Long before then, Tomis.

The starstones grew warm in my hands. I clearly perceived the instrument, now: a Watcher's cabinet, but with certain modifications, among them the starstones mounted on the handles. And I looked beyond Avluela and saw other faces, ones that I knew. The austere figure of the Renewer Talmit was to my left. Beside him stood the Surgeon with whom I had journeyed to Jorslem, with the Changeling Bernalt at his elbow, and now at last I knew what business it was that had brought these men of Nayrub to the holy city. The others I did not recognize; but there were two Fliers, and a Rememberer grasping his shawl, and a woman Servitor, and others. And I saw them all by an inner light for the room was as dark as it had been when I entered it. Not only did I see them, but I touched them, mind to mind.

The mind I touched first was Bernalt's. I met it easily though fearfully, drew back, met it again. He greeted me and welcomed me. I realized then that only if I could look upon a Changeling as my brother could I, and Earth itself, win the sought-for redemption. For until we were truly one people, how could we earn an end to our punishment?

I tried to enter Bernalt's mind. But I was afraid. How could I hide those prejudices, those petty contempts, those conditioned reflexes with which we unavoidably think of Changelings?

“Hide nothing,” he counseled. “Those things are no secret to me. Give them up now and join me.”

I struggled. I cast out demons. I summoned up the memory of the moment outside the Changeling shrine, after Bernalt had saved us, when I had invited him to journey with us. How had I felt then toward him? Had I regarded him, at least for a moment, as a brother?

I amplified that moment of gratitude and companionship. I let it swell, and blaze, and it obliterated the encrustations of scorn and empty disdain; and I saw the human soul beneath the strange Changeling surface, and I broke through that surface and found the path to redemption. He drew me toward his mind.

I joined Bernalt, and he enrolled me in his guild. I was of the Redeemers now.

Through my mind rolled a voice, and I did not know whether I heard the resonant boom of Talmit, or the dry ironic tone of the Surgeon, or Bernalt's controlled murmur, or Avluela's soft whisper, for it was all these voices at once, and others, and they said:

“When all mankind is enrolled in our guild, we will be conquered no longer. When each of us is part of every other one of us, our sufferings will end. There is no need for us to struggle against our conquerors, for we will absorb them, once we are all Redeemed. Enter us, Tomis who was the Watcher Wuellig.”

And I entered.

And I became the Surgeon and the Flier and the Renewer and the Changeling and the Servitor and the rest. And they became me. And so long as my hands gripped the starstones we were of one soul and one mind. This was not the merging of communion, in which a Pilgrim sinks anonymously into the Will, but rather a union of self and self, maintaining independence within a larger dependence. It was the keen perception one gets from Watching coupled with the submergence in a larger entity that one gets from communion, and I knew this was something wholly new on Earth, not merely the founding of a new guild but the initiation of a new cycle of human existence, the birth of the Fourth Cycle upon this defeated planet.

The voice said, “Tomis, we will Redeem those in greatest need first. We will go into Agupt, into the desert where miserable Changelings huddle in an ancient building that they worship, and we will take them into us and make them clean again. We will go on, to the west, to a pitiful village smitten by the crystallization disease, and we will reach the souls of the villagers and free them from taint, and the crystallization will cease and their bodies will be healed. And we will go on beyond Agupt, to all the lands of the world, and find those who are without guilds, and those who are without hope, and those who are without tomorrows, and we will give them life and purpose again. And a time will come when all Earth is Redeemed.”

They put a vision before me of a transformed planet, and of the harsh-faced invaders yielding peacefully to us and begging to be incorporated into that new thing that had germinated in the midst of their conquest. They showed me an Earth that had been purged of its ancient sins.

Then I felt it was time to withdraw my hands from the machine I grasped, and I withdrew my hands.

The vision ebbed. The glow faded. But yet I was no longer alone in my skull, for some contact lingered, and the room ceased to be dark.

“How did this happen?” I asked. “When did this begin?”

“In the days after the conquest,” said Talmit, “we asked ourselves why we had fallen so easily, and how we could lift ourselves above what we had been. We saw that our guilds had not provided enough of a structure for our lives, that some closer union was our way to redemption. We had the starstones; we

had the instruments of Watching; all that remained was to fuse them.”

The Surgeon said, “You will be important to us, Tomis, because you understand how to throw your mind forth. We seek former Watchers. They are the nucleus of our guild. Once your soul roved the stars to search out mankind's enemies; now it will roam the Earth to bring mankind together.”

Avluela said, “You will help me to fly, Tomis, even by day. And you will fly beside me.”

“When do you leave?” I asked.

“Now,” she said. “I go to Agupt, to the temple of the Changelings, to offer them what we have to offer. And all of us will join to give me strength, and that strength will be focused through you, Tomis.” Her hands touched mine. Her lips brushed mine. “The life of Earth begins again, now, this year, this new cycle. Oh, Tomis, we are all reborn!”

13

I remained alone in the room. The others scattered. Avluela went above, into the street. I put my hands to the mounted starstones, and I saw her as clearly as though she stood beside me. She was preparing herself for flight. First she put off her clothing, and her bare body glistened in the afternoon sun. Her little body seemed impossibly delicate; a strong wind would shatter her, I thought. Then she knelt, bowed, made her ritual. She spoke to herself, yet I heard her words, the words Fliers say as they ready themselves to leave the ground. All guilds are one in this new guild; we have no secrets from one another; there are no mysteries. And as she beseeched the favor of the Will and the support of all her kind, my prayers joined with hers.

She rose and let her wings unfold. Some passers-by looked oddly at her, not because there was anything unusual about the sight of a naked Flier in the streets of Jorslem, but because the sunlight was so strong and her transparent wings, so lightly stained with pigment, were evidently nightwings incapable of withstanding the pressure of the solar wind.

“I love you,” we said to her, and our hands ran lightly over her satiny skin in a brief caress.

Her nostrils flickered in delight. Her small girl-child's breasts became agitated. Her wings now were fully spread, and they gleamed wondrously in the sunlight.

“Now we fly to Agupt,” she murmured, “to Redeem the Changelings and make them one with us. Tomis, will you come with me?”

“I will be with you,” we said, and I gripped the starstones tightly and crouched over my cabinet of instruments in the dark room beneath the place where she stood. “We will fly together, Avluela.”

“Up, then,” she said, and we said, “Up.”

Her wings beat, curving to take the wind, and we felt her struggling in the first moment, and we gave her the strength she needed, and she took it as it poured from us through me to her, and we rose high. The spires and parapets of Jorslem the golden grew small, and the city became a pink dot in the green hills, and Avluela's throbbing wings thrust her swiftly westward, toward the setting sun, toward the land of Agupt. Her ecstasy swept through us all. “See, Tomis, how wonderful it is, far above everything? Do you feel it?”

“I feel it,” I whispered. “The cool wind against bare flesh—the wind in my hair—we drift on the currents, we coast, we soar, Avluela, we soar!”

To Agupt. To the sunset.

We looked down at sparkling Lake Medit. In the distance somewhere was Land Bridge. To the north, Eyrop. To the south, Afreek. Far ahead, beyond Earth Ocean, lay my homeland. Later I would return there, flying westward with Avluela, bringing the good news of Earth's transformation.

From this height one could not tell that our world had ever been conquered. One saw only the beauty of the colors of the land and the sea, not the checkpoints of the invaders.

Those checkpoints would not long endure. We would conquer our conquerors, not with weapons but with love; and as the Redemption of Earth became universal we would welcome into our new self even the beings who had seized our planet.

"I knew that some day you would fly beside me, Tomis," said Avluela.

In my dark room I sent new surges of power through her wings.

She hovered over the desert. The old Surgery, the Changeling shrine, would soon be in sight. I grieved that we would have to come down. I wished we could stay aloft forever, Avluela and I.

"We will, Tomis, we will!" she told me. "Nothing can separate us now! You believe that, don't you, Tomis?"

"Yes," we said, "I believe that." And we guided her down through the darkening sky.