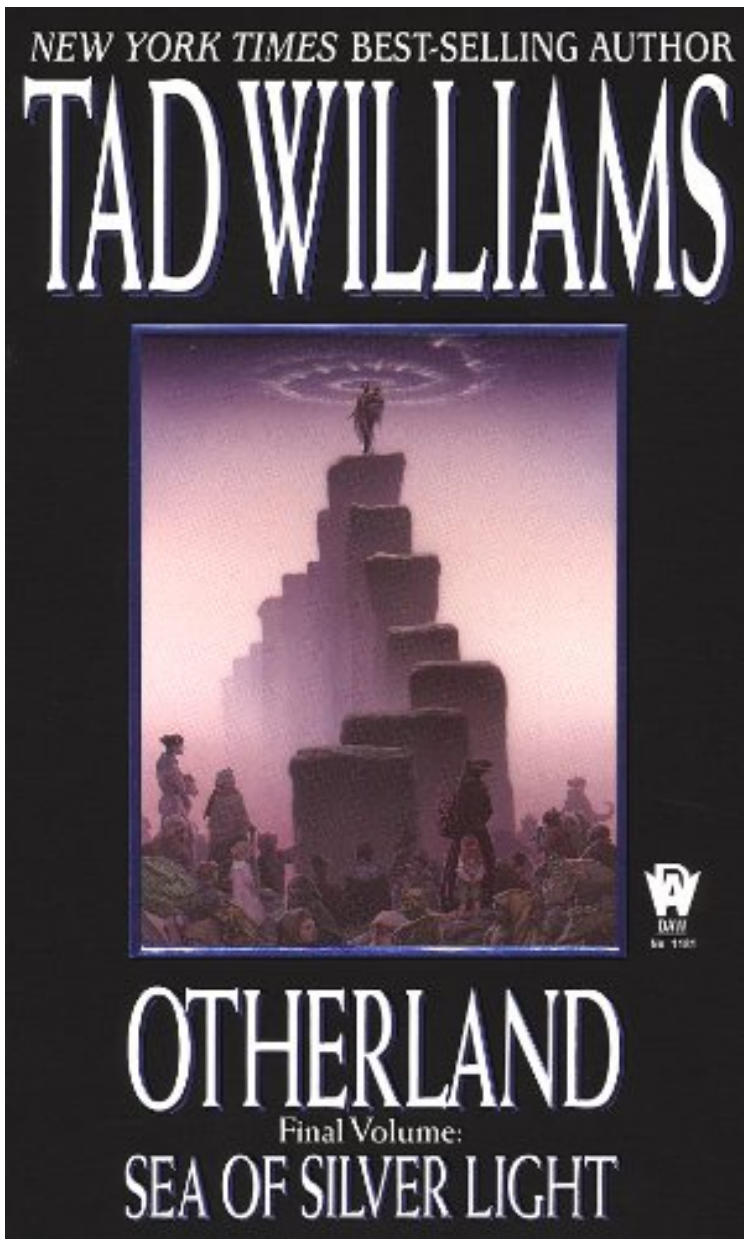


[Pdf free] File size: 59.Mb

Otherland 4: Sea of Silver Light



Par Tad Williams
*DOC | *audiobook | ebooks |*
Download PDF | ePub

Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #306118 dans eBooksPubli le: 2002-04-01Sorti le: 2002-04-01Format: Ebook Kindle

[Pdf free] Otherland 4: Sea of Silver Light

Par Tad Williams : Otherland 4: Sea of Silver Light before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Otherland 4: Sea of Silver Light:

Download

Read Online

Description : Description du produitFew science fiction sagas have achieved the level of critical acclaim-and best-selling popularity-as Tad Williams's Otherland novels. A brilliant blend of SF, fantasy, and technothriller, it is a rich, multilayered epic of future possibilities. "The Otherland series concludes triumphantly...The real and virtual plots all come to a spectacular climax...a surprisingly satisfying conclusion to such a fantastic adventure." (Locus)

Prsentation de l'diteurA group of adventurers searching for a cure for comatose children find themselves trapped in a sequence of virtual worlds, the only opponents of a conspiracy of the rich to live forever in a

dream. Now, they are forced to make an uneasy alliance with their only surviving former enemy against his treacherous sidekick Johnny Vulgaru, a serial killer with a chance to play God forever. Few science fiction sagas have achieved the level of critical acclaim-and best-selling popularity-as Tad Williams's Otherland novels. A brilliant blend of science fiction, fantasy, and technothriller, it is a rich, multilayered epic of future possibilities. From the Paperback edition..com's Best of 2001 With Sea of Silver Light, Tad Williams completes his massive Otherland quartet, one of SF's more intriguing explorations of the eroding boundaries of the human and the nonhuman, the living and the dead. Otherland is a sequence that contains many secrets, and Williams plays fair by unpacking all of them in the final book. A group of adventurers searching for a cure for comatose children find themselves trapped in a sequence of virtual worlds, the only opponents of a conspiracy of the rich to live forever in a dream. Now, they are forced to make an uneasy alliance with their only surviving former enemy against his treacherous sidekick Johnny Vulgaru, a serial killer with a chance to play God forever. Williams manages a vast cast of emotionally involving characters with considerable panache, but the real strength of the book is its endlessly questing intelligence; it is, among other things, an enquiry into the nature of storytelling as a way for human beings to give structure to their perceptions of the universe around them. It is as story that Sea of Silver Light ultimately works so well--involving us in the grueling descent of a vast mountain, the siege of an underground fortress, gun battles in a nightmare Wild West. Williams never neglects to tell us how things feel. He efficiently ties up every plot strand and convincingly reveals every secret in this large, complex plot. --Roz Kaveney, .co.uk ExtraitFirst: A VOYAGE IN THE HEART`Wynken, Blynken, and Nod one nightSailed off in a wooden shoeSailed on a river of crystal lightInto a sea of dew."Eugene Field, 1850-1895CHAPTER 1Strange BedfellowsNETFEED/NEWS: Little League Hostages FreedAngry Father Killed(visual: body of Wilkes beside camper van)VO: Gerald Ray Wilkes, like many Little League parents, thought his son's team was victimized by a bad call. Unlike most of them, though, Wilkes decided to take drastic action. After beating the unpaid umpire unconscious, he forced the opposing team of eleven- and twelve-year-olds into his van at gunpoint, then led authorities on a two-state chase. He was eventually stopped by a roadblock outside Tompkinsville, Kentucky, where he was shot when he refused to surrender....LRENIE dodged Sam's first blow and ducked the second almost as easily, but the third bounced hard off the side of her head. Renie cursed and leaned away. Sam was crying and swinging blindly, but Renie didn't want to take any chancesif the sim body was a fair representation of her real self, Sam Fredericks was a strong, athletic girl. Renie grabbed her around the waist and threw her to the strangely soapy ground, then struggled to secure the girl's arms in a clinch. She failed, and was slapped on the side of the head again. Renie was having trouble keeping her own anger in check.`Damn it, Sam, stop! That's enough!"She finally managed to grab one of the girl's arms and used the leverage to shove Sam's head down against the ground, then climbed atop her and pulled her other arm up behind her back. For a moment the girl bucked, trying to throw her off, then her limbs went slack and her weeping took on a deeper, more heartbroken sound.Renie kept her weight on Sam for almost a minute, until she felt the girl's convulsive sobbing begin to gentle. Hoping the worst was over, she took the risk of letting go one of the girl's arms so she could rub the spot where Sam had hit her. Her jaw clicked as she worked it. `Jesus Mercy, girl, I think you broke my face."Sam twisted her head back to look at Renie, eyes wide. `Oh my God, I'm so sorry!" She burst into tears again.Renie stood up. The skimpy strips of cloth she wore had nearly been pulled off her body in the struggle, as had Sam's, and both of them were streaked with pseudo-dirt. Some people would pay a lot to see this kind of thing, Renie thought sourly. Back at Mister J's, they'd put a lot of good coding into this effecthalf-naked women wrestling in the dirt. `Get up, girl," she said aloud. `We're supposed to be looking for rocks, remember?"Sam rolled over and stared up at the odd gray sky, face wet, eyes desolate. `I won't do it, Renie! I can't do iteven if you break both my arms. He's a murderer. He killed Orlando!"Renie silently counted to ten before speaking. `Look, Sam, I let you scream at meI even let you hit me and I didn't smack you back, no matter how much I wanted to. Do you think this feels good?" She touched her tender jaw. `It's been difficult for all of us. But we're going with that nasty old man because we have toand I'm not going to leave you here. End of discussion. Now, are you going to make me tie you up and carry you all the way down this damned mountain, tired as I am?" Suddenly realizing that she was indeed exhausted, she slumped down next to the girl. `Are you really going to do that to me?"Sam looked at her solemnly, struggling for self-control. Her breath hitched; she waited until she could speak. `I'm sorry, Renie. But how can we go anywhere with... with... ?""I know. I hate the bastardI'd like to throw him off the mountain myself. But we're going to have to live with Felix Jongleur until we get some answers to what's going on. What's that old saying about keeping your friends

close and your enemies closer?" Renie squeezed the girl's arm. "This is a war, Sam. Not just a single battle. Putting up with that terrible man... well, it's like being a spy behind foreign lines or something. We have to do it because we have a bigger purpose." Sam looked down, unable to hold Renie's gaze. "Chizz," she said after long moments, but she sounded like death. "I'll try. But I'm not going to talk to him." "Fine." Renie clambered to her feet. "Come on. I didn't just bring you out here to talk to you alone. We still have to..." She broke off as a shape moved slowly around one of the broken spikes of stone which were the primary features of the barren landscape. The handsome young man who stood there said nothing, but only stared back, empty-eyed as a goldfish in a bowl. "What the hell do you want?" Renie asked him. The dark-haired man did not answer for a moment. "I... am Ricardo Klement," he said at last. "We know." Just because he was brain-damaged didn't mean he had earned any of Renie's sympathy. Before the Ceremony went awry, he had been another one of the Grail murderers, just like Jongleur. "Go away. Leave us alone." Klement blinked slowly. "It is good... to be alive." After another pause he turned and disappeared among the rocks. "This is so utterly horrible," Sam said weakly. "I... I don't want to be here anymore, Renie." "Neither do I." Renie patted her shoulder. "That's why we have to keep going, find our way home. No matter how much we want to give up." She grabbed Sam's arm and squeezed again, trying to make her hear, force her to understand. "No matter how much. Now come on, girl, get on your feet! Let's go find some more rocks." ***!Xabbu was using the stones they had already gathered to construct a wall around Orlando's naked sim, something that looked more like a lidless coffin than a cairn. The pseudo-stones, like the rest of the environment on the black mountain, were slowly changing: with every hour that passed they looked less like the thing they were supposed to be, more like a sort of cursory 3D sketch. Orlando's Achilles sim, though, had retained its almost supernatural realism: lying in the improvised tomb, he did indeed look like a fallen demigod. Confronted with her friend's empty shell, Sam was crying again. "He is dead, isn't he? I keep wanting it not to be true, but that's probably how everyone feels, right?" Renie recalled the achingly bleak months after her mother's death. "Yes, it is. You'll be seeing him, hearing him, only he won't be there. But it gets better after a while." "It'll never get better. Never." Sam leaned down to touch Orlando's stony cheek. "But he is dead, isn't he? Really, really dead." Renie was finding it almost as difficult as Sam to contemplate leaving behind a body that still looked so full of life. There had been other strange signs too. Unlike all the other sims she had seen whose living owners had died, Orlando's garments had remained soft and supple despite the marble-like solidity of the body beneath. This strange state of affairs had even made Renie wonder for a while if he might not still be living, just lost somehow in his own deep coma back in real life, but numerous surreptitious experiments performed when Sam was otherwise distracted so as not to raise her hopes had made Renie as certain as she could ever be in this strange place that there was no animation left in that petrified form. Orlando's last gift to them had allowed Renie and Sam to salvage enough cloth to make crude garments, which helped Renie feel a little less vulnerable in the presence of the cold-eyed Jongleur and the vacantly childish Klement. In turning over Orlando's stiffened sim to untangle the remains of his tattered chiton, they had even found his broken sword, the hilt still bearing a few inches of blade, which had made it much easier to turn the dirty white fabric into loincloths and crude bandeau tops. The damaged sword was the only weapon among the mountaintop survivors, perhaps the only weapon in this entire simworld, and obviously far too valuable a tool to leave behind. Renie would have preferred to carry it herself, trusting her own wariness to keep it from falling into Jongleur's hands, but Sam had been so pathetically grateful to have some keepsake from Orlando that Renie had not had the heart to argue very much; Sam now wore it thrust through the waist of her loincloth. With only a bit more than a hand's breadth of blade left, it would not make much of a weapon, although it had given Renie a nasty scratch on her leg while she and Sam had been wrestling. Still, she had to admit that in such spare circumstances the shattered blade had the look of a legendary object. Renie shook her head, irritated at herself for getting mystical. Undecaying body or not, their friend was still dead. Orlando's sword might once have been the scourge of an imaginary gaming world, but now it would be used for digging or for sawing wood... if they ever found any. As for the miraculous cloth, it had been turned into a pair of primitive bikinis from a bad caveman flick. (!Xabbu had refused to take any of the tiny amount of fabric to clothe his own nakedness, and when Renie had offered some to Jongleur, more to protect her and Sam's own sensibilities than as a kindness, he had only laughed.) So we'll head down the mountain this way, she thought. Three naked men and two women looking like something out of a Neandertal lingerie advertisement. And for all we know, we're the only people left alive in this whole virtual universe... except for Dread. Oh, yes, we're in great shape....!Xabbu took the new stones they had collected, but he seemed distracted. Before asking him why, Renie made sure Jongleur was

out of earshot. The master of the Grail Brotherhood stood some distance away, staring out into the weirdly depthless sky from the rim of the cliff. Renie couldn't help wondering again what it would feel like to shove him over the edge. "You look worried," she told !Xabbu as he shored up the walls around Orlando's body. "How are we supposed to cover the top of this, by the way?" "I am worried because I do not think we have time to do that. I think we must leave Orlando's grave this way and begin our journey soon. I am sorry I wanted to do better." "What are you talking about?" "We have all seen what has happened to this place just since we have been here how things are losing their edges, their color. While I was out looking for more stones, I discovered something that worried me. The trail is losing truth, too." She shook her head, confused. "What do you mean?" "Maybe I have used the wrong word. I am talking of the trail which we climbed to come here, with Martine and Paul Jonas and the others, before everything became so strange the trail along the mountainside. It is changing as everything else here is changing, Renie, but there was not much... what is the word? There was not much truth, much... reality to it in the first place. Already it looks old and blurry." Despite the permanent room-temperature ambience, Renie felt a chill. Without that path they would be trapped on top of a miles-high mountain that was rapidly losing its coherence. And what if gravity was the last thing to go? "You're right. We leave soon." She turned to Sam, who was brooding over Orlando's empty sim. "Did you hear that? We're running out of time here." The girl was dry-eyed now, but the composure did not go very deep. It was still strange for Renie to see Sam's true face. It had been even stranger to discover that Sam had a black father, and a distinct African look to her features despite her tawny hair. Her teenage dialect had been so compellingly middle-American that even Renie herself had unconsciously typed the girl (even when everyone had still thought her a boy) as white. "He still looks so... perfect," Sam said quietly. "What's going to happen to him if this place goes away?" Renie shook her head. "I don't know. But remember, that's not him, Sam. That's not even his body. Wherever Orlando is, he must be in a better place than this." "We need a little rest before we go anywhere," !Xabbu said. "We have none of us slept since the night before Troy was destroyed, and that seems a long time ago. It will be no help to hurry down the mountain if we are not making good choices if we stumble and fall because we are so tired." Renie started to object, but of course he was right: they were all exhausted in fact, it was !Xabbu himself who usually got the least sleep and insisted on taking the most strenuous duties. It might only be a sim and not his true body, but he was still sagging with weariness. Even Sam's emotional volatility, unsurprising after what they had all been through, might be improved with rest. "Okay," she said. "We'll take a few hours to sleep. But only if you go first." "I am used to being without sleep, Renie..." "I don't care if you're used to it. It's your turn. I'll stand first watch, then I'll wake Sam up for the second. So just lie down, will you?" !Xabbu shrugged and smiled. "If you say so, Beloved Porcupine." "Stop that." She looked around. "It would be nice if it ever got dark here." She remembered the terror of sudden nightfall in the other unfinished land. "Well, maybe not. Anyway, just close your eyes." "You could sleep too, Renie." "And not have anyone keeping an eye on Jongleur? Chance not, as the young people say." !Xabbu curled up on the ground. Trained by his nomadic people to snatch the opportunity when it was available, within moments his breathing slowed and his muscles relaxed. Renie reached out once and touched his hair, still awed to have the old !Xabbu back again. Or a virtual version of him. She glanced at Felix Jongleur, still staring out into the sky like a ship's captain watching the weather, then at Sam, crouched silently beside Orlando's cairn. Although her knee was touching Renie's leg, the girl seemed farther away than Jongleur. "You get some sleep too," Renie told her. "Sam? Do you hear me?" The girl looked up, a flash of anger on her face. "You're not my mother, seen?" Renie sighed. "No, I'm not. But I am a grown woman and I'm trying to help. And if you ever want to see that mother of yours again, you must stay alert and healthy." Sam's look softened. "Sorry. Sorry I'm being so stupid. I just... I want this all to be over. I want to go home." "We're doing our best. Lie down for a while, even if you don't sleep." "Chizz." She stretched out beside Orlando's body and closed her eyes, one hand touching the low stone wall. It gave Renie a superstitious shiver to see it. I can't even remember, she thought, what it felt like when life was normal. Both !Xabbu and Sam were still sleeping soundly after something like an hour had passed, as deeply as her brother Stephen had used to sleep after a long day of childish hyperactivity. Sam was snoring quietly, and Renie was reluctant to wake her up. She felt a brief desire for a cigarette, and realized with surprise that it had been a long time since she had thought about smoking. Just too damned busy trying not to get killed, she decided. Effective, but there must be easier ways to quit. Jongleur had his back against a rock some ten meters away and appeared to be sleeping himself, or at least his head was sunk on his chest and his eyes were closed. Renie could not help thinking he looked like a vulture waiting with the patience of millions of years of blind evolution for something to die. The fifth

member of the involuntary fellowship, Ricardo Klement, had not reappeared, and even though it disturbed Renie to think about him trudging around the mountaintop, God only knew what kind of thoughts flickering through his damaged brain, it was better than having to look at him. It was the mountaintop itself that now caught Renie's attention. For all that had happened here, for all that she and !Xabbu had worried about its ongoing dissolution, she had not really looked it over very carefully. Sleepless in the eternal, directionless light, she let her gaze wander across the spiky terrain. The mountain was not only losing detail, it was losing color as well, since it had originally been all the same shiny black material, it might have been more precise to say it was gaining colors. The scumble of dark, unreflective soil beneath her had not changed too much, but the uneven peaks and pillars of stone were less solidly black, as though someone had thrown water on an ink drawing before it was entirely dry. Some of the spikes of rock had merely lightened to dark gray, but others now showed threads of other hues, purples and night sky blues, and even the suggestion here and there of a dark brown like dried blood. But that doesn't really make any sense, Renie told herself. That's not how virtual landscapes decay. If they don't just go nonfunctional, then some of the components might work longer than others and you get an odd effect like a schematic or a wire-frame after all the other detail is gone, but you don't just have color wash out. Things don't go blurry. It's crazy. But here they were, and what hadn't been crazy since they'd first crossed with the old hacker Singh into this virtual madhouse of a universe? Nothing here behaved as normal code should behave. Renie squinted. The mountaintop seemed quite real in some ways more so than when they had first come but there was no question that the place was losing coherence. Some of the jutting spikes were little more than blobs now, and in other places the canyons that cut into the rim of the valley had begun to sag along the edges like pudding. It's not a real landscape in fact, it never was. The more she looked at its sparse verticality and blurry gray sky, dead as a bad piece of theater scenery, the more it seemed like something purely of the imagination. An Expressionist painting, perhaps. A cartoon. A dream. Yes, that's what it truly looks like, she thought. And that's what the other unfinished place looked like too. Not like real places, but like one of those landscapes that the brain throws out as a backdrop for a dream. A thought suddenly came to her, something as strange and prickly as static electricity, and she found herself sitting up straight. After a few minutes, with other ideas grabbing onto the first as though magnetized, she badly wanted to share. She gave !Xabbu a gentle shake. He came awake immediately. "Renie? Is it my turn? Is everything...?" "I'm fine, I just... I had an idea. Because of what you always say. A dream is dreaming us, you know?" "What do you mean?" He drew himself up until he could look closely at her face. "You always say that a dream is dreaming us, right? And I always thought of that as being, I don't know, philosophical." He laughed quietly. "Is that a bad word, Renie?" "Don't make fun of me, please. I'm admitting my own faults. I'm an engineer, for God's sake or at least that's my training. I tend to think of things like philosophy as being what you do after the real work is finished." The look he gave her was amused, crinkling around the eyes. "And so?" "I was just thinking about this place and how much like a dream it is. How nothing is quite normal, but in a dream that doesn't matter because you're waiting for something important to happen. And then I suddenly just thought, what if this place is a dream?" !Xabbu cocked his head. "What do you mean?" "Not a dream, really, but strange and unreal for the same reason that a dream is. Why is it that things happen all funny in dreams, things look funny? That nothing is ever quite... complete? Because your subconscious isn't actually very good at recreating the stuff the conscious mind usually sees, or else it just doesn't care." Sam stirred in her sleep, disturbed by the urgency in Renie's tone, so she dropped her voice to a whisper. "I think the Other built this place. I think it meant us to come here, and it built this place out of its own mind, like a dream. What did Jonas call it? A metaphor." Spoken aloud, it did not seem as obviously true. It was hard to conceive of their own existence having any importance to that vast, suffering figure. "Made this from its mind? But if this Other runs the system, then it has access to anything all of those worlds, each one perfect." !Xabbu frowned, thinking. "It seems strange it should build anything so unreal." "But that's just it," Renie said excitedly. "It didn't build those other worlds. Those were made by people programmers, engineers, real people who know what a real world is supposed to look like, and how to make even an imaginary world look real. But what does the Other know? It's just an artificial intelligence of some kind, right? It sees patterns, but it's not a human. It doesn't know what would seem real to us and what wouldn't, just the general shape of things. It would be like giving a book to a very intelligent child who can't read, then telling him, "Now you make one of these books for yourself." The kid might have all the right letters to use from the one you gave him, but he couldn't make them into a story. So it would be a weird thing that just looked like a book. Get it?" !Xabbu thought about it for a long moment. "But why? Why would the Other create a new world?" "I don't know. Maybe just for us. Martine said she'd met it

before, remember? That she'd been part of an experiment with it when she was a girl? Suppose the thing recognized her. Or maybe for some reason it just wanted to see what we were. This is an alien intelligence we're talking about, so who knows? It might be artificial, but it seems to be a lot more complex than any ordinary neural net." Renie sensed something at her shoulder and turned. Felix Jongleur stood over them, his face hardened in a frown. "We have waited long enough. It's time to begin our descent. Wake the girl." "We were just..." "Wake her. We are leaving now." Ordinarily, faced with a naked middle-aged man, Renie would have been only too happy to keep her eyes on his face, but it was surprisingly difficult to meet Jongleur's cold gaze. Now that the first heat of her rage at the man had begun to dissipate she was discovering an uncomfortable fact: he frightened her badly. He had a deep, hard strength, the kind of unbending core that served nothing but its own will. His dark eyes showed not an iota of human concern, but there was nothing animalistic in them; rather, he seemed a creature that had moved past simple humanity. She had heard politicians and financial titans described as implacable, as forces of nature, and she had always seen it as just a flattering metaphor. Now, faced with the master of the Grail in person, she was beginning to understand that a black charisma like his owed nothing to artistic descriptions. She darted a look at !Xabbu, but her friend's thoughts were hidden: when he chose to be, he was just as inscrutable in his own skin as he had been behind the mask of the baboon sim. Jongleur turned his back on them and moved a few paces away, the picture of impatience controlled. Renie leaned over and nudged Sam Fredericks awake. "We have to go, Sam." The girl roused herself slowly. She crouched for a moment, then her eyes swung to Orlando's body lying in its close-fitting coffin of stones. "!Xabbu," Renie whispered. "Go bother Jongleur for a minute so Sam can say goodbye to her friend. Ask the old bastard some questions; not that he'll give you any answers, but it will keep him busy." !Xabbu nodded. He walked to Jongleur and said something, then swept his arm out toward the pearly, horizonless sky, exactly like someone discussing the weather or the view. Renie turned back to Sam. "We have to leave him behind now." The girl nodded. "I know," she said quietly, staring down at Orlando. "He was so good. Not just nice; sometimes he was kind of hardcase, majorly sarcastic. But he really wanted... w-wanted to be g-g-good..." Renie put an arm around her. There was nothing to be done, really. "Goodbye, Orlando," Renie said at last, quietly. "Wherever you are." She led Sam away from the cairn, fussing at the girl's hair and ragged garments to distract her. "You'd better get your brain-damaged friend," she told Jongleur, "because he's wandering around out there somewhere. We're leaving now." Something even darker and colder than usual moved across the man's face. "You think I should go fetch Klement as though he were some schoolyard chum of mine? You are a fool. I need the three of you, so we will all go together, but I see no such use for him. If he wants to join us, then I will not stop him unless he does something that endangers my safety; but if he stays here instead while this place reverts to raw code, it matters little to me." He turned and strode away toward the trail down the mountain, making himself the leader by default. "Such pleasant company," Renie muttered. "Okay, it's time. Let's go." The great bowl-shaped valley where the giant form of the Other had lain was empty now, one side collapsed in a long, ragged edge, as though something had taken a bite out of it. Jongleur walked ahead of them all, ramrod straight, his posture and stride those of a man even younger than the middle age his looks suggested. Renie wondered if the hard-planned face was really Jongleur's own, as it had looked sometime a century or more ago. If so, it just added to one of the strangest mysteries of all: why had they wakened here with sims so much like their real bodies? It doesn't make sense. When we first entered the network, I had the sim I'd chosen, and so did T4b and Sweet William, but Martine was just in a generic body from Atasco's simulation and !Xabbu was a baboon. What the hell was that about? And Orlando and Fredericks had their own choice of sims, avatars from their adventure game; but didn't Fredericks tell me that Orlando's sim was not quite the same as usual? Older or younger or something? But just as their original sims showed no obvious pattern, the fact that they now wore bodies much like their own true forms seemed just as strange. Could we actually be in our real bodies? she thought wildly. But she could remember quite clearly that moment of awakening in the tank in her true physical form, and although the difference was subtle, it was a difference. The shape she now wore might look like her real body, down to small details, scars, and even the knobbiness of a knuckle she had broken in childhood, but it wasn't real at all. So what's going on? If it's the Other's dream, why do we look like this? It's like magic. Renie blew out air, frustrated. No matter how strange and unrelated the facts seemed, there had to be patterns, but she couldn't see any of them yet. As the small company reached the outermost pinnacles of the mountaintop, Renie noticed that Ricardo Klement had at some point joined the party, following a hundred meters or so behind them like an unquiet ghost. The trail still curved down from the summit and along the shiny black slope, apparently all the way down into the mysteriously glinting

clouds that ringed the mountain, but Renie could see that !Xabbu had not exaggerated. The striations that had made the path safe had lost much of their definition, and although the trail itself still seemed substantial, the crispness of its outer edge was gone, as though the stone were some kind of licorice ice cream that had been out of the freezer a little too long. "I still wonder why the Other would want to bring us to a place like this," she said quietly to !Xabbu as they started down the trail after Jongleur. "And maybe to that first unfinished world, too." She couldn't help remembering how part of the ground in that other world had suddenly vanished, trapping Martine and shearing off T4b's hand. What if the same instability happened here? She decided not to waste time brooding about something she couldn't prevent. T4b's hand, though that was an interesting anomaly. It had been replaced by another hand, a glowing thing that had done terrible damage to one of the Grail people, who had seemed otherwise invincible. Could T4b's hand somehow have been replaced by a bit of the Other itself, or at least of its ability to shape the network? A wild-card piece of the operating system at the end of his virtual arm? She shared the thought with !Xabbu. "But even if the Other made both of these places carved them out of the raw material of the network, so to speak it doesn't really tell us anything. If it's been captured or taken over or something by Dread, that might be why this particular construct is starting to lose resolution, but it doesn't explain why that other unfinished world started falling apart underneath us." !Xabbu cut her off. "Look here. I do not remember the path being like that before." The trail in front of them was suddenly only wide enough for them to pass single file. "We should save our talking and thinking until we have found a wide place on the trail and stopped for the night." "We're not going to sleep on this mountain, are we?" Sam protested. "It only took us a couple of hours to climb up!" "Yes," !Xabbu told her, "but I think that was from a spot very high up the mountainside. Going down to the bottom may be a much longer trip." "If we make it down safely," Renie said, edging past the narrow space and its much too expansive view of the sheer black mountainside below her feet, "then I won't mind if it takes a week." *** Even after hours of plodding descent, they seemed no closer to the bank of white cloud. They were all tired. Renie, who had not slept, was perhaps the weariest of all. It was not surprising that an accident should happen. They had reached one of the narrower stretches of trail, not the worst they had seen in places they had been forced to edge sideways along the path with their backs against the hard stone of the mountainside but slender enough that two of them could not safely stand side by side. Sam was just behind Renie; !Xabbu and Felix Jongleur were the first and second in line. Klement, who at times had trailed a long way to the rear, was now so close he could reach out and touch the last in line, which for some reason was exactly what he did. Sam, startled and frightened by Klement's fingers trailing through her hair, lurched forward, trying to push her way past on Renie's inside shoulder. For a moment the two of them tangled; then, trying to give the girl room, Renie put her foot down too far to the outside and the edge of the trail crumbled beneath her like stale bread. For a moment Renie could only flail her arms, a reflex absolutely useless for anything except to increase the odds of dragging Sam over the side as well. Renie shrieked and then tumbled outward, aware even as her heart seemed to stop that the sight of !Xabbu's shoulder and his head turning far too late to help was the last of him she would ever see. Then something closed on her wrist like a manacle and she slammed down against the path with her legs dangling over nothingness, her breath smashed out in one great gasp. In the scrambling and shouting of her companions as they struggled to drag her back over the edge, Renie did not understand until she was safe again that it was Felix Jongleur's hand that had seized her, his wiry body that had kept her from slipping away until !Xabbu and Sam could pull her back to safety. Stretched on her stomach, blood sizzling through her head like electricity, Renie struggled to refill her lungs. Jongleur looked down on her like a scientist examining a dying lab rat. "I'm not certain I would have bothered to do it for one of your other companions," he said, then turned and continued down the path. Despite her shock and nausea, Renie spent a long moment trying to decide how she should feel about that. There was no darkness on the mountain, and the strange Van Gogh stars that had hung above them during their ascent did not reappear. That first journey seemed weeks behind them, but Renie thought it must have been less than forty-eight hours since she and !Xabbu and Martine and the rest had emerged from the Troy simulation onto this very trail. Now all those others were gone, vanished or dead. Out of the entire company that had been gathered by Sellars, only three were left: !Xabbu, Sam, and herself. The climb up the mountain had been brief, but this reverse journey held the promise of being much longer. Depressed by the way the silvery distant clouds seemed to grow no closer, increasingly exhausted, they continued down the trail long past the point of safety, searching for a place to stop. An hour longer than Renie would have believed she was able to walk, they finally reached a fold in the mountainside, a deep elbow joint in the trail a few meters wide and a few meters deep where they could rest away from the cliff

face. It was a bleak campsite, without food or water or even fire, since !Xabbu had found nothing anywhere that could be used as fuel, but just the chance to lie down and rest in safety seemed as good to Renie as any meal she had ever eaten. Since her near-fall she had been so frightened she would not move out of arm's reach of the mountain face, and had spent most of the last part of the descent trailing her fingers along the black stone, rubbing her skin raw to make certain that she was on the inside of the path. Renie made Fredericks curl up at the back of the crevice so that she could put herself between Jongleur and the broken sword Fredericks carried, then laid her own head on !Xabbu's shoulder. Jongleur made a space for himself farther up the cut where he quickly fell asleep sitting against the stone with his chin on his chest. Klement crouched at the opening of the crevice, looking out on the gray sky, his expression quite unreadable. Renie was asleep within seconds. She was teetering on the edge. Stephen was only a few meters away, a dim shape floating on air currents she could not feel, as though he wore wings; for all his fluttering movements he never came within reach. She thrust her arm out as far as she could and for a moment thought she touched him, but then her footing gave way and she was falling, plunging, with nothing beneath her but shriekingly empty darkness... ``... You there? Can you... me? Renie?" She fell gasping out of the dream and into a greater madness. Martine's voice was buzzing from her own breast, as though her friend were somehow trapped inside Renie's body. For a long, disoriented moment she could only stare at the black stone walls and the sliver of gray sky before she remembered where she was. The voice hummed against her skin once more. !Xabbu sat up. Sam stared, groggy and dumbfounded. ``Can... us? We're... bad shape... !""The lighter!" Renie said. ``Jesus Mercy!" She fumbled the device out of the strip of cloth she wore across her chest. ``It's Martine's alive!" But even as she lifted it up, trying to angle it into the thin light so she could see it and remember the operating sequences they had discovered, a shadow crashed against her and knocked the lighter from her hand, sent it clattering toward the back of the crevice. Felix Jongleur stood over her, fists clenched. ``What the hell are you doing?" she screamed, already scrambling on her hands and knees after the device. ``... Answer us, Renie," Martine pleaded. Renie's hand closed on the lighter again. ``We're... without..." ``If you try to activate that," said Jongleur, ``I will kill you." Sam came up from her crouch brandishing Orlando's broken blade. ``Leave her alone!" Jongleur did not even look at her. ``I am warning you," he told Renie. ``Do not touch it." Renie was frozen, irresolute. Something in Jongleur's tone told her he would do what he threatened, even with the sword buried in his back. Even so, she leaned slowly toward the lighter, fingers spread. ``What's wrong with you?" she growled. ``Those are our friends!" ``Martine! Is... you, sweetness?" said a new voice a terrifyingly familiar one, the signal stronger than Martine's, but also slipping in and out. ``I've missed... you have any of my other... with you?" Renie snatched her hand back as though the lighter had begun to glow white-hot. ``I'm a bit busy... old darling, but I'll... some friends to find you. Don't move! They'll... in minutes. Actually, go... move if you want... it... good." Dread's buzzing laugh filled the small space. ``He's after them!" Renie almost shouted. ``We have to help!" Jongleur curled his fingers into a fist. ``No." After ten seconds had passed in strained silence, Renie reached for the device and picked it up. It seemed cold and inert now, a dead thing. ``Those people are our friends," she said furiously, but Jongleur had stepped away, back toward the entrance to the crevice. !Xabbu and Sam stared at him as though he had suddenly sprouted horns and a tail. Only Klement had not moved from the place where he sat silently against the wall. ``Those people have just revealed themselves on an open communication band," Jongleur said. ``They have just announced their helplessness not to mention their position across the entire Grail channel. But they are not the only ones with access to that channel, as you also heard. If you had tried to give away my position to him, I would have killed you without a moment's hesitation." Renie stared, hating him, but fearful of his cruel certainty. ``And why should we care about that? It's you he wants." ``All the more reason you shall not give me away." ``Really?" She was enraged now by her own cowardice. ``Well, you talk big, but there are three of us and only one of you, unless you're expecting help from your idiot friend. As for Dread, he's no worse a threat to us than you are, because he's just an ordinary psychopath." ``Ordinary psychopath?" Jongleur lifted an eyebrow. ``You know nothing. John Dread with no greater weapon than his bare hands would be one of the most dangerous people in the world, but now he has the power of my entire system at his disposal." ``All right. So he's dangerous. So now he's the little tin god of the Grail network. So what?" Renie pointed a trembling finger. ``You and your selfish old friends, destroying children so you could live forever, so you could build yourself the most expensive toy in the history of the world. I hope your friend Dread does bring the whole thing down in flames, even if we go with it. It will be worth it, just to see the last of you." Jongleur eyed her, then !Xabbu and Sam. The girl cursed under her breath and turned away, but !Xabbu held Jongleur's gaze with little expression until the older man

turned back to Renie. "Be silent and I will tell you something," he said. "I built myself a place. It does not matter what kind of place, but it was something I created for myself, separate from the Grail system. It was my respite when the stress and worry of this project became too much. A system completely removed from the Grail matrix in fact, a dedicated system, if you know what that is." "I know what that is," Renie said scornfully. "What's your point?" "The point is that no one but me could access this virtual environment. Then one day, not long ago, I discovered that someone had accessed it, corrupted it, ruined what I had built there. I only realized after much consideration that the Other itself had penetrated that dedicated system something it should not have been able to do." He paused. Renie could make no sense out of what he was saying. "So?" Jongleur shook his head in mock-sorrow. There was a glint in his eye; Renie realized that the monster was actually enjoying this in some strange way. "I have overestimated you again, I see. Very well, I will explain. The only way the Other could have reached into that environment is through my own system by stealing or co-opting my own security procedures out of my house system. My personal system, not the Grail system. And now the Other is under the control of John Dread." Renie's chill had returned. "So... so what you're saying is that the Other... isn't isolated on the Grail system anymore." Jongleur's smile stretched his lips but went no farther. "That is correct. So while you consider where your loyalties lie, take this into your counsels. That far-from-ordinary-psychopath Dread not only has control of the most powerful and complex operating system ever developed, that system itself has already managed to reach out of its Grail Project bottle and into my house network. Which means that the Other and Dread, as its controlling force can reach anywhere on the global net." He stepped out of the crevice and onto the path, turned toward the downhill slope, then paused. "The damage Dread can do here is nothing compared to what he'll do when he discovers his new reach." Jongleur spread his hands wide. "Just imagine. The whole world will be at his fingertips air traffic control, critical industries, stockpiles of biological weapons, nuclear launch facilities. And as you have already discovered, Johnny Dread is a very, very angry young man." OTHERLAND: City of Golden Shadow Synopsis Wet, terrified, with only the companionship of trench-mates Finch and Mullet to keep him sane, Paul Jonas seems no different than any of thousands of other foot soldiers in World War I. But when he abruptly finds himself alone on an empty battlefield except for a tree that grows up into the clouds, he begins to doubt that sanity. When he climbs the tree and discovers a castle in the clouds, a woman with wings like a bird, and her terrifying giant guardian, his insanity seems confirmed. But when he awakens back in the trenches, he finds he is clutching one of the bird-woman's feathers. In South Africa, in the middle of the twenty-first century, Irene "Renie" Sulaweyo has problems of her own. Renie is an instructor of virtual engineering whose newest student, !Xabbu, is one of the desert Bushmen, a people to whom modern technology is very alien. At home she is a surrogate mother to her young brother, Stephen, who is obsessed with exploring the virtual parts of the world communication network the "net" and Renie spends what little spare time she has holding her family together. Her widowed father Long Joseph only seems interested in finding his next drink. Like most children, Stephen is entranced by the forbidden, and although Renie has already saved him once from a disturbing virtual nightclub named Mister J's, Stephen returns to the net. By the time Renie discovers what he has done, Stephen has fallen into a coma. The doctors cannot explain it, but Renie is certain something has happened to him online. American Orlando Gardiner is only a little older than Renie's brother, but he is a master of several online domains, and because of a serious medical condition, spends most of his time in the online identity of Thargor, a barbarian warrior. But when in the midst of one of his adventures Orlando is given a glimpse of a golden city unlike anything else he has ever seen on the net, he is so distracted that his Thargor character is killed. Despite this terrible loss, Orlando cannot shake his fascination with the golden city, and with the support of his software agent Beezle Bug and the reluctant help of his online friend Fredericks, he is determined to locate the golden city. Meanwhile, on a military base in the United States, a little girl named Christabel Sorensen pays secret visits to her friend, Mr. Sellars, a strange, scarred old man. Her parents have forbidden her to see him, but she likes the old man and the stories he tells, and he seems much more pathetic than frightening. She does not know that he has very unusual plans for her. As Renie gets to know !Xabbu the Bushman better, and to appreciate his calm good nature and his outsider's viewpoint on modern life, she comes to rely on him more and more in her quest to discover what has happened to her brother. She and !Xabbu sneak into the online nightclub, Mr. J's. The place is as bad as she feared, with guests indulging themselves in all manner of virtual unpleasantness, but nothing seems like it could have actually physically harmed her brother until they are drawn into a terrifying encounter with a virtual version of the Hindu death-goddess Kali. !Xabbu is overcome, and Renie, too, is almost overwhelmed by Kali's subliminal hypnotics, but with the help of a mysterious figure whose

simulated body (his "sim") is a blank, with no features at all, she manages to get herself and !Xabbu out of Mister J's. Before she goes offline, the figure gives her some data in the form of a golden gem. Back (apparently) in World War I, Paul Jonas escapes from his squadron and makes a run for freedom through the dangerous no-man's-land between the lines. As rain falls and shells explode, Paul struggles through mud and corpses, only to find he has crossed over into some nether-region, stranger even than his castle dream flat, misty emptiness. A shimmering golden light appears, and Paul is drawn to it, but before he can step into its glow, his two friends from the trenches appear and demand that he return with them. Weary and confused, he is about to surrender, but as they come closer he sees that Finch and Mullet no longer appear even remotely human, and he flees into the golden light. In the twenty-first century, the oldest and perhaps richest man in the world is named Felix Jongleur. His physical body is all but dead, and he spends his days in a virtual Egypt he has built for himself, where he reigns over all as Osiris, the god of Life and Death. His chief servant, both in the virtual and real world, is a half-Aboriginal serial murderer who has named himself Dread, who combines a taste for hunting humans with a strange extrasensory ability to manipulate electronic circuitry that allows him to blank security cameras and otherwise avoid detection. Jongleur discovered Dread years before, helped to nurture the young man's power, and has made him his chief assassin. Jongleur Osiris is also the leader of a group of some of the world's most powerful and wealthy people, the Grail Brotherhood, who have built for themselves a virtual universe unlike any other the Grail Project, also called Otherland. (This latter name comes from an entity known as the "Other" which has some important involvement with the Grail Project network an artificial intelligence or something even stranger. This powerful force is largely in the control of Jongleur, but it is the only thing in the world that the old man fears.) The Grail Brotherhood are arguing among themselves, upset that the mysterious Grail Project is so slow to come to fruition. They have all invested billions in it, and waited a decade or more of their lives. Led by the American technology baron Robert Wells, they grow restive about Jongleur's leadership and his secrets, like the nature of the Other. Jongleur fights off a mutiny, and orders his minion Dread to prepare a neutralization mission against one of the Grail members who has already left the Brotherhood. Back in South Africa, Renie and her student !Xabbu are shaken by their narrow escape from the virtual nightclub known as Mister J's, and more certain than ever that there is some involvement between the club and her brother's coma. But when she examines the data-object the mysterious figure gave her, it opens into an amazingly realistic image of a golden city. Renie and !Xabbu seek the help of Renie's former professor, Dr. Susan Van Bleeck, but she is unable to solve the mystery of the city, or even tell for certain if it is an actual place. The doctor decides to contact someone else she knows for help, a researcher named Martine Desroubins. But even as Renie and the mysterious Martine make contact for the first time, Dr. Van Bleeck is attacked in her home and savagely beaten, and all her equipment destroyed. Renie rushes to the hospital, but after pointing Renie in the direction of a friend, Susan dies, leaving Renie both angry and terrified. Meanwhile Orlando Gardiner, the ill teenager in America, is hot in pursuit of the golden city that he saw while online, so much so that his friend Fredericks begins to worry about him. Orlando has always been odd he has a fascination with death-experience simulations that Fredericks can't understand but his current behavior seems excessive. When Orlando announces they are going to the famous hacker-node known as TreeHouse, Fredericks' worst fears are confirmed. TreeHouse is the last preserve of everything anarchic about the net, a place where no rules dictate what people can do or how they must appear. But although Orlando finds TreeHouse fascinating, and discovers some unlikely allies in the form of a group of hacker children named the Wicked Tribe (whose virtual guise is a troop of tiny winged yellow monkeys), his attempts to discover the origins of the golden-city vision arouse suspicion, and he and Fredericks are forced to flee. Meanwhile Renie and !Xabbu, with the help of Martine Desroubins, have also come to TreeHouse, in pursuit of an old, retired hacker named Singh, Susan Van Bleeck's friend. When they find him, he tells them that he is the last of a group of specialist programmers who built the security system for a mysterious network nicknamed "Otherland," and that his companions have been dying in mysterious circumstances. He is the last one alive. Renie, !Xabbu, Singh, and Martine decide they must break into the Otherland system to discover what secret is worth the lives of Singh's comrades and children like Renie's brother. Paul Jonas has escaped from his World War I trench only to find himself seemingly unstuck in time and space. Largely amnesiac, he wanders into a world where a White Queen and a Red Queen are in conflict, and finds himself pursued again by the Finch and Mullet figures. With the help of a boy named Gally and a long-winded, egg-shaped bishop, Paul escapes them, but his pursuers murder Gally's children friends. A huge creature called a Jabberwock provides a diversion, and Paul and Gally dive into a river. When they surface, the river is in a different world, a strange, almost

comical version of Mars, full of monsters and English gentleman-soldiers. Paul again meets the bird-woman from his castle dream, now named Vaala, but this time she is the prisoner of a Martian overlord. With the help of mad adventurer Hurley Brummond, Paul saves the woman. She recognizes Paul, too, but does not know why. When the Finch and Mullet figures appear again, she flees. Attempting to catch up to her, Paul crashes a stolen flying ship, sending himself and Gally to what seems certain doom. After a strange dream in which he is back in the cloud-castle, menaced by Finch and Mullet in their strangest forms yet, he wakes without Gally in the midst of the Ice Age, surrounded by Neandertal hunters. Meanwhile in South Africa, Renie and her companions are being hunted by mysterious strangers, and are forced to flee their home. With the help of Martine (whom they still know only as a voice) Renie, along with !Xabbu, her father, and Dr. Van Bleeck's assistant Jeremiah, find an old, mothballed robot-plane base in the Drakensberg Mountains. They renovate a pair of V-tanks (virtuality immersion vats) so Renie and !Xabbu can go online for an indefinite period, and prepare for their assault on Otherland. Back on the army base in America, little Christabel is convinced to help the burned and crippled Mr. Sellars with a complex plan that is only revealed as an escape attempt when he disappears from his house, setting the whole base (including Christabel's security chief father) on alert. Christabel has cut what seems an escape hole in the base's perimeter fence (with the help of a homeless boy from outside), but only she knows that Mr. Sellars is actually hiding in a network of tunnels beneath the base, free now to continue his mysterious "task." In the abandoned facility under the Drakensberg Mountains, Renie and her companions enter the tanks, go online, and break into Otherland. They survive a terrifying interaction with the Other which seems to be the network's security system, in which Singh dies of a heart attack, and find that the network is so incredibly realistic that at first they cannot believe it is a virtual environment. The experience is strange in many other ways. Martine has a body for the first time, !Xabbu has been given the form of a baboon, and most importantly, they can find no way to take themselves offline again. Renie and the others discover that they are in an artificial South American country. When they reach the golden city at the heart of it, the city they have been seeking so long, they are captured, and discover that they are the prisoners of Bolivar Atasco, a man involved with the Grail Brotherhood and with the building of the Otherland network from the start. Back in America, Orlando's friendship with Fredericks has survived the twin revelations that Orlando is dying of a rare premature-aging disease, and that Fredericks is in fact a girl. They are unexpectedly linked to Renie's hacker friend Singh by the Wicked Tribe just as Singh is opening his connection to the Grail network, and drawn through into Otherland. After their own horrifying encounter with the Other, Orlando and Fredericks also become Atasco's prisoners. But when they are brought to the great man, along with Renie's company and others, they find that it is not Atasco who has gathered them, but Mr. Sellars revealed now as the strange blank sim who helped Renie and !Xabbu escape from Mister J's. Sellars explains that he has lured them all here with the image of the golden city the most discreet method he could devise, because their enemies, the Grail Brotherhood, are so vastly powerful and remorseless. Sellars explains that Atasco and his wife were once members of the Brotherhood, but quit when their questions about the network were not answered. Sellars then tells how he discovered that the secret Otherland network has a mysterious but undeniable connection to the illness of thousands of children like Renie's brother Stephen. Before he can explain more, the sims of Atasco and his wife go rigid and Sellars' own sim disappears. In the real world, Jongleur's murderous minion Dread has begun his attack on the Atascos' fortified Colombian island home, and after breaking through the defenses, has killed both Atascos. He then uses his strange abilities his "twist" to tap into their data lines, discovers Sellars' meeting, and orders his assistant Dulcinea Anwin to take over the incoming line of one of the Atascos' guests the online group that includes Renie and her friends so he can take on the identity of that usurped guest, leaving Dread hidden as a spy in the midst of Renie and friends. Sellars reappears in the Atascos' virtual world and begs Renie and the others to flee into the network while he tries to hide their presence. They are to look for a man named Jonas, he tells them, a mysterious virtual prisoner Sellars has helped escape from the Brotherhood. Renie and company make their way onto the river and out of the Atascos' simulation, then through an electrical blue glow into the next simworld. Panicked and overwhelmed by too much input, Martine finally reveals her secret to Renie: she is blind. Their boat has become a giant leaf. Overhead, a dragonfly the size of a fighter jet skims into view. Back in the mountain fortress, in the real world, Jeremiah and Renie's father Long Joseph can only watch the silent V-tanks, wonder, and wait. OTHERLAND: River of Blue Fire Synopsis Paul Jonas still seems to be adrift in time and space. He has recovered most of his memory, but the last few years of his life remain a blank. He has no idea why he is being tossed from world to world, pursued by the two creatures he first knew as Finch and Mullet, and he

still does not know the identity of the mysterious woman he keeps encountering, and who has appeared to him even in dreams. He has survived a near-drowning only to find himself in the Ice Age, where he has fallen in with a tribe of Neandertals. The mystery woman appears to him in another dream, and tells him that to reach her he must find "a black mountain that reaches to the sky." Not all of the cave dwellers welcome the unusual stranger; one picks a quarrel that results in Paul being abandoned in the frozen wilderness. He survives an attack by giant cave hyenas, but falls into the icy river once more. Others are having just as difficult and painful a time as Paul, although they are better informed. Renie Sulaweyo originally had set out to solve the mystery of her brother Stephen's coma with her friend and former student !Xabbu, a Bushman from the Okavango Delta. With the help of a blind researcher named Martine Desroubins, they have found their way into Otherland, the world's biggest and strangest virtual reality network, constructed by a cabal of powerful men and women who call themselves the Grail Brotherhood. Summoned by the mysterious Mr. Sellars, Renie meets several others who have been affected by the Grail Brotherhood's machinations: Orlando Gardiner, a dying teenager, and his friend Sam Fredericks (who Orlando has only recently discovered is a girl), a woman named Florimel, a flamboyant character who calls himself Sweet William, a Chinese grandmother named Quan Li, and a sullen young man in futuristic armor who uses the handle T4b. But something has trapped them within the network, and the nine companions have been forced to flee from one virtual world to the next on a river of blue fire, a virtual path that leads through all the Otherland simulation worlds. The newest simworld is much like the real world, except that Renie and her companions are less than a hundredth of their normal size. They are menaced by the local insects, as well as larger creatures like fish and birds, and the members of the group become separated. Renie and !Xabbu are rescued by scientists who are using the simulation to study insect life from an unusual perspective. The scientists soon discover that, like Renie and !Xabbu, they are trapped online. Renie and !Xabbu meet a strange man named Kunohara, who owns the bug world simulation, but claims he is not part of the Grail Brotherhood. Kunohara poses a pair of cryptic riddles to them, then vanishes. When a horde of (relatively gigantic) army ants attacks the research station, most of the scientists are killed and Renie and !Xabbu barely escape from a monstrous praying mantis. As they flee back to the river in one of the researchers' aircraft, they see Orlando and Fredericks being swept down the river on a leaf. As they attempt to rescue them, Renie and !Xabbu are pulled through the river gateway with them, but the two groups wind up in different simulations. Meanwhile, in the real world outside the network, other people are being drawn into the widening Otherland mystery. Olga Pirofsky, the host of a children's net show, begins to suffer from terrible headaches. She suspects that her online activities might have something to do with it, and in the course of investigating her problem, begins to learn of the apparently net-related illness that has struck so many children (including Renie's brother). Olga's research also draws the attention of a lawyer named Catur Ramsey, who is investigating the illness on behalf of the parents both of Orlando and Fredericks, since in the real world both teenagers have been in a coma ever since their entrance into the Otherland network. John Wulgaru, who calls himself Dread, and whose hobbies include serial murder, has been an effective if not one hundred percent loyal employee of the incredibly wealthy Felix Jongleur, the man who heads the Grail Brotherhood (and who spends most of his time in his Egyptian simulation, wearing the guise of the god Osiris). But in the course of killing an ex-member of the Brotherhood at Jongleur's orders, Dread has discovered the existence of the Otherland network, and has even taken over one of the sims in Renie's marooned company. As his master Jongleur is caught up in the final arrangements for the Otherland network whose true purpose is still known only to the Brotherhood, Dread busies himself with this new and fascinating puzzle. As a spy among Sellars' recruits, Dread is now traveling through the net-work and trying to discover its secrets. But unlike those in Sellars' ragtag group, Dread's life is not at risk: he can go offline whenever he wishes. He recruits a software specialist named Dulcie Anwin to help him run the puppet sim. Dulcie is fascinated by her boss, but unsettled by him, too, and begins to wonder if she is in deeper than she wants to be. Meanwhile, a bit of Dread's past has surfaced. In Australia, a detective named Calliope Skouros is trying to solve a seemingly unexceptional murder. Some of the terrible things done to the victim's body are reminiscent of an Aboriginal myth-creature, the Woolagaroo. Detective Skouros becomes convinced that there is some strange relationship between Aboriginal myths and the young woman's death she is investigating. Back in the Otherland network, Renie and !Xabbu find themselves in a weird, upside-down version of the Oz story, set in the dreary Kansas of the original tale's opening. The Otherland simulations seem to be breaking down, or at least growing increasingly chaotic. As Renie and !Xabbu try to escape the evil of Lion and Tinman who seem to be two more versions of Paul Jonas' Finch and Mullet, they find a pair

of unlikely allies, the young and naive Emily 22813 and a laconic Gypsy named Azador. Emily later reveals that she is pregnant, and says Azador is the father. Separated from Azador during one of the increasingly frequent "system spasms," they escape Kansas, but to their surprise, Emily (who they had thought was software) travels with them to the next simulation. Orlando and Fredericks have landed in a very strange world, a kitchen out of an ancient cartoon, populated by creatures sprung from package labels and silverware drawers. They help a cartoon Indian brave search for his stolen child, and after battling cartoon pirates and meeting both a prophetic sleeping woman and an inexplicable force entities that are really Paul Jonas' mystery woman and the network's apparently sentient operating system, known as the Other they escape the Kitchen and land in a simulation that seems to be ancient Egypt. Meanwhile, their former companions, the blind woman Martine and the rest of the Sellars' recruits, have hiked out of the bug world to discover themselves in a simulation where the river is made not of water but air, and where the primitive inhabitants fly on wind currents and live in caves along vertical cliffs. Martine and the others name the place Aerodromia, and although they are nervous about trying it at first, they soon discover that they can fly, too.

A group of natives invite them to stay in the tribal camp. Paul Jonas has passed from the Ice Age into something much different. At first, seeing familiar London sights, he believes he has finally found his way home, but soon comes to realize that he is instead traveling through an England almost completely destroyed by Martian attack. It is, in fact, the setting of H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*. Paul now realizes that he is traveling not just to worlds separate in time and space, but to some that are actually fictitious. He meets a strange husband and wife called the Pankies, who seem to be another guise of his pursuers Finch and Mullet, but offer him no harm. (Paul is also being pursued by a special software program called the Nemesis device, but he is not yet aware of it.) Then, when Paul and the Pankies stop at Hampton Court, Paul is led into the maze by a strange man and then shoved through a gateway of glowing light at the maze's center. On the other side Paul finds himself in the setting of Coleridge's famous poem, *Xanadu*, and the man who brought him there introduces himself as Nandi Paradvash. Nandi is a member of a group named the Circle, who are working against the Grail Brotherhood. Paul finally learns that he is not insane, nor caught in some kind of dimensional warp, but is rather a prisoner in an incredibly realistic simulation network. But Nandi has no idea why the Brotherhood should be interested enough in Paul who worked in a museum and remembers his other life as being very ordinary to pursue him throughout Otherland. Nandi also reveals that all the simulations through which Paul has been traveling belong to one man Felix Jongleur, the Grail Brotherhood's chairman. Before Nandi can tell him more, they are forced to separate, Nandi pursued by Kublai Khan's troops, Paul passing through another gateway into yet another simworld. Things are no less complex and confusing in the real world. Renie's and Xabbu's physical bodies are in special virtual reality tanks in an abandoned South African military base, watched over by Jeremiah Dako and Renie's father, Long Joseph Sulaweyo. Long Joseph, bored and depressed, sneaks out of the base to go see Renie's brother Stephen, who remains comatose in a Durban hospital, leaving Jeremiah alone inside the base. But when Joseph arrives at the hospital, he is kidnapped at gunpoint and forced into a car. The mysterious Mr. Sellars lives on a military base, too, but his is in America. Christabel Sorensen is a little girl whose father is in charge of base security, and who, despite her youth, has helped her friend Sellars escape the house arrest her father and others have kept him in for years. Sellars is hiding in old tunnels under the base, his only companion the street urchin Cho-Cho. Christabel does not like the boy at all. She worries for the feeble Mr. Sellars' safety, and is torn by guilt for doing something she knows would make her mother and father angry. But when her mother discovers her talking with Sellars through specially modified sunglasses, Christabel is finally in real trouble. Martine, Florimel, Quan Li, Sweet William, and T4b have been enjoying the flying world, Aerodromia, but things get uncomfortable when a young girl from the tribe is kidnapped. Martine and the rest don't know it, but the girl has been stolen, terrorized, and murdered by Dread, still pretending to be one of Martine's four companions. The people of Aerodromia blame the newcomers for the disappearance, and dump them all into a labyrinth of caverns they call the Place of the Lost, where they find themselves surrounded by mysterious, ghostly presences which Martine, with her heightened nonvisual senses, finds particularly upsetting. The phantoms speak in unison, telling of the "One who is Other," and how he has deserted them instead of taking them across the "White Ocean," as promised. The voices also identify the real names of all Martine's company. The group is fascinated and frightened, and only belatedly realizes that Sweet William has disappeared evidently to protect the guilty secret of his true identity. Something large and strange the Other abruptly enters the darkened Place of the Lost, and Martine and the others flee the horrifying presence. Martine searches desperately for one of the gateways that will allow them to leave the

simulation before either the Other or the renegade Sweet William catches them. At the same time, Orlando and Fredericks discover that the Egyptian simulation is not a straightforward historical recreation, but a mythical version. They meet a wolf-headed god named Upaut, who tells them how he and the whole simworld have been mistreated by the chief god, Osiris. Unfortunately, Upaut is not a very bright or stable god, and he interprets Orlando mumbling in his sleep as the result of a dream-conversation Orlando is having with his software agent, Beezle Bug, who can only reach him from the real world when he dreams as a divine directive for him to try to overthrow Osiris. Upaut steals their sword and boat, leaving Orlando and Fredericks stranded in the desert. After many days of hiking along the Nile, they come upon a strange temple filled with some terrible, compelling presence. They cannot escape it. In a dream, Orlando is visited by the mystery woman also seen by Paul Jonas, and she tells them she will give them assistance, but as the temple draws them closer and closer, they find only the Wicked Tribe, a group of very young children they had met outside the network, who wear the sim-forms of tiny yellow flying monkeys. Orlando is stunned that this is the help the mystery woman has brought them. The frightening temple continues to draw them nearer. Paul Jonas has passed from Xanadu to late-sixteenth-century Venice, and soon stumbles into Gally, a boy he had met in one of the earlier simulations, and who had traveled with him, but Gally does not remember Paul. Seeking help, the boy brings him to a woman named Eleanora; although she cannot explain Gally's missing memories, she reveals that she herself is the former real-world mistress of an organized crime figure who built her this virtual Venice as a gift. Her lover was a member of the Grail Brotherhood, but died too soon to benefit from the immortality machinery they are building, and survives now only as a set of flawed life-recordings. Before Paul can learn more, he discovers that the dreadful Finch and Mullet the Twins, as Nandi named them, have tracked him to Venice: he must flee again, this time with Gally. But before they can reach the gateway that will allow them to escape, they are caught by the Twins. The Pankies also make an appearance, and for a moment the two mirror-pairs face each other, but the Pankies quickly depart, leaving Paul alone to fight the Twins. Gally is killed, and Paul barely escapes with his life. Still trying to fulfill the mystery woman's summons from his Ice Age dream, he travels to a simulation of ancient Ithaca to meet someone called "the weaver." Still shocked and saddened by Gally's death, he learns that in this new simulation he is the famous Greek hero Odysseus, and that the weaver is the hero's wife, Penelope the mystery woman, again. But at least it seems he will finally get some answers.

Renie and !Xabbu and Emily find that they have escaped Kansas for something much more confusing a world that does not seem entirely finished, a place with no sun, moon, or weather. They have also inadvertently taken an object from Azador that looks like an ordinary cigarette lighter, but is in fact an access device, a sort of key to the Otherland network, stolen from one of the Grail Brotherhood (General Daniel Yacoubian, one of Jongleur's rivals for leadership). While studying the device in the hopes of making it work, !Xabbu manages to open a transmission channel and discovers Martine on the other end, trapped in the Place of the Lost and desperately trying to open a gateway. Together they manage to create a passage for Martine and her party, but when they arrive, believing they are being pursued by a murderous Sweet William, they find that it is William himself who has been fatally injured, and grandmotherly Quan Li who is really the murderer Dread in virtual disguise. His secret revealed, Dread escapes with the access device, leaving Renie and the others stranded, perhaps forever, in this disturbing place.

OTHERLAND: Mountain of Black Glass

Synopsis

Renie Sulaweyo, her Bushman friend !Xabbu, and several more of the volunteers recruited by the strange Mr. Sellars have been reunited in the weirdest part of the Grail network they have yet discovered: a world that seems somehow unfinished. They are stranded there because the murderer named Dread, who was masquerading as one of their company, has taken the access device: a virtual object that appears to be a cigarette lighter that they have been using to travel between simulated worlds. While they try to discover a way out, two of the more mysterious members of their company, Florimel and T4b, finally explain their backgrounds. Florimel is an escapee from a German religious cult, and has come to the network because her daughter is one of the children (like Renie's brother Stephen) who has fallen into one of the mysterious Tandagore's Syndrome comas. T4b, whose real name is Javier Rodgers, is a former street kid and gang member, now living with his grandparents. A young friend of his has also fallen prey to a coma. Renie and the others find the unfinished world in which they are marooned increasingly uncomfortable. At one point, they see something that looks just like !Xabbu's baboon sim, but isn't. When a huge hole suddenly opens right in the middle of the ground, almost swallowing the blind woman Martine and somehow obliterating one of T4b's virtual hands, they decide they must escape immediately. Martine, !Xabbu, and Renie, working together, manage to open a gateway even without the lighter. After they step through the gateway, following

in Dread's virtual tracks, the search-and-destroy program named Nemesis, which was put into the network to locate another fugitive, Paul Jonas, tries to decide whether to follow them or not. It is confused there are things happening on the network that interfere with the original clarity of its programmed drives, anomalies that are making it do strange, unprecedented things. The amnesiac fugitive Paul Jonas is living out a version of the Odyssey in which he is Odysseus, returned to his home island of Ithaca after the Trojan War. But Penelope, the wife of Odysseus (who also appears to be yet another incarnation of the mysterious woman Paul thinks of as "the Angel") does not seem to be playing by the same set of rules. In an effort to shake her up and get some answers another incarnation of the Angel has told him that the Penelope-version will tell him how to find the "black mountain" he must reach he performs an invocation of what he thinks is Hades, the death god of ancient Greece. Instead, he summons the Angel herself, confronting Penelope with a near-twin. Next, a new force answers his invocation not Hades, but the Other, the dark intelligence behind the Grail network. Terrified, Paul flees onto the ocean, but his boat is destroyed. Meanwhile, Orlando Gardiner and his friend Sam Fredericks are in a simulation of ancient Egypt a simworld that is the one place on the network that Felix Jongleur, the world's oldest man and master of the Grail Brotherhood, considers his home. They have been hidden from Jongleur's subordinates by a woman named Bonnie Mae Simpkins, who is a member of a group called the Circle. She tells them how her husband and many other Circle members have been killed trying to penetrate the mysteries of the Grail network. Now the last few members in Egypt are besieged in a temple. Bonnie Mae recruits the god Bes to lead her and Orlando and Fredericks there, hoping that her Circle friends can help the two teenagers escape Egypt through an activated gateway. People offline are just as involved in these events as those trapped on the network. Catur Ramsey, a lawyer who works for Sam Fredericks' parents, finds himself drawn deeper and deeper into the Otherland mystery. With the help of Orlando's software agent, a cartoon bug named Beezle, Ramsey follows the online trail of the two comatose teenagers. A Canadian woman named Olga Pirofsky that he contacts, who works for one of Jongleur's many companies, has also become involved. What started for her as troubling headaches have now become dream-visitations by mysterious children. Olga fears she might be going mad. In North Carolina, the little girl Christabel Sorensen, who helped Sellars escape and hide under the military base where they both live, has been caught by her security chief father, Major Sorensen. Sellars uses the little homeless boy Cho-Cho to ask Christabel to arrange a conversation with her parents. Sellars tells and shows Christabel's parents enough to convince them to help him escape the base entirely. With Sellars hidden in the back of their van, and Cho-Cho pretending to be Christabel's cousin, they all set out for a rendezvous with Catur Ramsey, who has also been contacted by Sellars. Back in the Otherland network, Renie, !Xabbu, and the others have come through their jury-rigged gateway, following Dread's trail into a mysterious simworld known only as the House. They quickly discover it's called that because the world is nothing but a house an endless collection of halls and rooms, with separate civilizations living only floors apart from each other. They are assisted in their queries by a brotherhood of monks who maintain the House's monstrous library, but Martine is kidnapped by Dread, and with the aid of one of the monks they set out in search of her and the murderer. Someone else searching for the murderer Dread although in the real world, not the virtual is Calliope Skouros, an Australian homicide detective. In the course of investigating one of Dread's earliest killings, she begins to find out just what a strange and unpredictable killer he is. Although Dread also known by his birth-name, John Vulgaruis listed as dead in police records, Calliope begins to suspect that he is alive. Dread is not only alive, but has returned to Sydney, setting up operations only miles from Detective Skouros. He has brought the American programmer Dulcie Anwin to Australia to help him make sense of the Otherland network, whose existence he discovered while eliminating one of Felix Jongleur's Grail Brotherhood rivals. Dulcie finds herself strangely attracted to Dread she knows he is a criminal, but has no idea of his true proclivities and Dread is more than willing to use that attraction for his own benefit. He has big plans for the network, and plans to use his experience there as a basis for overthrowing his employer, Jongleur. He sets Dulcie up in a loft and puts her to work. In South Africa, Renie's father Long Joseph Sulaweyo and friend Jeremiah Dako have been guarding her and !Xabbu while they lie helpless in the V-tanks they have used for long-term access to the network. But Long Joseph, cut off from drink, miserable, and distracted, left the abandoned army base to head for Durban and was kidnapped outside the hospital where his son Stephen lies comatose. The kidnapper turns out to be Renie's ex-boyfriend Del Ray, whose own life has been ruined by the help he gave Renie. He is desperate to find Renie so he can get a group of thugs (whom Dread hired on behalf of Jongleur) off his back. But when Joseph and Del Ray leave the hospital after going back to see Joseph's son, they are trailed by a mysterious black van. Then, when they

return to the army base dug deep into one of the Drakensberg mountains, they find the thugs are there ahead of them. Joseph and Del Ray sneak into the base through the air duct Joseph used in his escape. Inside the base, Jeremiah has been contacted by Mr. Sellars, who wants to help them, but things do not look good. All but weaponless themselves, they are now besieged by heavily-armed killers. Shipwrecked Paul Jonas is bound for Troy, which means he is living out the Odyssey more or less backward. After getting help building a raft and other sorts of solace from a hospitable goddess, he puts to sea again. He survives the attack of the monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis, then finds another survivor floating unconscious in the waves. The stranger turns out to be Azador, a mysterious Gypsy who had traveled earlier with Renie and !Xabbu and the strange girl Emily from the Oz simulation, and from whom Renie accidentally took the access device lighter. Together, Paul and Azador defeat a dangerous cyclops and land on the island of Lotos, where they fall under the spell of the narcotic flowers. The Angel awakens Paul and helps them escape, but only after a hallucinating Azador has told Paul that he too is being pursued by the Grail Brotherhood, that he has escaped from their immortality machines, but many of his Gypsy kin have not. Free of Lotos, they sail on to Troy. In the House-world, Renie and her companions have had little luck finding the kidnapped Martine (who is being psychologically tortured by Dread) and have themselves been captured by one of the tribes who make the House's attic their home. To their surprise, they find Hideki Kunohara sharing the robbers' revelries. Kunohara, one of the landlords of the Grail network, whose own giant world of insects they had crossed earlier, seems bemused to see them, but intercedes for them with the robbers. Paul Jonas' Angel appears to them all in a supernatural fashion, frightening away the robbers and alarming even Kunohara, who refuses to help Renie and the others any more than he already has, saying that he cannot risk the displeasure of the powerful Grail Brotherhood. Renie and her companions at last find Martine, but only after !Xabbu has disappeared while searching for her (his baboon sim a more useful form for exploring the rooftops of the House). But Martine is not alone: Dread has prepared a trap for them. When they open the door, he shoots T4b and Florimel, then battles with Renie across a steep rooftop. Just when it seems he has won, !Xabbu returns, and then Florimel finds one of Dread's discarded guns. As Dread prepares to kill Renie, Florimel shoots him. He dies but only online, leaving the stolen virtual body behind. For the moment Dread has been pushed out of the Grail network, and Renie and her companions are battered but safe. Ancient arch-mogul Felix Jongleur has been very busy preparing for the Ceremony the moment at which the members of the Grail Brotherhood will become immortal within the virtual worlds they have built for themselves. He has not been spending much time in his favorite mythical-Egypt simulation, and does not realize how far out of hand things have become there. His servants Tefy and Mewa the Egyptian versions of his subordinates Finney and Mudd, who have been chasing Paul Jonas all through the network are now forced to besiege a temple full of people resisting their cruel reign. Inside the besieged temple, Orlando Gardiner and Sam Fredericks meet other members of the Circle, including Nandi Paradivash, a specialist who is trying to make sense of the network's dying gateway system. There is something very wrong with the Grail network. Its mysterious operating system, the Other, is acting in a peculiar fashion, and many of the simworlds seem to be falling apart. Tefy and Mewa attack the temple, first bringing in a trio of rogue Egyptian gods to fight with the temple's two sphinx-guardians, then sending in a horde of tortoise men and flying snakes to finish the job. Orlando fights bravely, but cannot keep Sam from being captured by Tefy and Mewa. The unpleasant pair have recognized the teenagers as real people from outside the network, and are about to take them away to be tortured when Jongleur himself returns in the form of Osiris, chief god of Egypt. In the chaos, Orlando and Fredericks escape through one of the gateways Nandi has opened, out of Egypt and into Troy, where they have been urged to go by another incarnation of Paul Jonas' Angel. Paul has already made his way to Troy, whereas Odysseus fits right in with the Greeks besieging the city. But when he is sent to the tent where the hero Achilles and his friend Patroclus wait, unwilling to fight against the Trojans, he decides something about the two doesn't seem to fit the simulation. After much sparring, he reveals his true name to them. Achilles and Patroclus are in fact Orlando and Sam, who recognize the name "Jonas" from something Sellars had told them. The meeting becomes a happy one, although Paul's spirits sag a little when he learns the two teenagers are in just as much trouble, and are just as lost, as he is. Renie and the others use the lighter recaptured from Dread to leave the House and go to Troy. Unlike Orlando and Paul, when they enter the simulation they are assigned to the Trojan side in the besieged city, aware that their friends may be outside the gates, but with no way to recognize them. They are quickly sent on a deadly raid against the Greeks. Paul Jonas has a dream in which the Angel appears to him again and tells him to go outside the camp. He meets Renie and the others. They talk for a long time, comparing stories, trying to

make sense of what they have learned. Paul decides to bring them back to the Greek settlement in the guise of prisoners so they can be reunited with Orlando and Sam, but even as they reach the camp the Trojans launch a frightening attack. Caught in the middle of a fierce battle, cut off from Orlando and Sam, they can only struggle to stay alive. In the meantime, Sam, in a misguided effort to keep up the morale of Achilles' despairing troop and buy the sick Orlando some time to get better, dresses herself in the famous armor of Achilles and, masquerading as their chieftain, leads Achilles' soldiers out to fight the Trojans. The masquerade is so successful that the Trojans are driven back toward the walls of Troy. Orlando wakes to find himself alone. When he realizes what has happened, he scavenges armor and weapons and sets out across the plain toward the city, despite his own fast-failing health, desperate to save his friend Sam. He discovers her about to be killed by the Trojan hero Hector, and only barely manages to overcome him, then collapses in front of the walls. Martine, who has been given a role as one of the Trojan royal family, is desperate to keep her friends alive. Hearing of the fighting in front of the walls, she nearly tricks some Trojan guards into opening the gates, but when they balk, she is forced to order T4b to kill the guard captain. The gates are opened, and to Martine's shame the Greeks come roaring into Troy, burning, raping, and killing. Although she and the others are all reunited, and even though the Trojans being killed are merely programs, she feels she has done a terrible thing. Meanwhile, the Grail Brotherhood have begun their Ceremony, although Jongleur is irritated by the absence of his employee, Dread. Jongleur and technocrat Robert Wells explain to the concerned Grail members that they will not truly transfer their minds directly to the network. Instead, duplicate versions of themselves, virtual minds which have been made to copy every detail in the original minds, will come to life online but in order to assure that only one version of each Brotherhood member exists, they must kill off their physical bodies. Because they are not aware that Jongleur, Wells, the financier Jiun Bhao, and American military man Daniel Yacoubian are not actually going through with the Ceremony this time because they want to see how well the process works, these four will only pretend to awaken their virtual bodies and murder their real physical selves. The other members of the Brotherhood are at last convinced. But Dread has other plans for the Grail network. He has decided to force his way back onto the network, and with the help of Dulcie Anwin and a copy he has made of the access device lighter, he tries to enter the system. He is resisted with terrible force by the security systems of the Other, but in the course of their battle Dread employing his own telekinetic talent, which he calls his "twist" Dread discovers that the network has mechanisms to inflict something like pain on the Other, mechanisms which the Grail Brotherhood has used to force the intelligent operating system to do their will. Dread uses this pain to bludgeon the Other into retreat. Victorious, Dread can now influence and even direct the entire Grail network. Renie, Paul, Xabbu, and the others fight their way across the dying city. When Paul meets Emily, a longtime companion of Renie and the others, he is stunned to recognize her as another version of the Angel. A name suddenly comes back to him "Avialle" and he is overwhelmed by returning memories. Suddenly he can remember being hired by Felix Jongleur to work as a tutor in Jongleur's huge office-tower home in Louisiana. And he also recalls his first meeting with his pupil Jongleur's daughter, Avialle Jongleur. But he can remember no more. Despite apparently being followed by someone, they enter an abandoned temple and make their way to an altar at the center of a maze, where the Angel appears to them again and tells them they are too late that she no longer has the strength to take them to where the Other wishes them to go. Paul offers her anything she needs, but does not expect what happens next. The Angel takes the life-force from Emily, who was only some kind of copy of herself, and then opens a gateway. When they go through, Paul and Renie and the others find themselves on a trail on the side of a bizarre and not-quite-real black mountain. They trek to the top, where they find a bound giant lying in a wide valley. The giant is in terrible pain, but is singing a song about an angel. Martine recognizes the song. It was sung to her by the mysterious child in the Pestalozzi Institute, thirty years before, on the day she lost her sight. The suffering giant does not harm them, but opens a window through which Paul and Renie and the others can see the virtual Egyptian temple where Jongleur and the rest of the Brotherhood are beginning the Ceremony. Some Brotherhood members are still reluctant, but one of their number, a man named Ricardo Klement, undergoes the process and seems to be born satisfactorily into his new, young, virtual body. The others gleefully perform the Ceremony to kill off their physical bodies and resurrect themselves online, but although their physical selves do die, the virtual bodies remain uninhabited. Jongleur and the rest are spared because they have not undergone the Ceremony, but they are stunned and terrified. Something has gone very wrong. Orlando, whose own physical body is also dying, can watch no more. He steps through the window and into the temple, where he confronts Jongleur and the other three Grail survivors. Sam and Renie follow to try to save him, and Renie tries to

bluff Jongleur with the lighter that Yacoubian recognizes as his own stolen access device, which he has since replaced. Yacoubian, in Egyptian god-form, attacks Orlando. The Grail system, already under a strain, now seems to begin to fall apart. The temple in Egypt and the top of the black mountain begin to merge.

Simultaneously, the giant begins to writhe and bellow in pain it is being attacked by something. A moment later, in the middle of all this chaos, it becomes clear that the attacker is Dread, who is trying to take control of the system from the Other. Paul's Angel appears, weeping, as reality breaks down altogether. With the help of T4b, Orlando appears to kill the monstrous Yacoubian, but Orlando himself has used up his strength, and is smashed beneath Yacoubian's giant form when he falls. The hand of the giant rises and then falls down on top of Renie, !Xabbu, Sam, Orlando, and others. They disappear. Then the reality of the top of the black mountain turns inside out again. Martine, sensitive to the network in ways the others can't quite understand, screams that the children are in pain, dying. Paul is overcome and blacks out. Afterward, Renie wakes up to discover that she no longer wears the sim she had chosen, but seems to be in her own body again. !Xabbu has also shed his baboon form for his own real shape, as has young, female Sam Fredericks, who no longer appears to be a man. But they are not back in the real world. They are still stuck on the now-empty black mountaintop. The suffering giant has vanished. All their other companions are gone. Only Orlando Gardiner's dead body, still wearing the Achilles sim, remains. But others are on the mountain, even if their friends are not. Felix Jongleur appears, wearing the body of a middle-aged man, accompanied by Ricardo Klement, who, although he has survived the Ceremony, appears to be brain damaged. After Dread's conquest of the operating system, Jongleur too is trapped in the network. He acknowledges that Renie and her friends have every reason to want to attack him, but suggests that they are better off making common cause. He leads them to the edge of the black mountain and points down. They are miles high, in the middle of nothing. They cannot see the bottom of the mountain, or any ground at all, because everything below them is hidden in a strange, silver cloud. This is no part of the network he created, Jongleur assures them. Reprinted from OTHERLAND: Final Volume: SEA OF SILVER LIGHT by Tad Williams by permission of DAW, a member of Penguin Putnam Inc. Copyright 2002, Tad Williams. All rights reserved. This excerpt, or any parts thereof, may not be reproduced in any form without permission.