**The Happiest Dead Boy in the World**

Tad Williams

Tharagorn the Ranger was deep in conversation with Elrond Half-elven in the quiet shadows of the Hall of Fire. The man of the west had just returned from roaming through the world, and he and the elven lord had not spoken together in a long time. Things of moment were in their minds, not least of which a sudden rash of goblin raids near the Misty Mountains. Thus it was that the elven messenger, with the graceful diffidence of his kind, waited for some long moments in the doorway before either of them noticed him.

“A visitor is here who wishes to speak to Tharagorn,” the elf replied to Elrond’s question. “It seems to be a halfling.”

“Yeah, that would be me.” The voice was louder and, it had to be said, a bit less cultured than what was normally to be heard in the Last Homely House. The figure in the doorway was half the size of anyone else present, his feet covered in hair so thick and matted he appeared to be standing ankle-deep in the corpses of two small mountain goats. “Bongo Fluffernutter, at your service,” he said with a sweeping bow. “Nice place you got here, Elrond. Love the old-world craftsmanship. Tharagorn, can you spare a second?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Beezle,” the ranger said under his breath. “I am truly sorry,” he told the master of the house. “Will you excuse me for a moment?”

“Of course.” Elrond looked a little puzzled, although the simulation was adept at incorporating or simply ignoring anomalies. “Is it really a halfling? We have not seen such a one, I think, since Gandalf brought his friend Bilbo Baggins to us from the Shire some years ago.”

“Yes, well, this . . . this is a different sort of hobbit.” Tharagorn lowered his voice. “A less successful branch of the species, if you get my drift.”

“Hey! I heard that!”

Elrond and the messenger withdrew, leaving Tharagorn, also known as Orlando Gardiner, alone in the high-raftered hall with his small, shabby visitor.

“Beezle, what the hell are you doing?”

“Don’t blame me, boss, you’re the one who said I couldn’t show up here unless I was in character.” He lifted a foot and admired it. “Whaddaya think? Nice pelt, huh?”

“Bongo Fluffernutter?”

“Isn’t that the kind of name they all have? Jeez, I’ve only got so much room for Tolkien trivia, y’know.”

Orlando stared at the pint-sized horror in front of him. Whether it was a better fit with the simulation than Beezle Bug’s normal, multilegged, cartoonish appearance was open to debate, but there was no doubt he was looking at the world’s ugliest hobbit. Orlando was beginning to suspect the software agent’s sense of humor had moved on a bit beyond what was covered by the original warranty. Maybe he’d given Beezle a bit too much freedom over the years for self-programming off the net.

“I mean, really,” Beezle said, “look at which pot’s calling which kettle black, boss—Tharagorn?Tharagorn? Are you just waiting around here for the Return of the Thking or something?”

“Ha ha. Oh, you’re one funny piece of code. I picked it because it sounds like Thargor.” Who had been, of course, Orlando’s online avatar for most of his childhood, the brawny barbarian swordsman who had conquered so many gameworlds back in the old days, when Orlando Gardiner had still had a real world to return to at the end of the adventure. Not that he wasn’t a little embarrassed by it all now. “Look, I wanted something easy to remember. Do you know how many names I have on this network?” He realized that he was justifying himself to an entity that had once been a birthday present, and not even the most expensive present he had received that year. “What was it you wanted, anyway?”

“Just to do my job, boss.” Beezle actually sounded hurt. “I’m just serving as a furry-footed link to your busy social calendar. We already talked about dinner with your folks, so I know you remember that. You know you’ve got Fredericks scheduled in first, right?”

“Yeah. She’s meeting me here.”

“Oh, good, I’m sure that’ll be fun for everyone. May I recommend the Hall of Endless Nostalgic Singing? Or perhaps the Silvery Giggling Lounge?”

“Your sarcasm is noted.” It wasn’t as though Orlando didn’t harbor occasional less-than-reverent thoughts about the Tolkien world himself, but it was still the closest thing he had to a home, after all. Back in the beginning of his full-time life on the network, when Orlando was overwhelmed by all that had happened to him, Middle-Earth—and Rivendell in particular—had been a blessed haven for him, a familiar, much-loved place where he could relax and heal and come to terms with his responsibilities and even with the possibilities of immortality, a subject that surrounded him on every side in Elrond’s ancient residence.

“By the way, tonight’s also the first Friday of the month in Wodehouse World,” Beezle went on. “Did you remember that too?”

“Oh,fenfen . No, I forgot. How long do I have?”

“Meeting’s in about three hours.”

“Thanks. I’ll be there.” But Beezle just stood, waiting expectantly, forcing Orlando to ask, “What is it now?”

“Well, if I have to stay in character and walk out of this overgrown bed-and-breakfast and all the way across the bridge just so I can leave the simulation, you could at least say, ‘Fare thee well, Bongo Fluffernutter!’ or something.”

Orlando glowered. “You’re joking.”

“It’s only polite.”

“Fenfen.” But Beezle showed no signs of leaving without it. “Chizz, then. Fare thee well, Bongo Fluffernutter.”

“Don’t forget, ‘And may your toes grow ever more curly.’ ”

“Just get out of here.”

“Okay. Fare thee well, also, Tharagorn, Cuddler of Elves.”

It turned out Beezle could move quickly on those furry feet when he had to.

Sam Fredericks was almost an hour late, but that was all right: guests could get something to eat and drink at pretty much all hours in Rivendell if they didn’t mind the limited menu. The people who had programmed this simworld years ago—a team from the Netherlands, as Orlando had discovered—had stuck to the original very carefully. There was no specific mention in the books of meat being served in Imladris, the elven name for Elrond’s sumptuous house, so what the kitchen offered was pretty much limited to bread, honey, fruit, vegetables, and dairy products. Orlando, who had spent a lot of time in the Tolkien simulation during his early days living in the network, could remember more than a few times when he would have been willing to crawl to Mordor for some pepperoni.

When she showed up, she looked exactly the same as she had on her last visit, dressed in the manner of a male elf, her coffee-and-cream skin radiant, her frizzy hair a glorious confusion held only by a cloth band that made her look slightly piratical. She and Orlando hugged. Sam let go first.

“Something to eat?”

“I’m not really hungry,” she said. “You go ahead if you want to.”

“Sam, the food here won’t fill you up, and I don’t need to eat at all. It’s just social.” He led her onto one of the covered balconies instead. They could hear the river ringing in the valley below them, although the lanterns of Rivendell only illuminated the tops of the trees.

Sam slid onto a bench. Orlando sat down beside her and stretched his long legs. That was one of the holdovers from his illness that even he recognized: he was never going to be in a sick or crippled body again if he could avoid it. “So, you,” he asked. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. How are you?”

“Oh, you know. Getting around, keeping an eye on things. This whole job has turned out a lot different than I expected. When I first agreed to be the sort of head park ranger, I thought I’d be, I don’t know, stopping wars or something.”

Sam smiled. “Like Superman?”

“Or God, yeah. I try not to limit my ambitions.” He waited; Sam’s laugh was a little late. “But since Sellars and Kunohara convinced all the others to let it go free-range, I’m kind of more like an anthropologist or something.” Patrick Sellars had brought together the group of people who had prevented the network from being used for its original purpose, which had been to give immortality within its confines to the Grail Brotherhood, a group of people as unpleasant as they were rich. Kunohara, a former minor member of the Grail who had turned against them, had joined Sellars at the end in saving the network—and in essence, saving the lives of all the network’s complex sims, as well as Orlando himself, who had been copied into the network before his physical death and now existed only as information. Sellars, too, had soon after left his dying body behind to take up existence on the Otherland network, but unlike Orlando, his move had been voluntary.

“Anthropologist?” Sam prompted.

“Yeah, well, except for fixing obvious code errors, which don’t happen much, I mostly make a lot of reports and keep an eye on the interesting, unexpected stuff. But since Sellars is gone now and Kunohara’s so majorly busy, I kind of wonder who I’m making reports for.”

“The rest of us, I guess. And other people who might study it someday.” Sam shrugged. “Do you miss him? Sellars?”

“Yeah. I can’t say we were utterly friends or anything, not like you and me.” He hoped to see her smile, but she only nodded. “He was just too . . . something. Old. Smart. But I liked him a lot once I got to know him. And he was the only person who lived here with me, Sam. I knew he wasn’t going to be around forever—that he was tired, that he wanted to follow those information-people out into the great whatever. But I sort of thought we’d get to have him for a few more years.” He was playing it down, of course, for Sam’s benefit. It had been even more devastating than he had expected when Sellars moved on: Orlando had felt deserted, bereft. After all, the crippled ex-pilot had been the only other person in the universe truly to understand the strangeness of knowing you were alive only on a network, that your real body was ashes now, that most of the people who had known you thought you were dead . . . and were more or less right.

Also, Sellars had been a kind person, and—either because of or despite his own suffering—a good listener. He had been one of the only people who ever saw Orlando Gardiner cry. That had been back in the earliest days of living on the network, of course. Orlando didn’t cry anymore. He didn’t have the time for things like that.

Sam and Orlando sat on the Rivendell balcony another half an hour, talking about all manner of things, even sharing a few jokes, but there continued to be something awkward in his friend’s behavior. It touched Orlando with something he so much did not expect to feel around Sam Fredericks that it took him long minutes to recognize it as fear: he was almost terrified by the idea that she might not want to be here with him, that their friendship had finally become no more than an obligation.

They had wandered back to the subject of the network. To his surprise, she seemed to think he was the one who needed cheering up. “It’s still an amazing job you have—the ranger for a whole universe. All those worlds, your responsibility.”

“Three hundred and ninety-eight at the moment, but a few others have just temporarily collapsed and they’ll cycle back on again. That’s like a quarter of what there used to be, but Sellars just switched a bunch of them off because they were too scanny, too violent or creepy or criminal.”

“I know, Orlando. I was at that meeting, too.”

“Are you sure you’re okay, Sam? You seem . . . I don’t know, sad.” He looked her up and down. “And now that I think about it, you haven’t changed sims in like a year’s worth of visits.”

“So? Jeez, Gardiner, you’re the one who wants everyone to dress up all elfy-welfy here.”

“I don’t mean the clothes.” He almost told her about Beezle’s version of Rivendell chic, but he could not get past what was suddenly bothering him. “Sam, what’s going on? Is there a reason you won’t change your sim? You must have something more up to date you use for remotes and friendlines and all back home.”

She shrugged—she was doing it a lot—but would not meet his eyes. “Yeah. But what does it matter? I thought you were my friend, Orlando. Is it really that important to see if . . . if my breasts have developed since the last time you saw me?”

He flinched. “You think that’s why I want to see the real you?”

“No. I don’t know. What’syour problem?”

He swallowed down the anger, as much because of the resurgence of fear as anything else. There were times when it felt like his friendship with Salome Fredericks was the only thing that kept him connected to the world he had been forced to leave behind. His parents were different—they were his parents, for God’s sake, and always would be—and the other survivors of the Otherland network would always be his friends as well, but Sam . . . “Damn it, Fredericks, don’t you get it? You’re . . . you’re part of me.”

“Thanks a lot.” Despite the mocking words, she looked more unhappy than angry. “All my life I wanted to be something important, but part of Orlando Gardiner? I never even hoped . . .”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it. Fenfen, I mean you’re in my . . . okay, you’re in my heart, even though that sounds utterly drooly. You’re why I still feel like I’m a living person when, well, we both know I’m not.”

Now she was the one to flinch, but there was still some kind of wall between them. “What does that have to do with my sim? When you first met me, you thought I was a boy!”

“But this is different, Sam.” He hesitated, then put his hand on her arm. The world’s most powerful simulation engine made it feel just as it was supposed to feel, the warm skin on her wrist, the velvety folds of her sleeve over muscle and tendon and bone. “I know I’m never going to grow up, not in the normal way. I may not have a real body anymore, but that doesn’t mean I expect everyone else to play with me forever here in the Peter Pan Playground. Look at me, Sam.” He knew it was mostly guilt that kept her eyes on him, but just now he was willing to use whatever he had. “If you hide things from me, especially the normal stuff, because you think I can’t take it—well, that’s the worst thing I can think of. I was a cripple my whole life. Having progeria wasn’t just knowing I was going to die young, it was having every single person who saw me for the first time look at me and then look away real fast, like I was some kind of horrible human car accident. Even the decent ones who tried to treat me like anyone else . . . well, let’s just say it was obvious they were working at it. I don’t want to be pitied ever again, Sam.”

She looked miserable and ashamed. “I still don’t understand, Orlando. What does that have to do with my sim?”

“You don’t want me to see the way you look now, but it’s not because you’ve got a zit or something and you’re embarrassed. It’s because you know you look different, that you’re growing or changing or whatever. Tell me I’m wrong. Jeez, Fredericks, I’ve been living on this network almost three years, do you think I expect things not to change? It’s not going to hurt me. But if you can’t show me, then . . . well, it’s like you don’t trust our friendship. Like we can only be the kind of kid-buddies we used to be back in the Middle Country game.”

She looked at him with something of the old Sam on her face, amused even though she was irritated. “Same old Gardiner. You still know everything.” She took a long breath. “Okay, you want to see how I look now? Fine.” For a moment her Rivendell-self froze as she reselected her appearance, the new information passing through the series of blind relays that kept the very private Otherland network isolated from the real-world net. Then, suddenly, like a hardcopy picture dropped onto the top of a stack, Sam’s image changed. “Satisfied?”

“You don’t look that different,” he said, but it wasn’t really true. She was an inch or two taller, but also more curved and womanly—she had wider hips now that the elven breeches only emphasized. The Sam he had known had been a greyhound-slender athlete. There was also suddenly a length to her face he hadn’t seen before. She was really lovely, and not just because she was the Sam he loved. He also realized he hadn’t told the truth about something else: seeing her suddenly a year older, seventeen instead of sixteen, did hurt. It hurt like hell. “Thanks.”

“Oh, Orlando, I’m sorry. I’m being utterly jacked. It’s not that, it’s not any of that.” She slumped on the bench, leaned forward until she could rest her elbows on her knees. She had stopped meeting his eye again. “It’s just . . . I’m seeing somebody.”

For a moment he didn’t understand what she meant, thought she was still talking about sims and images. “Oh. Is it . . . serious?”

“I don’t know. Yeah, I guess. We’ve been going around together for a couple of months.”

Orlando took a breath. “Well, I hope it works out. Fenfen, Frederico, is that what’s been bothering you all day? We’ve been past that jealousy stuff for a long time.” In part, he had to admit, because Sam had made it clear from the beginning of their real friendship, after he knew she was a girl and she knew about his illness, that although she loved him as much as he loved her, it was never going to be the romantic kind. Which was just as well, he had decided, because what they had was going to last their whole life and not be messed up by sex.

He often wondered if real, living teenagers told themselves the same kind of pathetic lies he did.

“I don’t know, it just . . . scares me. Sometimes I feel like . . .” She shook her head. “Like I’m not a very good friend for you.To you,” she amended hurriedly. “I don’t see you as often as I should. You must think I’m terrible.”

He laughed, surprised. “It never even occurred to me. You know, Sam, no offense, but it’s not like when you’re not here I just sit around waiting for your next visit. Two days ago I was dodging arrows in Edo while a bunch of warlords tried to overthrow the Tokugawa shogunate. The week before I spent a few days with Captain Nemo exploring some undersea ruins.”

“So . . . so you’re okay? With everything? Not bored or . . . or lonely?”

He gave her arm another squeeze before letting go. The elves were singing again in the Hall of Fire, a meditation on the light of the Two Trees. The voices seemed almost to belong to the valley itself, to the night and the forest and the river singing together. “Bored? Not when I consider the alternatives. No, don’t fret about me, Frederico—I always have places to go, things to do, and people to see. I must be the happiest dead boy in the whole wide world.”

It wasn’t really so much that Sam was dating someone that was bothering him, he thought as he got ready to connect to his parents’ house, or even that she’d kept it a secret for a while. In fact, now that he thought of it, hestill didn’t know if her new soulmate was male or female. Sam had always been funny that way, not wanting to talk about those sorts of things, irritated by questions, as if Orlando might think differently about her if she ever clarified her gender and sexual issues. No, it wasn’t so much that she was dating someone, or even that she was growing up. He loved her, he really did, and he wanted her to have a happy life no matter what. Instead, it was the sudden worry that he might not be growing up himself, as he had always assumed he was, however weird his situation. He felt a kind of chill as he thought about it, and wondered whether he was becoming irrelevant to everything, not just to Sam, whether despite the fact that years were passing for him in Make-Believe Land just as they did for her in the real world, his experiences here might not be the same as growing up at all.

Maybe you have to be real to do it. Maybe you have to do real things, make a fool of yourself at a party, trip and skin your knee, fall in love, or just . . . just . . . have a heartbeat. Maybe I’ll never really change. I’ll be like one of the sims—a sim of a fourteen-year-old kid. Forever.He pushed away the sickening thought. Right now, it was Family Night, which was hard enough to get through at the best of times.

It didn’t really seem fair, being dead and still having to go home for visits. Not that he didn’t love Conrad and Vivien. In fact, it was because he loved them so much that it could be so difficult.

He took a deep breath, in a metaphorical sort of a way—he felt like he was taking a deep breath, anyway—and as he did so, he remembered that his mother and father apparently had a surprise for him tonight. They had asked him to connect to a different location in the house for his visit instead of the wallscreen.“Well, actually, it’s really Conrad’s surprise,” his mother had explained. She had smiled, but she hadn’t seemed entirely pleased with whatever it was going to be. Orlando had seen that expression before: she had worn it when Conrad had given him the bike for his eleventh birthday. Anyone, even Orlando himself, could have told his father that his bones were too brittle and his muscles too weak even to think of riding a bicycle, but Conrad Gardiner had insisted that his son should have every chance to be normal.

When he had become more or less bedridden in the last year, they had finally got rid of it to make more room in the garage for medical equipment, spare filters, and oxygen pods. He had never ridden it, of course. Progeria, the disease that had ruined and eventually ended his previous life, was a condition that turned children into doddering ancients and then killed them, mostly before they had even reached their teenage years.

As he made the connection, Orlando wondered why he couldn’t just join them through the wallscreen, as usual. He liked doing that, because it felt no different than an ordinary kid-to-parents call, as though he were simply away at school in a different state instead of living in what was functionally a different universe.

Maybe Conrad swapped in the old screen for one of those deep-field things. He was talking a while back about investing in one of the solid-crystal ones.

The connection opened and he was looking at his parents, who looked back at him. His mother was teary-eyed, as she always was when they first saw each other. His father was beaming with what looked like pride. But there was also something unusual about the way they both appeared; it took him a moment to process what it was.

I’m looking through a different imager,he decided.I guessed right—it’s a new screen. But if his parents had indeed bought a new unit, he suddenly realized, they had installed it in the dining room instead of the living room: he could see the old oak sideboard behind their heads, and the poster of the French can-can dancers next to it that had hung on the wall there for years.

“Hi. What’s up—new screen?” Without thinking, he raised his hand to blow his mom a kiss as he always did—yes, it was embarrassing, but you had to do things differently when you couldn’t actually touch—and something shadowy rushed toward him. Even after years without a real body, he could not help flinching a little. The new thing stopped and hung in his view in the same way a simulated hand would.

Itwas a hand, but not being simulated on his end. Instead, it seemed to be looming in front of his parents’ screen and thus effectively hanging in front of his eyes, a weird-looking, smooth, maroon hand made of what appeared to be shiny plasteel. Half forgetting his bodiless state, he reached out to touch it. The hand reached out too, extending away from his viewpoint, just as if it were his own hand, responding to his thoughts. Fascinated and troubled as he began to catch on, he tried to make the fingers wiggle as he would with one of his own simulated hands. The fingers wiggled. But these fingers weren’t on one of his sims, and weren’t even in the network—they were in Conrad and Vivien’s dining room in the real world.

“What the hell is this?”

“Do you like it?” His father was nodding, the way he used to nod when someone was trying out his home-brewed beers, back when they had still had visitors.

Well, that’s one thing,Orlando thought.Now that I’m gone, at least they can have people over again. “Like it? What is it? Some kind of robot arm attached to the new screen?”

“It’s not a new screen, it’s a whole body. So you can, you know, be here. Inside the house with us. Whenever you want.”

Orlando had discovered the other arm. He flexed it, held the two hands up together, then looked down. The viewpoint swiveled, showed him the cylindrical, beet-colored torso, the jointed legs. “A . . . body?”

“I should have thought of it before,” his father said. “I don’t know why I didn’t—your software agent used to have that little body with all the mechanical legs so it could crawl around the house, remember? I looked around until I found something that seemed like it would work. It’s a remote figure they use for certain kinds of reconnaissance operations—I think it was built for Antarctica originally, maybe military or something. I found a collector and bought it. I had to get different feet put on it—it kind of had hands at the end of the legs.” He was clearly a little nervous: When he was nervous, he babbled. “Better for climbing and moving on ice or something. I’m surprised they weren’t skis or tractor treads or maybe—”

“Conrad,” Vivien said, “that’s enough. I don’t want to hear about hands on legs. It’s . . . disturbing.” She darted a quick look at Orlando, who was more than a little stunned.

“What . . . what am I looking out of?”

“The face,” his father said. “Well, it should be, but we’ll have to change what you’re putting out from your end. I didn’t want to spoil the surprise, so right now there’s a whole little Orlando standing there in the face-screen.”

“I’m still trying to figure this out. You mean, I’m supposed to . . . move around in this?”

“Sure, go ahead!” Conrad was delighted by the question. “Walk! You can go anywhere in the house!”

“He doesn’t have to if he doesn’t want to,” said his mother.

Orlando flexed his muscles, or performed the mental actions that flexed muscles in the real world and the better virtual worlds. The cartoon fingers reached out and gripped the tabletop. He put his feet under him and stood, the point of view rose, not altogether steadily. Now that he was listening for it, he could hear the faint wet hiss of fibromotors bunching and relaxing.

“Do you need some help?”

“No, Conrad. I’ll be okay.” He got up and took a few swaying steps, then stopped to look down at the feet—they were huge ovals, like Mickey Mouse shoes. It was strange to be in a body as clumsy as this: his Otherland network bodies all responded exactly as though they were his own, and made him stronger, faster, and far more nimble than he had ever been in real life.

He hadn’t been in the bathroom since his death. It was interesting, even strangely touching, to have movement around his old house restored to him, but he wasn’t certain about any of this. He looked at his reflection in the mirror, the strange stick-figure shape of the thing. The screen in the faceplate showed Orlando’s full-body sim, so that he looked like one of those giant Japanese robot-monsters with a human controller rattling around inside its head. He scaled his sim’s output so that only the face appeared, and suddenly, even though it wasn’t his real face, not by a long shot—no one including Orlando himself had seen that since his physical body had been cremated—it made the whole thing more real and also far more disturbing.

Is this what they want for me? This . . . thing?He knew that Conrad meant well, that his parents were only trying to find a way to make his continued presence in their lives more real, more physical, but he didn’t know if he could stand to live for even short periods as this stalking, plasticized scarecrow.

He looked at the face he used with his parents, a teenage face appropriate to his age, made with help from various police forensic illustration nodes, scaled up from scans of his own skull and incorporating features from both his mother and his father.The face of the kid they should have had, he thought.Stuck on this thing like a lollipop on a stick.

Orlando did his best. He sat through dinner and tried to concentrate as his parents told him things about friends and relatives, about their jobs and the small annoyances of life in the security-walled Crown Heights Community, but he felt even more like an alien than he usually did. The servo-muscles on the body were clumsy and the tactors less advanced than what he was used to: he knocked over his mother’s glass twice and almost tipped the table over when he stood up at the end of the meal.

“I’m going to have to make it an early night,” he said.

“Are you all right?” his mother asked. “You seem sort of down.”

“I’m fine, I’ve just got a meeting to go to at the Drones Club.”

“That’s that nineteen twenties English place you told us about?” Conrad asked. “That must be interesting. Didn’t you say there was a war there?”

“Sort of.” It was still hard to make his parents understand about John Dread, about the terrible destruction the killer had wrought in so many of the Otherland network worlds in the brief days he had ruled over the system as a kind of evil god. “The simulation is coming back, but we’re letting things sort themselves out instead of just wiping out what’s happening and starting the cycles over, so there’s some pretty scanny stuff going on in some of them. Adaptations, almost like after a forest fire has changed an ecosystem. Very barky.” He noticed their puzzled faces. “ ‘Barky’? It means funny. The weird kind of funny.”

“You know so much about these things,” his mother said. “This complicated network. You’ve learned so much. And you’ve really worked hard to make something out of . . .” Vivien Fennis was about to say something likeyour terrible situation , but of course she was too much of an old hand for that, too smart and too kind to mess up this proud-mom moment she was giving him. “Out of your life in this new world. New universe, really. It’s still so hard to believe or even understand.”

“You have the makings of a first-class scientific education there,” Conrad chimed in. “Even if it’s not the accredited type. Life experience has to count for something, doesn’t it? Maybe someday—”

“This all has to stay secret—me, the Otherland network, everything. If it ever becomes public, there will be lawsuits for decades over who owns the network. It’s worth gazillions—it’ll be torn apart by the military looking for weapons-quality code, at the very least. You know that.” Orlando tried to puncture his dad’s fantasies gently, but they did have to be punctured: Conrad came up with hopeful, impractical plans every few months, and some of them made the maroon robot body seem positively normal. “Look, the chances are that I’m not ever going to live in the real world again. I’m sorry. I wish I could have had a grown-up life here and done all the things you guys wanted for me.” He took a breath: he found himself getting angry and he didn’t want to. But why did everyone keep projecting ridiculous expectations and ideas onto him? He more or less figured on getting it from his parents, but Sam’s lack of trust in him was still hurting. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. This is a lot better than being dead. Don’t worry about me. Like you said, the network’s a whole new universe and I’m the one who gets to explore it. I’m happy.”

Happy or not, he was beginning to feel like he couldn’t breathe. He did his best to be cheerful as he said his goodbyes, even allowing his mother and father to give the robot-body a hug, although it was a weird and uncomfortable experience, probably even for Conrad. As he sat the mechanical form down in a chair so it wouldn’t fall over when he was no longer animating it, Orlando was finding it harder and harder to hide his ugly mood. Getting out of that horrible, whirring prison and back into the freedom of the network was like finally being allowed to take off a scratchily ill-fitting Christmas sweater after the aunt who gave it to him had finally gone home.

He had half an hour to kill before the meeting of the Worldwalkers Society. He wandered the streets of P. G. Wodehouse’s London, thinking.

Before Dread, this simulation world had been a shiny little confection of unadulterated good cheer, a London where the poor were content to be that way and the unguilty rich could concentrate on important things, like eating a really good breakfast and avoiding dragonish aunts (who could pop up and spoil the aforementioned breakfast, not to mention zillions of other innocent pastimes, with amazing swiftness). Now this particular London had become a much different place. Like some Socialist demagogue that even the most paranoid Tory could barely have imagined, John Dread had first enraged and then armed the city’s working class—a group in short supply in Wodehouse, but not entirely absent. A horde consisting mostly of gardeners, butlers, chauffeurs, delivery men, maids, and cab drivers had stormed the haunts of the upper crust, besieging and attacking the rich in their mansions, Kensington flats, and clubs. Whole blocks had been put to the torch as some of Wodehouse’s wild-eyed Socialists and anarchists, rumored but scarcely ever seen, turned out to be more than merely rumor, and a few turned out to be dab hands at arson as well. There had even been some massacres, public slaughters of the class enemies—the class of the victims depending on which side was top of form at that particular moment of the struggle—although because of the happy-go-lucky nature of the Wodehouse world, even Dread’s malign influence had waned quickly once his direct supervision ended. Still, by the time Sellars and Kunohara had got round to shutting down the particulars of Dread’s intervention, some weeks after Dread himself had been dethroned, the city had descended into a sort of weird twilight state, something that combined the ruination of post-Blitz London with the freewheeling lawlessness of its earlier Elizabethan incarnation and more than a touch of the fearful shadows that had clung to the nineteenth-century city during the Jack the Ripper crimes.

Curzon Street was full of horses and wagons these days—very few cars had survived the Unpleasantness, as the reign of terror was referred to—and Orlando had to watch what was under his feet as he made his way to Hyde Park. The squatter camps that had appeared in the first few weeks of the upheaval had become more or less permanent settlements, and with the chill evening coming down, bonfires burned everywhere. It didn’t do to walk too obliviously through the park—desperately cold and hungry people had long ago obliterated the park squirrels and the waterfowl of the Serpentine, and chopped down most of the beautiful old trees for fuel. Many wealthy folks who supposed that now that the Unpleasantness had ended they could return to riding along Rotten Row had discovered that although horsemeat might come into the park on its own hooves as in the old days, the only way it was leaving again was inside someone’s stomach.

However, if anyone could walk heedless of personal safety in Hyde Park these days, it was Orlando Gardiner, the system’s bashful demigod, and the demigod had a lot to consider.

Is it just me? Conrad and Vivien mean well. Why is it so hard to humor them? After all, I’m their only kid and it’s pretty obvious things aren’t going to work out the way they hoped—no graduation, no girlfriends, no marriage, no grandkids . . .But no matter how he thought about it, he couldn’t feel anything but resentful horror at the idea of wearing that remote body. Instead of making him feel more natural it did the opposite, made the distance between his new life and his old one more acute, as though the real world had become some kind of alien planet, a toxic environment he could only enter dressed in a clanking robot-suit. The fact that the real world had become exactly that for him, and had been that way for going on three years, didn’t matter: as long as he only visited his folks by phone he could half pretend he was just putting in a year in Africa with the UN Service Corps or something, but now Conrad’s compulsion to fix things was going to put a serious crimp in Orlando’s hard-earned denial.

It was the stuff with Sam, though, that really got to him. He didn’t want to be someone who never grew up, never changed no matter what he experienced. That was worse than the suit—that was like being truly dead. He would be a sort of ghost.

A ghost in a dead world. Nothing changing, not me, not these worlds.

He turned back across the park toward Dover Street and the club. Crews of young toughs were gathered around rubbish-bin bonfires, singing mocking serenades to their rivals. It sounded like they might be working up to a reading, as in a “read and write,” local slang for a gangfight.

They’re free-range,he reminded himself.None of my business. Happens all the time, anyway, and I couldn’t be here to stop them all.

He looked at the laughing young men in scarves and fingerless gloves and stolen top hats, dapper as Dickensian urchins. Some were openly sharpening knives and razors. In the simworld’s more normal operation they would be prone to no worse mischief than flinging snowballs at unsuspecting vicars and fat uncles, but even this evidence of a certain flexibility of ambition allowed by the system didn’t change Orlando’s feelings. They might have adjusted to the high level of local chaos, but these hooligans were still essentially the same kind of minor characters they had been in the world’s earlier incarnations. It was becoming obvious that for all Kunohara’s and Sellars’ florid early predictions, a certain depth of reality, a flare of unpredictability, had gone out of the Otherland network for good with the death of the operating system. What was left was still fabulously complex, but ultimately lifeless.

No wonder everyone keeps asking if I’m okay. It’s not me that’s the problem, it’s this network. Nothing really changes, or if it does, it’s just like ivy growing wild in someone’s yard or something—the same kinds of changes over and over and over. It’s not an evolving universe, it’s a big, broken toy, and even if it’s more complicated than anything anyone ever made before, it’s still never going to be like living in the real world.It wasn’t so much a lack of other people that was depressing him, he realized—the sims who inhabited the various worlds were astonishingly diverse and self-actualized, their interactive programming so flexible and their canned histories so comprehensive that in most cases you could never get to know any of them well enough to see the gaps in their near-perfect mimicry of life. But Orlandoknew they weren’t real, and that was a very big part of the problem. He was also the most powerful person in this pocket universe now that Sellars was gone and Hideki Kunohara was so frequently absent, which added to the imbalance between himself and his cohabitants.

Yeah, that’s it—that’s who I am,he realized.I’m not Aragorn or the Lone Ranger, I really am Superman, like Sam said. I’m one of a kind in these worlds and I’m going to spend my life doing things for people who are lesser beings—who won’t ever seem quite real to me. And that’s a long time to do something, because I just might live forever.

For the first time since he had been reborn into the system, his potential immortality felt more like a burden than a gift.

The meeting was under way, but a few other latecomers were still wandering into the Bertram W. Wooster Memorial Salon—a chamber dedicated, Orlando had gathered, to a former Drones Club member who had been smothered to death by a mob of crazed railway porters during the Unpleasantness. Orlando took his Coca-Cola and sat at the back of the room. His first requests for the beverage had baffled the club’s bar staff, but the proprietor had stepped in and now a bottle of syrup and siphon of soda water were waiting for him whenever he dropped in.

That was only on meeting nights, of course—the Wodehouse simulation was not really his kind of world in the first place, and Orlando had never been interested in joining clubs even when he was alive, but the Society was different.

“Before we welcome tonight’s speaker,” the chairman was saying, “we have a few orders of business—messages sent by members who were not able to attend tonight, but who nevertheless have information of importance to share.” The chairman, Sir Reginald de Limoux, was a handsome man in his middle thirties, hawk-nosed, lean, and tanned in a way that proclaimed him in this world as a laborer or an adventurer. He was clearly not a laborer. “The gateway between Chrysostom’s Byzantium and Toyland is no longer safe. Toyland is still unstable, and some kind of military group has captured the shop where the portal operates and made it their headquarters. They are wooden soldiers, I am told, so unless you are a termite, it is suggested you avoid that gateway for now.” A few of the club members laughed politely. “Visitors to Toyland can still use the forest gate, which is protected by factions more sympathetic to free travel. Now, still on the subject of gateways, we have a report of a new one discovered in Benin, at an oasis just outside the city . . .”

As de Limoux continued with the announcements, Orlando sipped his Coke and studied him. He wondered how much of the chairman’s source personality remained. He was one of the Jongleur-shadows, based on copies that had been made of Felix Jongleur, the Otherland network’s original master at a time when the ancient industrialist was planning to live forever within its circuits, a god ruling over many worlds. Jongleur had indeed achieved immortality of a sort, as had many of the network’s other wealthy, powerful, and largely amoral founders from the Grail Brotherhood, but not in the way he or any of them had hoped.

Instead of serving the purpose for which they had been intended, these copies, meant to be the basis for what would be immortal information-based incarnations, had been warped and changed during the last mad days of the original operating system, then the copies had been allowed to scatter and disperse through the system. Nobody knew how many of them there were, or what they had become, since there was no foolproof way to track individual sims in the huge network. One of the reasons Orlando Gardiner, in his role as the network’s conservator, had become involved with the Worldwalker’s Society was so that he could keep tabs on these various Grail Brotherhood clones, many of which seemed drawn to the club by a compulsion that might have been subconscious.

Orlando had been surprised at first that Kunohara and Sellars, the two men who best understood the Otherland system, had not even tried to remove these remnants of the network’s original masters, but they had pointed out to him that even if all the shadow-copies could be found and identified, they were not automatically criminal themselves any more than the children of a thief could be assumed to be inherently dishonest, and that even the least pleasant of the Grail Brotherhood originals were no worse than other nasty sim personalities that were original inhabitants of some of the network worlds. It had been the Grail masters’ personal wealth and power, and also their control over the network from the outside, that had made them dangerous. Inside the network these clones and imitations started over from scratch, some with admitted personality defects that cropped up in most incarnations, but others with a surprising capacity to become decent citizens. As he watched the Society’s chairman at work, Orlando thought that this particular version of Jongleur, Sir Reginald de Limoux, seemed somewhere in the middle—sharp-tempered and obviously ambitious, but certainly no out-and-out villain.

The other legacy granted to the Grail-shadows and a few similar beings that the old operating system had created—some based on Orlando’s real friends and acquaintances, like the Englishman Paul Jonas—was that they alone of all the simulated souls on the network could travel with relative freedom among the network worlds, or even knew that there were worlds outside the simulation in which they lived. Unlike Orlando, these travelers did not understand what they were, or what kind of universe they lived in, but they did have a freedom of thought that set them apart from the rest of the sims. In fact, they were the closest thing to equals Orlando Gardiner had these days. Sitting around in the Drones Club bar after a Worldwalker meeting, listening to the humorous stories and impossible boasts of Society members, was the closest thing to the happiness he had once found in the adventurers’ taverns of his old Middle Country game.

And, of course, even in their wildest stories, these walkers-of-worlds brought back gems of information that Orlando found very useful. He might be a ranger with godlike powers, but he still couldn’t stamp out every untended campfire in four hundred different worlds.

When the chairman had finished his announcements, the featured speaker took the lectern and began to describe the findings from his most recent expedition. This gentleman seemed to have spent most of his time in Troy and Xanadu, two simworlds Orlando knew well, so he let his attention drift to other things. He became so caught up in wondering how to reconnect with Sam that he did not realize for several moments that someone who had harrumphed significantly several times behind him was now tapping on his shoulder.

“Mr. Roland? Someone urgently wishes to speak with you.” The tapper was the proprietor of the Drones Club, a tall, poker-faced fellow named Jeeves who, rumor suggested, had been in some kind of domestic service before the Unpleasantness but had risen very high, very quickly during those unstable times. “Did you hear me, Mr. Roland?”

It took Orlando another long moment to recognize his local pseudonym. “Sorry, sorry. Someone to see me?” Could it be Beezle again, dressed for maximum embarrassment value in a cummerbund or pith helmet? But it was only when Orlando was in Rivendell, the closest thing to a refuge he had, that the agent wasn’t allowed to contact him directly: it was hard to relax and enjoy the peaceful singing of the elves and the flickering of firelight when you were getting four or five calls an hour from an agent with the raspy voice and abrupt manners of an old-school Brooklyn cabbie.

“Yes, a visitor, sir,” Jeeves said, leaning close. “A young lady. Very attractive, if I may say so, but perhaps a bit . . . confused. I’ve taken the liberty of installing her in one of the unused lounges—some of the older members are less than open-minded about women in the club, even now. I beg pardon for interrupting you. She said it couldn’t wait, and it seemed from her conversation that it might be something with which you would wish to deal . . . discreetly.”

Orlando looked at the man’s somber mouth, his tall, intelligent brow. Jeeves was not supposed to know who the Worldwalkers really were—on the surface, they were only a stuffily ordinary club of travelers and adventurers who met at the Drones Club once a month—let alone have even an inkling of Orlando Gardiner’s true nature, but he had always treated Orlando with extra care and a certain glint in the eye, as though he suspected him of being more than he appeared. Orlando in turn had often wondered whether the club’s new owner wasn’t a Worldwalker himself, albeit an undiscovered one. If so, he had found the perfect place to hide, right under the Society’s nose.

He made a mental note to do some research on this Jeeves fellow when he had some spare time and turned back to survey the room. The Society members had fallen into civilized but contentious discussion about a proposed new expedition. Orlando knew they would be batting it around for at least half an hour, and probably wouldn’t finish the discussion this month. Expeditions took resources, and those Worldwalkers who were independently wealthy in one simworld could seldom move valuables or tangible resources from one simulation to another. In fact, the only really certain, completely portable capital was knowledge, and that was one of the reasons most Society members valued their membership above anything except their lives. He rose, certain there was nothing going on tonight he couldn’t pick up later, in the bar.

Jeeves led him to the doorway of the lounge before sliding away down the corridor, silent as a cat burglar. Orlando stepped into the snug room and almost knocked over a young woman dressed in a pale frock who was warming herself before the coal fire. It was only as he put out a hand to steady himself he realized he was still carrying his Coca-Cola.

“Sorry,” he said and balanced the glass on the narrow mantel. “My name is Roland. I’m told you were looking for me.”

She was pretty, as Jeeves had suggested, in a wide-eyed, consumptive sort of way, the darkness of her curly hair and the blush on her cheek only emphasizing the almost translucent pallor of her skin. She returned his stare a little wildly, as though at any moment he might lunge at her—or, worse, laugh at her.

“Perhaps I am mistaken. I was told . . . I understood the person I was seeking could be found here. The name Roland was given to me. I’m looking for Orlando Gardiner.” She peered at him as though she might be nearsighted, or as though she were looking for a resemblance in a newly met, very distant relative; then her face fell. “But you are not him. I have never seen you before.”

He was astonished to hear his real name spoken aloud by a sim, and almost equally surprised to be told he was not himself, but hearing her voice confirmed what he had guessed when he had first seen her. This young woman was another Avialle Jongleur shadow, either one of the original copies of Felix Jongleur’s dead daughter or a variant coined from those copies in the last days of the operating system. The original Avialle had been obsessively in love with the Englishman Paul Jonas, and most of the copies, certainly all those that had been made from the living Avialle after she met Jonas, had continued this infatuation. They had popped up in numerous guises during Jonas’ amnesiac wanderings through the Otherland network, sometimes encouraging him, sometimes actively aiding him, other times brokenly pleading for his love or understanding.

But none of them had ever had much or anything to do with Orlando, and he had no idea why one should be seeking him now, especially under his real name.

“You say you haven’t seen me before.” He gestured for her to sit down—she seemed prepared to bolt like a rabbit at the slightest noise, and he was curious now. “I have to admit, I don’t recognize you either. I do know someone named Orlando Gardiner, however, and I might be able to get a message to him. Can you tell me something of your problem?” The surroundings were beginning to get to him, he realized. He was starting to sound like one of the simworld’s native characters.

“Oh. You . . . you know him?” She looked a little more hopeful, but it was a miserable sort of hope, as though she had been told that instead of torture she would be given a mercifully swift death. “Where can I find him?”

“You can give me a message. I promise he’ll hear it.”

She brought a hand to her mouth, hesitating. She was very pale, shaking a little, but Orlando could see now that there was a determination behind the doe-eyes that belied her outward appearance.She’s taken some risk to come here, he thought.She must want to get this message to me very badly. “Very well,” she said at last. “My shame could not be any greater. I will trust to your discretion, Mr. Roland. I will trust you to behave like a gentleman.

“Please tell Mr. Gardiner that I need to see him as soon as possible. I am in terrible straits. Terrible. If he does not come to me I do not know what I shall do.” Her reserve suddenly fell apart; tears welled in her eyes. “I am desperate, Mr. Roland!”

“But why?” Orlando hunted vainly for a handkerchief, but she had already produced one of her own from her sleeve and was dabbing at her face. “I’m sorry, Miss . . . Mrs. . . . I’m afraid I don’t know your name. Look, I don’t want to make things worse, but I really do have to know why you want to speak with him before I can pass along your message.”

She looked at him, eyes still wet, and seemed to come to a decision. Her lip stopped trembling. She spoke with self-mocking dignity. “It is not such an unusual story in this wicked world of ours, Mr. Roland. My name is Livia Bard. I am an unmarried woman and I am with child. The child is Mr. Gardiner’s.”

Then, as though they had reached the climax of a particularly good magic trick, the young woman simply vanished into thin air.

Find one single woman in only four hundred or so different simworlds, each world with life-size geography, maybe a few million simulated citizens, and no central tracking system? Yeah, problem not. Piece of cake.He couldn’t even amuse himself these days. “Beezle? Any word back on that Amazon place, that Lost World thing with the dinosaurs? What’s it called?”

“Maple White Land, boss. Yeah, we got a confirmed sighting. It seems like another Avialle Jongleur shadow, awright, but she looks different and she’s using a different name—Valda Jackson, something like that. Older, too, if our informant’s right. And she don’t act much like a pregnant lady, either. She leads expeditions into the interior and she drinks like a fish.”

“Fenfen.” He looked around the spacious room, frowning. The river was loudly musical outside and the air smelled of green things, but it wasn’t as soothing as it usually was. He was beginning to find Rivendell less comfortable than it had been, and even though he now permitted Beezle to contact him inside the simulation without having to make an actual appearance, it seemed less and less like the best place for this kind of work. After all, he didn’t want to turn the Last Homely House, the ideal of his childhood, into the permanently busy capitol of Orlando Land. Maybe he needed to think about moving his base of operations. “Three months now and this woman might as well have been drezzed right out of the network code for all I can find out about her. Where is she?”

“It’s just a search operation, boss. Like you always say, there ain’t no central registry office. It takes time. But seems to me, time’s one thing you definitely got plenty of.”

“When I want philosophy, I’ll buy a plug-in module. When you get hold of Sam, ask if we can meet somewhere different this time. Her choice.”

“Your wish is my command, O master.”

“It’s really pretty, isn’t it? I always liked Japanese teahouses and stuff.”

Orlando wrinkled his nose. “I think that’s the first time I ever heard you use the word ‘pretty’ except when you’re on something like, ‘That’s a pretty stupid idea, Gardiner.’ ”

Sam Fredericks frowned a little, but her samurai sim turned it into a scowl that might have graced a Noh mask. “What’s that supposed to mean? That I’m turning all girlie or something?”

“No, no.” He was depressed, now. He had only had a few brief visits with Sam since the whole Livia Bard thing had started, and he had missed her, but they still seemed to be out of rhythm with each other. “I just didn’t expect you to pick a place like this for us to meet.”

“You’re always talking about how much you like it.” She looked out from the teahouse. Beyond the open panels of the wall and beyond the tiny, orderly garden of rocks and sand and small trees, the wooden roofs of the city stretched away on all sides. On the far side of the Nihon-Bashi, the stately wooden arch across the Sumida, Edo Castle loomed proudly.

“Well, I like the war part, although that’s mostly over for this cycle—the shogun has pretty much settled in for good. The armor isho dzang , too.”

“Ho dzang!I haven’t heard anyone say that for a long time.” She saw the look on his face and went on with nervous haste, “Yeah, that armor is great, especially those helmets with the sticking-up things—makes your elves almost look dull. I’m not crazy about the music, though. I always thought it sounded like unhappy cats.”

Orlando clapped his hands and sent away the geisha who had been quietly playing “Jiuta” on her shamisen. The only singing now was the hoarse chant of a water seller that drifted up from the street below. “Better?”

“I guess.” She looked at him carefully. “Sorry I’ve been so hard to get hold of. How’s your noble quest?”

“Noble quest? Like the kind we used to have back in the Middle Country?” He fought off a moment of panic—did she think he hadn’t changed at all? “You mean about the pregnant woman.”

“Yes.” She made herself smile. “And it is a noble quest, Orlando, because you’re a noble-quest kind of guy.”

“Except that apparently I impregnated this poor girl and then deserted her. Not really the kind of thing people usually call noble.”

Sam frowned, but this time because she was irritated with his flippancy. “But you didn’t do it. Just because there’s some evil clone version of you running around . . .”

“Maybe, but I don’t think so. There’s never been any other sign of another version of me, or even a hint. Believe me, I’ve had Beezle combing every record since we started up the network again.”

“I thought there wasn’t any main archive or whatever.”

“There isn’t, but there’s the informal one that Kunohara started when he and Sellars got the system running again, and most of the individual worlds have their own records that are part of the simulation. For instance, the Wodehouse place where I met this woman started out pretty much like the real early-twentieth-century London, so there are birth records and death records and telephone directories and everything. The data is a bit hinky sometimes because it’s sort of a comedy world, but there certainly wasn’t any mention of a Livia Bard in any of those.”

“So you think she must come from somewhere else. She’s one of those travelers, then, the ones can cross from one world to another. I can’t remember—were all the Jongleur girl’s shadows like that?”

He shook his head, felt the topknot bob. “I don’t know. They’ve always been the weirdest of all the shadows because the operating system jacked around with them so much.” He sat back, toying with his bowl of tea. It was easy to believe his mystery woman could think she was pregnant—many of the Avialle-shadows thought they were pregnant, because the original had been, at least for a little while. Orlando had gone back and forth through Sellars’ history and Kunohara’s margin notes trying to make sense of it, even though he’d heard some of the story from Paul Jonas’ own mouth—it was a bizarre bit of history and hard to figure out.

“Orlando?”

“Sorry, Sam. I was thinking about something.”

“I just wanted to ask you . . . are you absolutely sure that . . . that you didn’t do it?”

“Do what? . . . Fenfen, Fredericks, you mean get her pregnant?” He felt his cheeks reddening in a most un-samurai manner.

Sam looked worried. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

He shook his head, although he definitely was embarrassed. He had been a fourteen-year-old invalid when he died, a boy denied a normal childhood or adolescence. Gifted with a life after death, with health and vigor beyond anything he had ever known, not to mention an almost complete lack of adult supervision, he had of course experimented. At first the knowledge that his partners were in some ways no more real than what you could rent on the crudest kind of interactive pornodes hadn’t bothered him, any more than the literal two-dimensionality of women in girlie magazines disturbed earlier generations, but the novelty had worn off fast, leaving him lonely and more than a little disgusted with the whole situation. Also, because he was uncomfortable with their origins, he had made a personal rule never to get involved with any of the Worldwalker Society’s female members, so he found himself more or less unable to date anyone with actual free will.

Of course, love and sex weren’t things he’d ever been very comfortable talking to Sam Fredericks about, anyway. “Let’s just put it this way,” he said at last. “If I had been in a situation where it could have happened, I’d remember. But, Sam, that doesn’t even matter. This isn’t a real person and it’s not a real pregnancy—she’s a construct!”

“Didn’t all those What’s-her-name Jongleur girls have a pregnancy thing, anyway? They all thought they were, or some of them did, or something?”

“Avialle Jongleur. Yes, and like I said, they aren’t real pregnancies. But that’s not the point. The question is, why does this one know my real name and why does she think it’s my baby?”

Sam slowly nodded. “Yeah, that all barks pretty drastically. So what are you going to do?”

“I wish I knew. I’ve been looking for months, but she’s just vanished. Beezle wants me to authorize a bunch of mini-Beezles so we can search the system more effectively—not just for this one woman, but any time we need to. It’s not a bad idea, really, but I’m not sure I want to be the Napoleon of an army of bugs.”

Sam Fredericks sat back, toying with her bowl of tea. “You seem . . . I don’t know, a little more cheerful than the last couple of times I saw you.”

He shrugged. “I keep busy. I thought you were the one who was depressed.”

“Scanmaster. I was probably locked off with you for some reason.”

Orlando smiled. “Probably.”

Sam stirred. “I brought you something. Can you import it into the network? It’s on the top level of my system, labeled ‘Orlando.’ ”

“You brought me something?”

“You don’t think I’d forget your birthday, do you?”

He had half forgotten, himself. “Actually, it’s tomorrow.” It was strange how little something like a birthday meant when you didn’t go to school and you had hardly any friends—any normal friends, that is.

“I know that, but I won’t see you tomorrow, will I?”

“Seventeen years old. I’m an old man, now.”

“Old man—hah! You’re younger than me, so six that noise.” A small, gift-wrapped package appeared on the low table. “Good, you found it. Open it.”

He took off the lid and looked at the thing nestled on virtual cotton in the virtual box. “It’s really nice, Sam.”

“Happy birthday, Gardino. Don’t just stare at it—it’s a friendship bracelet, you idiot. You have to read what it says.”

He turned the simple silver bracelet. The inscription said,to orlando from sam. friends forever. For a moment he didn’t trust his voice. “Thanks.”

“I know there are places you go where you can’t wear it, but I spent a lot of time thinking, like, what can you get someone who can have anything in the whole world—rocket cars, a live pet dinosaur, you name it? All I’ve got to give you that you can’t get in one of these worlds is me. We’re friends, Gardiner, and you remember that. No matter what. As long as we both live.”

Orlando was very grateful that this sim was toobushi to cry—the blushing had been bad enough. “Yeah,” he said. “No matter what.” He took a deep breath. “Hey, you want to go for a walk before you have to go? I’ll show you a little of the Tokaido—that’s kind of the main road. It’s the best place to sightsee. If we’re lucky, a few of the daimyos will still be coming into town. They’re the nobles, and they have to make a pilgrimage here twice a year. Some of them come in with thousands of retainers and soldiers, horses and flags and concubines and all that fen, a big parade. It’s like Samurai Disneyland.”

“You really know this place!”

“I keep busy.”

“You left tonight open, didn’t you?” Beezle asked as Orlando reanimated his Rivendell sim. “Your parents have got plans.”

“Oh, jeez, right, my birthday dinner. That means they’ll want me to wear thattchi seen robot body. Conrad’s probably hooked it up with an air hose so I can blow out the candles on my cake.” He resented tromping around in that thing so much that he had been avoiding seeing his parents because of it. Still, in just three visits he’d broken a table leg and several vases, and pulled a door off its hinges by accident. The thing had very delicate hand responses, but the rest of it was meant for slogging around in mine shafts or in the holds of sunken ships and was about as graceful as an elephant on roller skates. Orlando didn’t want to hurt their feelings, and Conrad was so proud of his idea, but he just hated it.

It’s not as if I didn’t have enough to deal with.Just at the moment, two Society members were stuck in the House simulation in the middle of an armed uprising and unable to escape, there was a programming glitch or something like it causing mutations in the plant life of Bronte World so that Haworth Parsonage was under siege by carnivorous cacti, and he still had no idea of where Livia Bard might be, let alone any explanation for her weird accusation.Yeah, I keep busy.

“Any decision yet on letting me whip up some sub-agents, boss?”

“I’m still thinking about it.”

“Well, don’t hurt yourself—I hear that thinking stuff ain’t for beginners. You ready to go to your folks? ’Cause you got an urgent message from that Elrond guy you gotta deal with first. He needs you downstairs right now.”

“Jeez, it never stops. Make the connection to that locking toy robot at my parents’, will you? After I finish downstairs I’ll duck into a closet or something and go directly.”

“Yeah, wouldn’t want to screw up the continuity.” It sounded suspiciously like sarcasm. “Don’t worry, boss. I’m on it. Just go see Elrond.”

He was halfway down the delicate wooden staircase between the small house that he called his home and the central buildings when the thought occurred to him,Why the hell would Beezle be passing a message for Elrond? Rivendell doesn’t work that way .

All questions were answered when he walked into the main hall and discovered his mother, father, and several score elves, dwarves, and assorted other Middle-Earthers waiting for him.

“Surprise!” most of them shouted. “Happy birthday!”

Orlando stopped just inside the doorway, dumbfounded. The hall was strung with cloth-of-gold bunting, and candles burned everywhere. Huge trestle tables were covered with food and drink. His mother came up and threw her arms around him, kissed him and hugged him. When she leaned back she looked at him worriedly, but she was also flushed with excitement. “Is this okay? You said your network can deal with incongruities. This won’t spoil anything, will it?”

“It’s fine, Vivien. I’m just . . . well, surprised.”

She was wearing elven costume, a long dress in shades of butter yellow and pale beige, and had piled her hair up on top of her head where it was held by diamond pins. “Do I look funny?” she asked. “That nice Arwen girl gave me these hair things. I think that’s her name—I don’t remember her from when I read the books, but it was a long time ago.”

“That nice Arwen girl?” Orlando couldn’t help smiling. “Yeah, you look great.”

Conrad came up with a goblet in one hand. “Those dwarves like to drink, don’t they? What do you think? Did we surprise you?”

Orlando could only nod, appalled and touched. The party already seemed in high gear. Someone put a cup of ale in his hands. Elrond came up and bowed to Orlando’s parents. “Regards to you on this festive day, Tharagorn,” the elf said. “You are always an ornament to our house.”

Vivien started to flirt with Elrond, to Orlando’s horror, but the master of the house accepted it with good humor. Even more fortunately, Conrad had already wandered off to look more closely at the ceiling joists—he was a hobbyist carpenter—so at least Orlando didn’t have to worry about his father picking a jealous fight with an elven lord.

Arwen Undomiel, Elrond’s daughter—the one his mother had referred to as a “nice girl”—was standing with her love, Aragorn, who was dressed in a tattered cloak and seemed to have come straight in off the road. The man whose name Orlando had more or less borrowed for his incarnation in this world left his betrothed’s side long enough to come and clasp Orlando’s hand. “Good wishes, cousin. We have not met in many a long year. I did not know anyone outside the halfling lands celebrated the day of their birth in this manner.”

“Blame my parents.”

“There is no blame. They are noble folk.” Aragorn embraced him, then returned to Arwen’s side, where her brothers Elladan and Elrohir now also stood, as travelworn as Aragorn, as though they had all ridden fast and far to be here. The elven princess raised her glass toward Orlando in a silent salute. He would have been flattered if he hadn’t known it was all make-believe, just programming.

“I don’t even want to know how you arranged this, Vivien,” he said to his mother.

“Beezle helped.” She pointed to a small, disreputable, and extremely hairy-footed figure on the far side of the room, who was busy outdrinking three dwarves from Dale. “He’s almost human, isn’t he?”

“Who isn’t?” He hugged her again. “Thanks. I really didn’t expect it.”

Vivien was asking Elrond something domestic—he thought he heard her use the phrase “finding kitchen help”—when Orlando’s attention was suddenly drawn to a pale shape moving through the throng at the center of the hall. For a moment he could only stare, wondering which Tolkien character this was, why she looked so familiar.

“Oh my God,” he said. “It’sher !”

He was across the room before Vivien finished asking him where he was going and caught the woman in white as she stepped into the Hall of Fire. The unsteady light of the flames made her seem a phantom, but if it was not Livia Bard herself who stood before him, it was her exact duplicate.

She looked up at his approach, startled and even a little frightened. “What do you want?”

He realized the look on his face might very well be something that would frighten anyone. After months of searching, to have her simply walk past him! . . . “Miss Bard. Livia. I’ve been looking for you.”

She turned to face him and he had a second shock. Beneath the flowing white gown, she was very obviously several months’ pregnant. “Who are you?” She stared, then blinked. “Can it be? Are you truly him ? . . .”

And then she disappeared again.

“Beezle!” he bellowed. “That was her! Right here, then she disappeared! Where did she go?”

“Couldn’t tell you boss. Hang on, let me just roll Snori here off me and I’ll be right with you.”

By the time his parents and his faithful software agent reached him, Orlando was down on his knees on the floor of the Hall of Fire, pounding on the boards in frustration. Conrad and Vivien suggested calling off the feast, but Orlando knew it was for them as much as himself, so he climbed to his feet and let himself be led back to the party. Still, despite all the diversions and distractions offered by Rivendell in holiday mode, he hardly noticed what was going on around him. As soon as he could decently manage it he made his excuses and headed for bed, pausing on his way up to his rooms to have a word with Beezle.

“Okay, you have my permission—I’ve run out of ideas. Put together your little army of sub-agents. But do me a favor and don’t make them bugs, huh? I’m going to have to see Kunohara, and I’ll get enough of the things there to last me for years.”

“Will do, boss.”

Orlando went to bed. Beezle stayed up late drinking with the dwarves from Dale. He showed them how it was possible to belch several whole stanzas of the Lay of Queen Beruthiel, and also that there is a point at which even dwarves should stop drinking.

Elves don’t complain, but Elrond’s folk had a terrible mess to deal with the next morning.

“Mr. Gardiner, it is always a pleasure to see you, but I hope you will be understanding.” Kunohara gestured for him to sit on one of the chairs that looked out from the balcony across the expanse of forest-high grass and the undergrowth that loomed beyond it like a frozen tsunami wave. He was a small, trim man in a modern-style kimono who appeared to be in early middle age, or at least his sim always looked that way, his black hair and beard both gray-flecked. “My time is very limited these days. A nephew of mine—barely out of adolescence, or so it seems—is leading a hostile takeover against me. They claim too much of the family company’s money has been spent on what they call ‘the amusements of the chairman.’ Who would be me, and this simulation would be one of the amusements, except they do not know it still exists.” He glowered. “A company built with my patents, and they think to take it away from me. I will crush them, of course, but it is sad for the family and irritating for me. It wastes a great deal of my resources.”

Orlando nodded. “I appreciate you making time for me.” He had never quite warmed to Hideki Kunohara, not having known him as well as some of his other companions had; there were ways in which Kunohara never made himself really available, even when he was sitting right in front of you, chatting in a seemingly amiable, open way. Orlando had always wondered what the man was really thinking, and because of that had never entirely trusted him, but with Sellars gone, Kunohara understood the system’s underlying logic better than anyone alive.

If there is such a thing as logic involved,Orlando thought sourly.

“I’ve reviewed your messages,” Kunohara said, then stopped suddenly to watch a striking black-and-orange butterfly the size of a small plane flit down into their field of view, almost touch the ground, then lift away again, wings flashing in the sunshine. “A heleconid,” he announced. “Numata,it looks like. Nice to see them so near the station.”

Hideki Kunohara’s house was a recycled building far too large to make a satisfactory dwelling for anything less substantial than a king’s household, or at least it would have been in the real world, where people were limited by various petty annoyances like the laws of physics, but size was not such an issue in a private node where travel could be instantaneous. The house had formerly been a scientific station that Kunohara had leased to governments and the biology departments of universities because all visitors to Kunohara’s world found themselves smaller than most of the insects and other invertebrate fauna. It was a fascinating if occasionally terrifying perspective: the research station had been destroyed by soldier ants and all the human sims in it killed during the upheavals of the network. Kunohara’s own house had also been ruined. The balcony on which he and Orlando sat now had originally been one of the raised viewing stations that ran all along the southern face of the complex’s main building; as they talked Orlando could watch all kinds of monstrous animals feeding and being fed upon in the field sloping away below them, including birds the size of passenger jets tugging worms that seemed long as subway trains out of the damp morning ground.

“Anyway, I’ve read your messages and I don’t really have much to say, Mr. Gardiner. Have you considered the possibility she’s someone from outside the network? A real person who discovered your name somewhere, or even someone who knows you and is playing a trick?”

“That would be worse than the mystery we have,” said Orlando. “Because unless it was one of my friends, and I can’t quite picture any of them thinking this was funny, it would mean that our security is compromised. This network is supposed to be a secret.”

“We have a few people on the outside who actively help us maintain it as a distributed network.”

“Yeah, but even those people don’t know about me.”

Kunohara nodded. “The possibility of this being the work of some outsider does not seem likely, I grant you.”

“I think there must be a shadow-Orlando, although I’ve never seen one or heard even a hint of one before now.”

“That raises questions, too, Mr. Gardiner. It is possible that a duplicate of you might exist, and also possible that it could have escaped our notice for almost three years—it is a big network, after all. It is even possible that this duplicate uses your real name, still without attracting our attention. But there still remains one question that would have to be answered before we could accept this hypothesis as a valid theory.”

“I know.” Orlando squinted at a pair of what looked like flies chasing each other across the tops of the tree-tall grass, iridescent objects the size of taxis performing a midairpas de deux , their glassy wings sparking light. He wasn’t nuts about bugs in the first place, let alone bugs that were a lot bigger than he was, but there were moments like this when he could almost understand Kunohara’s world, if not Kunohara himself. “The problem with the shadow-Orlando theory is how she knewI had something to do with Orlando Gardiner when she found me in the Wodehouse world—and how she found me again in the Tolkien world. How could she track me like that?”

“The copies derived from Felix Jongleur’s daughter really are remarkable, as you know,” said Kunohara. “Some of the Avialle-shadows seem able to move at will from one simulation to another. Others can travel between simulations, but only in the workaday manner that your Worldwalkers employ, using the gateways. And some of the Avialles do not seem to move out of their home simulations at all, although those versions usually end up holding some powerful or unusual position in their worlds.”

“Yeah, like the one we met in the freezer in the cartoon Kitchen world. I guess the original Avialle—the real person—was utterly important to the old operating system, so maybe all her shadows are still kind of important to the system.” Something tugged at him, an idea that would not quite form. “But why? I mean, we’ve got a whole different operating system now, right?”

“In part, but it’s far more complicated than that.” Kunohara clicked his tongue against his teeth. “Not all the remnants of the old operating system, that poor tortured creature known as the Other, could be removed from the network. That is one of the reasons we suspected that some of its attempts to create a kind of life, as it did once already with raw materials from Sellars’ own experimentation, might have permeated the entire network and changed it into another order of thing entirely. A sort of living, evolving entity.”

“But it didn’t turn out to be that way. That’s what you’re always saying.”

“It’s true, there’s been no evidence of it. We’ve seen no other information-creatures like the ones it grew before, which are now gone. Nor has there been any sign of the evolutionary process beginning again in some other manner—not a one. You can trust me on that, Mr. Gardiner—the permutations of life, and now of pseudo-life, are my passion, and I have looked long and hard for any evidence of it on the current network. It is a fantastically complex creation, but essentially it has become what any other network is—an unliving artifact. I’m afraid that with the death of the Other and the escape of its information-creatures into space, the network is now effectively dead.”

Orlando had more or less known this—after all, the flatness of things, the lack of real change, had been troubling him for months—but being told it in such a categorical manner by Kunohara was a bit like being punched in the stomach. “But the sims themselves reproduce within their simworlds. They have babies. The animals have little animals. Look at your bugs here—they lay eggs, don’t they? Make little giant baby bugs?”

“Yes, but only within the matrix of the simulations. It is part of the program for the sims to appear to reproduce, but it is not true life, any more than it would be if you wrote a story in which someone gave birth. New life in this system is a construct. Look at your Avialle-shadows—some of them have perpetual pregnancies, as is probably the case with the one you are seeking. That is no real pregnancy, it is a programmed trait, like the color of a sim’s hair or how fast it can run.”

“But the last time I saw her, she looked really pregnant! None of the Avialle-shadows ever get to the point of showing her pregnancy. I read that in your own notes.”

Kunohara shook his head. “Mr. Gardiner, you are a smart young man and a very fine conservator of the network worlds and I’m sure that wherever he now is, Patrick Sellars is proud that he chose you, but you are not a scientist—not yet, anyway. Do you know for certain that she reallydid have the belly of a woman several months pregnant, or are you basing this entirely on what you think you saw from a distance of several meters for a period of just a few seconds? The simulated people can be nearly as psychologically complex as real people. Perhaps she feels herself to be with child but her belly does not grow—it never will grow, but she does not know this—so she pads herself with a pillow or some similar object, out of anxiety, perhaps. No, Mr. Gardiner, my friend, when you or I can examine her and see that she truly does have an advancing pregnancy, then we can begin to wonder about how she differs from the other Avialle Jongleur shadows. Until that time, I urge you not to jump to conclusions.”

Orlando didn’t particularly like being lectured. “So you’re saying that this whole weird mess is just another hysterical Avialle-clone who’s stumbled on my name somehow—nothing more, nothing less.”

“I am saying nothing about what itis , Mr. Gardiner, because I do not have enough information.” Kunohara steepled his fingers and slowly shook his head. “I am sharing what I suspect, and also what I strongly doubt. People spent trillions of credits on this network to make thingsappear as real as possible, but please do not confuse appearance with reality, and especially do not mistake the appearance of reproduction and other symptoms of life, however sophisticated, with real reproduction and actual life. Life is a very stubborn phenomenon that uses an astonishing number of strategies to perpetuate itself. What this network does is mimic those processes for the benefit of its human users, to create a realistic environment—an experience not tremendously different from an amusement-park ride. But the gap between the simulated thing and the actual process it imitates is vast indeed. Now, forgive me, but I have kept my lawyers waiting for half an hour.”

Orlando thanked him, but Kunohara was already making his call and only nodded. Orlando left him talking to himself, or so it appeared, as he gazed out across his supersized domain. Flowers tall as redwoods creaked and swayed in the freshening breeze.

Beezle Bug was waiting for Orlando back in his bedroom at Rivendell. Out of the elven public eye and with the rules now relaxed, the agent wasn’t even bothering to masquerade as a hobbit, but was back in his usual form, something that could have been a black dust mop with eyes, a cartoon spider, or even a particularly disturbing Rorschach ink blot. Beezle’s natural good looks were enhanced today by a floppy, striped top hat. He grinned toothily as Orlando came in and did a little hairy-legged dance.

“You’re in a good mood.”

“You don’t sound like you are, boss. Any luck with Kunohara?”

“Nothing that cleared anything up. I think he thinks I’m overreacting.”

“Well, I know what will cheer you up. You can meet my crew.”

“Your what? Oh, the sub-agents. Look, Beezle, I don’t think I’m up to having a bunch of bugs crawl all over me . . .”

“No bugs—you already told me.” The agent swept off his hat and a horde of small shapes began to jump out of it. Within seconds they were filling the floor all around him. “I kind of swiped the idea from the Dr. Seuss world. Meet Little Cats A1 through A99, B1 through B99, C1 through C99 . . .”

“I get the drift.” Already Orlando was ankle-deep in a lagoon of tiny, hatted cats. “I don’t need to meet all twenty-six hundred of them. I suppose I should count my blessings you didn’t steal your idea out ofHop on Pop .” He squinted at the little cats, which were now clambering up the bedclothes and trampolining across his pillow. “How the hell are these things going to get the kind of information we need discreetly? They’re not exactly inconspicuous, are they?”

“Boss, boss.” If Beezle had a neck, he would have been shaking his head. Instead, he was doing a sort of hairy hula. “They’re my sub-agents. You don’t think I go out looking for information looking like this, do you? Looking like anything, for that matter. I’m gear—good gear. I just interface with the stuff directly at machine level, and so will they. I just thought the reports would be more fun this way.”

“Great.” Beezle was the second person in an hour—second thing, anyway—to tell him that he was making the mistake of judging matters by face value. The network was seductive that way—so much time and money spent to make the worlds seem like real places. Reminded, he looked at his virtual wrist, his Tharagorn wrist since he was in Rivendell, and at the virtual friendship bracelet he now wore on it. It seemed like a real bracelet, but it wasn’t; it hadn’t ever been real, but it meant as much as or more than any actual pieces of shaped metal, because the friendship it representedwas real.

There was the core of an idea there, something that he needed to think about, but he was distracted as the living cat-carpet abruptly swirled up into a spinning cloud of miniature felines, then vanished back into Beezle’s hat with a loudpop . “Hey, boss, I forgot to tell you. They need you back in that P. G. Wodehouse simulation—someone left a note in your box at the club.”

“But the next meeting’s not for weeks.”

“Emergency get-together of the steering committee, and you’re in the rotation.”

“I don’t have time. Send an excuse for me.”

“Actually, you might want to go. They’re trying to get rid of whatsisname, de Limoux, the chairman.”

“What for?”

“Seems a couple of the women members are going to have babies and they say he’s the daddy.”

“I had nothing to do with it!” Sir Reginald was almost white with anger. “With either of them! I scarcely even know Mrs. Hayes, and I despise Maisie Macapan. Everyone knows that.”

Orlando himself only barely recognized the first name: she was a quiet colorless woman who seemed to owe her sim existence to some early equipment tests by one of the Grail Project’s female engineers. The second was a shadow of Ymona Dedoblanco, who had been the only woman in the Grail Brotherhood’s inner circle. The real woman could fairly be termed a monster, but her shadow merely seemed to incorporate some of her less murderous, albeit still irritating, faults, namely self-absorption almost to the point of megalomania. Like her template, she also had a full measure of ambition, which was why she and the Jongleur-shadow, Sir Reginald, often found themselves at cross-purposes.

“Why aren’t the two women here?” Orlando asked. “Shouldn’t de Limoux have a chance to confront his accusers?”

“Roland, you are an honorable man,” said Sir Reginald. “Yes, where are they? Why this star-chamber inquisition, based on accusations that are ridiculous on their face? Everyone knows I am a happily married man, with a wife and family in Third Republic Paris.”

“Happily married men may stray,” suggested a mustached traveler named Renzi whom Orlando suspected of being the shadow of another of the network’s early engineers, or possibly even a much-degraded version of his friend Paul Jonas.

“But not with that Macapan woman!” De Limoux seemed more offended by that idea than by the accusation itself. “I would sooner throw myself into a cage with a hungry lioness.”

“The women are both unwell, Mr. Roland,” Renzi explained to Orlando. “And their stories, it must be admitted, are a bit confusing. But they both swear that their charges are accurate, and although Miss Macapan is known to bear Sir Reginald some ill feeling, Mrs. Hayes does not seem like the type to invent such a thing.”

“Unless the Macapan bitch bribed her,” snarled de Limoux. “She would do anything to steal the chairmanship away.”

“If she could bribe one, she could bribe two,” Orlando said. “If she’s only trying to ruin your reputation, Sir Reginald, it seems strange she should make herself one of the victims, since everyone knows she has a grudge or two against you.”

“Surely you are not suggesting you believe this twaddle, Mr. Roland?”

“I’m not saying I believe or disbelieve anything, Sir Reginald. I don’t have enough information. I’m just thinking out loud.”

After that he let the others talk while the idea began to form. Even in its earliest shape, it was a very strange idea.

He had the travel records of the Worldwalkers Society members in hard copy form—leather-bound books handwritten in ink, in keeping with the simulation—spread all over the wooden table that served as his desk in Rivendell. A year earlier, Orlando himself had covertly lobbied for and helped to push through the particular Society rule that mandated all members keep diaries of their travels and make them available in the Society library inside the Drones Club, and now he was glad that he’d done it.

Orlando had noticed something very interesting about de Limoux and his two accusers and had drawn a small chart for himself to try to make sense out of their comings and goings. He had just confirmed his suspicion and was staring at the chart, chewing the end of his pencil in something like astonishment, when he heard his agent speaking in his ear.

“Boss?”

“Let me guess, Beezle. You’ve got some news for me. There’s another pregnancy at the Society and another denial of responsibility.”

After a moment’s pause, the agent said:“Hey, that’s pretty good, boss. How did you know about the Society thing?”

“I’m just starting to get a few ideas.”

“Do you want to know who’s involved?”

“If the ideas I’m starting to get are right, it doesn’t really matter. Let me go back to what I’m doing, Beezle. I’ll let you know when I need you, and I’ll probably need you soon.”

“Boss?”

“Beezle, I’m really trying to concentrate here. Thanks for bringing me the information, now get lost, okay?”

“It’s important, boss.”

Orlando sighed. “What is it?”

“Well, it’s about Little Cats N-42 and N-45—two of my sub-agents, remember? I think you might want to see about getting them a little treat. A year’s supply of fish heads or something.”

“Fish heads? . . . Beezle, you are making me crazy. What the hell are you talking about?”

“Just as a reward, maybe. Because they found your girlfriend.”

“They . . .” He sat up. “Are you sure?”

“Avialle-shadow, dark, curly hair, visibly pregnant. Yeah, pretty much.”

“Fish heads for everyone. No, give ’em the whole fish. Where?”

“Living in an apartment in Old Chicago, of all places. We don’t think she’s been there long. I’ve sent you the address, but it’s easy to find. It’s over a club on 37th Street at Giles.”

“I’m there.”

And he was, a subvocalized command taking him to the heart of the simworld more swiftly and certainly than any magic carpet. Sometimes it was okay being a sort of god.

Thirty-seventh Street was loud and lively. There were no Al Capone–type gangsters in sight, which was what Orlando usually associated with Old Chicago, but the sidewalks were crowded with quite a lot of ordinary people of several colors. Everybody seemed to be dressed up to go somewhere important, all the men in ties, the women in dresses. The apartment was above a club called Toothy’s Free-For-All, which had a buzzing neon mouth grinning above the door. Half a dozen black men in handsome, big-shouldered suits stood underneath the overhang, smoking and talking and looking up at the overcast sky, and coincidentally blocking the apartment building’s stairway next to the club’s front door. Orlando wondered if the men might be gangsters. He wasn’t even sure if they had African American gangsters back in those days, but he didn’t want to waste time on trouble. Unfortunately, he was wearing his only prepared sim for the Chicago world, which was inarguably Caucasian and, although reasonably tall and strong, meant more to be inconspicuous than to scare people into leaving him alone. But the men in front of the doorway seemed much more interested in the cigarette they were sharing; they hardly looked at him as he angled through and started up the narrow staircase.

“Looks like Missy got a gentleman caller,” one said to Orlando’s retreating back.

“He ain’t the first caller for that little girl,” said another, and the men laughed quietly.

The corridor smelled faintly of mildew, and the hall carpets were so dark with years of dirt that he couldn’t make out the pattern, although he was pretty sure there was one. He knocked on the door with the number on it that Beezle had given him.

She opened it on the chain. Her eyes widened. She let him in, but almost as if she were sleepwalking: she was clearly frightened and confused. She wore a quilted, pale blue housecoat and her hair was unbound, spilling over her shoulders.

“Who are you?” she asked.

If she was confused, he was even more so. “Who areyou ?” But he knew who she was, she was an Avialle Jongleur shadow—the dark curly hair, the big eyes, and especially the voice had removed all doubt. And, as Beezle had noted, she was quite visibly pregnant. The problem was, she wasn’this Avialle Jongleur shadow, and the differences weren’t subtle. Other than a similarity in the hair and eyes, this was a completely different woman.

“My . . . my name is Violet Jergens.” She seemed on the verge of tears. “What do you want? You look familiar.”

He had no other ideas, so he went for broke. “I’m Orlando Gardiner.”

For a moment her face almost seemed to light up, a child’s Christmas-morning face of wonder and joy, then her smile faltered and was replaced by bafflement and anxiety once more. “I’ve . . . I’ve dreamed of the day Orlando would come back to me, when we would be a family. But I’ve never seen you before.” She backed away, raising her hands. “Please, whoever you are, don’t hurt me.”

Orlando shook his head. He had been working on a theory that seemed very promising, but now he was confused again. “I’m sorry. I mean you no harm.” Perhaps his original idea could still make sense. He decided to ask her the same question he would have put to Livia Bard. “Just tell me one thing. What does Orlando Gardiner look like?”

The question seemed to anger her, but after a moment her face changed. “I . . . it has been such a hard time for me, lately. It is all . . . I would . . .”

“You don’t remember, do you?”

She was crying now. “I haven’t been well.”

He saw a chance to add another piece of information. “You’re going to have to trust me now. May I . . . may I feel your stomach?”

“What?”

“I swear I won’t harm you or the baby, Miss Jergens. Please. I promise I’ll be gentle.”

She didn’t assent, but she did not back away as he moved closer. He slowly extended his hand and put it on the curve of her belly where it made her housecoat swell like a wind-filled sail. The bump was firm and, as far as he could tell, warmly alive.

He was not at all surprised this time when Violet Jergens abruptly disappeared from her own apartment like a soap bubble popping. He did not bother looking for her on 37th Street or anywhere else. He didn’t need to find her, he was beginning to feel certain, because the chances were he’d be seeing her again, and others just like her.

Kunohara,he thought,you owe me an apology.

“I don’t get it,” Sam said. “So nowanother of those Avialles thinks you’re the father of her child?” She was talking to him on the phone because she was in the middle of finals and couldn’t leave her studying very long. It was kind of nice, Orlando decided, just talking face to face from different places. It was a bit like being back in the real world, except Sam Fredericks was in West Virginia and he, at the moment, was in Atlantis, or rather hovering above its watery grave, tidying up a wave-motion problem before the city rose out of the ocean and started its cycle again. “What’s going on?”

“I went back to see Kunohara. We think we’ve finally got the whole thing figured out.” He couldn’t help adding: “I figured it out myself, mostly, but he agrees, and he came up with the one part I couldn’t wrap my head around. It was the Worldwalkers Society pregnancies that tipped me off—there’s about half a dozen of them now, by the way. I haven’t figured out yet how to straighten out that part of the mess. They’re all utterly scanned about it, accusations, denials, meetings falling apart and people threatening legal action. And the thing is, just like with me and the Avialle-shadows, everybody’s right.”

“Hang on.” Sam put her book down. “I’ve been in, like, a death struggle with colligative properties all day for my chemistry final, but this is worse. What do you mean, everybody’s right? You said you never saw her before, let alone played bumper cars with her.”

Orlando shook his head. “I hadn’t and I didn’t. Or with the other one, and there’ll almost certainly be more. And the Society chairman de Limoux didn’t suddenly get sweet on his archenemy Maisie Macapan and give her the gift of motherhood, either—except he did, in a way.”

“That’s it—you’ve gone way far scanbark, Gardiner. You are barking to the moon and back, then taking a little side trip to Bark Island. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Kunohara got me thinking about it first. He was telling me off about mistaking appearance for reality, and he said something like,’Never underestimate how many strategies Life will use to perpetuate itself, Mr. Gardiner,’ in that kind of irritating way he has. Well, it irritates me, anyway. And that made me think about how this network has always been so complex. The Other, the original operating system, actually bred life from information viruses and antiviruses. And it made imitation children, based on real children. They may not have been alive, but they weren’t just normal sims, either.”

“Not it,him . The Other was a person, Orlando, despite all the horrible things the Grail people did to him. But he’s gone now.”

“Yeah, but the system was built around his brain, so his original impulses have an effect on everything about the network. And especially—and this is where I started to get my idea—his influence is utterly strong in the shadow-people, all those copies that he made and then released into the system.”

“Like your Society folks, the ones who can travel from world to world through the gateways. And the Avialle-shadows.”

“Who don’t need gateways, although they can use them. In fact, other than me, the Avialle-shadows are the only sims who can travel freely throughout the network. That makes them the most advanced of all the copies, really, even if a lot of them are a bit mental. So, me and the Avialle-shadows are pretty much the most advanced things in the network. Are you starting to get the picture yet?”

Sam frowned. “Don’t be all Professor Mysterioso. I was up practically all night last night studyingChemistry: The Central Science and I have a drastic headache.”

“Well, I’ve been up several nights in a row studying biology, so who’s zoomin’ now?”

“Just explain.”

“How about if I said that instead of ‘most advanced,’ you could also call me and the Avialle-shadows the fittest creatures on the network. As in ‘survival of the fittest’?”

“You mean it’s like an evolution thing?”

“Yeah, in a sense, it’s beginning to look that way. Somehow, even without the original operating system, this network still has a tendency toward . . . well, if not actually being alive, then to lifelike behavior. It wants to reproduce. In fact, now that the original brain of the network is gone, it may be more like a true organism. It’s just trying things and if some of them work, it will continue. See, in some ways the people in the network, at least those like me and the Society people who are more or less alive, we really are people. We think, we feel, we make plans. But to the network, we’re more like cells in a single organism—or maybe like individuals, but in a hive culture. The network is the hive, and we’re the drones and workers and all that. That’s the example that Kunohara kept using, anyway. He’s utterly excited about all this, by the way, even though it means he was wrong about the network being dead.”

“He would like it, if it’s got hives in it. But I still don’t get this, Orlando. Are you saying that the system wanted you and the Avialle-shadows to reproduce together? But you’d never seen each other and she’s already pregnant. That doesn’t make sense.”

“It does if you remember what Kunohara said, that we shouldn’t confuse appearance and reality, that life has lots of strategies. Just because we look like humans and the women appear to be pregnant in the ordinary, human way doesn’t really mean it has to be anything like the same process. Think about flowers. They reproduce, too, but sometimes the genetic information comes from two plants that are miles apart—they certainly don’t ever see each other. But when humans or us humanoid sims think they’re pregnant, the natural assumption is that it happened the old-fashioned way.” He frowned. “Unlike normal human reproduction, I have to say the network’s model is a little lacking in the motivations department—you know, thewe-do-it-because-it’s-fun stuff.”

“Slow down, Sherlock. So the system is just . . . throwing together genetic material from you and other people in the system to make new people? But you don’thave any genetic material.” She suddenly looked horrified. “I’m sorry, Orlando, I didn’t mean . . .”

“Don’t worry, I’ve been thinking about this stuff for days. This game is weird and different and even a dead guy like me can play. See, it’s not genetic material in the normal sense, it’s what Kunohara calls the network’s codification of us—the blueprints of us copies, which is the closest to genes we’re going to have. It’s just found a way to mix them up.” She still looked worried, so he smiled. “As far as throwing the stuff together—yes, more or less, but not so random. A good reproductive system usually has some component ofwinners-get-to-mate in it. That’s why my material showed up first, and it was paired with an Avialle-shadow—the fittest parents, remember?—and why more than one of the Avialles is pregnant by me. We have the most mobility, and in my case I have the most power—I’m not sure the network really factors that in, though—so my material . . . I’m going to need a new word, ‘material’ just doesn’t do it . . . my information is the most attractive. There’s only one me, but there are more than a few Avialle-shadows, and they’ll tend to select for my information if they can get it.”

“How? Does the network just . . . impregnate them with it?”

“No. This is another weird touch. I began to get a hint of it with the Society members. Two women got pregnant, and the Jongleur-shadow said he didn’t do it. After my own experience, I wondered if he might not be telling the truth. So I went through the travel diaries of the three people involved and found out they almost hadn’t ever been in the same worlds at the same time, let alone shacked up. In fact, they were only near each other during Worldwalkers meetings in the Wodehouse version of London, and the Jongleur-shadow had traveled back to his own home world right afterward, which meant there wasn’t much chance for a regular, old-fashioned simulated conception and pregnancy. But they allhad traveled through a lot of the same gateways between the network worlds, de Limoux first—he’s the man—and then the women.”

“Gateways? You mean it was the gateways?”

“We think so, yeah. Like the way bees brush up against pollen and then take it to another flower, or even the way some fish or insects sort of go to the same spot to deposit sperm and eggs, but they don’t have to be there at the same time. The system is making male information—from people like me and de Limoux—reproductively active in some way, and then receptive females can pick it up as they pass through the gateways. In fact, me and Kunohara are going to have to turn down the success rate of the connections or the Society women are going to be pregnant all the time.”

Sam was now waggling her hands in the way she did when she was having problems. “You mean you’re going to let it happen? But . . . but what kind of babies are these women going tohave ? This is far scanny, Orlando! I mean, if these pregnancies are like fish or insects or something, maybe they’ll have . . . uck! . . .swarms of babies.” For the second time in a few minutes, she looked stricken. “Will they even look like human children?”

“We think so. Even if the methodology is more like a hive or something, the network seems to be using a lot of human-type models for the actual pregnancies—it was programmed to simulate things like that already, remember. They seem to be moving along at the right rate, and the doctors in Wodehouse World who’ve checked the Society women only hear one baby heartbeat per mother. Also, there’s a couple of other clues that kind of suggest they’ll be human babies—or as close to it as the system can manage, considering that they’re not working with real humans as parents, but copies, some of them pretty imperfect. One is that it seems like a lot of trouble to use the human sims within the system as information donors—parents—if you’re going to change the information a whole bunch afterward. It’s easier just to use the human models of parents and children that are already built in, see? But the other reason is the answer to one of the questions that was bothering me even after I started to figure all this out. I couldn’t get it, but Kunohara did.”

“Go ahead. I’m just trying to swallow all this.” Sam really did look as though she had been thumped on the head. “Dozens of women lining up all over the network to have your babies, Gardiner. You must be living on Aren’t I Special Street.”

“It’d be a lot more flattering if it was happening the old-fashioned way. Anyway, while we were putting this all together, I told Kunohara that two questions were still burning up my brain. One was why the Avialle-shadows knew my name even though we’d never actually met. Kunohara figures that’s another proof we’ll have human-type babies. Higher mammals, especially humans, have long childhoods, and they need lots of parental care. It was in the interest of the network’s reproductive strategy to give both donors a chance of bonding together to raise the children, so the females get implanted with not just the male genetic information, but also the knowledge of who the father is and an ability to locate him, even if they don’t really know how the pregnancy itself happened. That’s how the Society women knew de Limoux was the daddy, and how the Avialle-shadows know they’re carrying my children—I guess I have to call them that, even if I didn’t really have anything to do with it.”

“But that doesn’t make sense, Orlando. I mean it does in a sort of way, but if the network really wants you to be involved with these children like a father, why would the mothers keep disappearing every time you hooked up with them?”

“See? Even after hours of rubbing your poor, sore brain against honors chemistry, Frederico, you’re still smarter than you think you are. That was exactly my other question. Kunohara figured that one out, too. It’s kind of embarrassing, really.”

“Chizz. Do tell.”

“Well, among higher mammals, especially the ones like us that need both parents, there’s usually an elaborate courtship strategy that helps to bind the father to the mother and the coming offspring. Since there isn’t anything remotely like courtship before the pregnancy in the network’s reproductive strategy . . . well, the system came up with a substitute. Kind of courtshipafter the pregnancy. Like a mating dance, or—what did Kunohara call it, bees do it? A nuptial flight.”

“Huh?”

“It only works really well for the Avialle-shadows because they can travel instantaneously—just vanish—but some of the Society women have also dropped out and disappeared in more conventional ways. This woman named Maisie Macapan has taken off for Imperial Rome, for instance. All this running away is supposed to keep the father interested. He chases after them, see?” He shook his head. “Boy, did it work on me.”

This was the hardest bit, and Orlando knew he was stalling. He thought about the last thing Sam had said before they disconnected.

“I guess it’s good,”she’d told him,“because you look utterly excited and interested. I was really beginning to worry about you—you seemed so depressed for a while. But what does it mean? How are you going to deal with being a father to all these babies, if that’s how it really turns out? What are you going to do, Orlando?”

And the truth was, he didn’t know—in fact, there were still hundreds of questions to be answered. How had the system arrived at this point, seemingly all at once? Had it been trying things out in some evolutionary laboratory world hidden in the folds of the network? Was it conscious, as the old operating system had been, or was it simply working out old tendencies left over from the original system? Or was it actually moving toward a new kind of consciousness—would Orlando and the other sims eventually become cells in some greater living thing? Some of the questions were downright scary. The elation of solving the mystery hadn’t entirely faded, but he knew the reality of this wasn’t going to be anywhere near as simple as explaining it to people. Not that explaining it was ever going to be easy—especially the explanation he was about to give, which was why he was stalling.

If there are dozens of children just from me, I can’t be a full-time father, obviously. We may have to turn the process off after this first group, at least as far as my own information—otherwise, what if the network plans to keep doing this all the time, generation after generation? Like I’m the queen bee, the king bee, whatever, and it’s going to make thousands of kids with me as a parent?He had some time to think about that, at least, to discuss the problem with Kunohara, since there were a limited number of potential mothers and the pregnancies seemed to be lasting as long as in the real world. The entomologist was in rapture with these new developments, and was hurrying to settle his court case so that he could throw himself into investigating the new paradigm.

Easy for him—his information isn’t copied into the system. He’s not going to be a dad to dozens of kids, to have all that responsibility.But if there was ever anyone in a position to protect his children, it was Orlando Gardiner, network ranger.After all, like they used to say about the sheriffs in the Wild West, I’m all the law there is this side of reality.

God, I don’t know. I’ll figure it out. I’ve got friends. It’ll be weird, but I’m dead and I’m on my way to visit my folks, so how much weirder can things get? It’ll be an adventure.

I’m going to be a father! Me!He couldn’t get over it. It was terrifying and exciting. What would the children be like? What would happen to the network as this first generation grew and then reproduced themselves, creating ever more complex patterns of inheritance? No one in the history of humanity had ever experienced anything like this.Unknown country. It’s all unknown country ahead.

“I’m going now, Beezle,” he announced. “I don’t want to be interrupted unless the universe as we know it is actually collapsing, okay? Take messages.”

“No problem, boss. I’ll just hang out here in imaginary space and play with the cats.”

Orlando summoned up the connection for his parents’ house. This time he would even be willing to wear that horrid plasteel scarecrow. After all their work arranging that surreal and touching birthday party at Rivendell, he felt he owed Conrad and Vivien a little something. Even more importantly, he wanted them in a good mood when he told them that against all logic, they were apparently going to be grandparents after all.

Maybe forty or fifty times.