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Tumbling After

Paul Witcover

TUMBLING AFTER

PAUL WITCOVER

 HarperCollins e-books

For my mother and father

AND

*For Chris Anderson, John Lamar, Tom Mustakos
Fellow Chroniclers of the Damned*

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JACK AND JILL

I caught it! he thinks. *I actually caught it!*

As the wave swells beneath him, Jack looks out over the windswept, all-but-deserted beach (where his sister Jilly stands watching, dwindled to doll size) and surrenders to the same mix of elation and terror that makes roller coasters irresistible. The cry that bursts from his lips is the primordial cry of the ocean: raw, fierce, and proud. Jack's up so high that he can see over the crest of the dunes to the houses beyond—even to his own house, where the antlike figures of his father, Bill, his older sister, Ellen, and Uncle Jimmy are hard at work taking down the porch screens. It seems entirely possible that he might fly to them, joining the gulls angling through the air on the knife-edge gusts and thrusts of wind preceding Belle like the outriders of an advancing army. *Look! Up in the sky! It's a bird; it's a plane; no, it's Super Jack!*

The ocean yaws and pitches. The next thing he knows, he's falling. The surf is miles below. He screams, desperately trying to right himself, or the world. At the same time, he catches sight of Jilly. She's up to her waist in the surf, arms rigid at her sides, gazing

at him with an expression of fearful excitement, her mouth open as if she's shouting at the top of her lungs. But he can't hear her. Then he can't see her anymore either, because the wave curls behind him and slaps him down. There's no time to register the pain of striking the surface in the pummeling he receives beneath it as the wave rolls him toward shore. Jack tumbles like a sneaker in a washing machine, slammed into the bottom again and again until his body is numb and all sense of direction fled. His lungs burn with the need for air. A directionless roar envelops him.

He struggles against the current, but the incoming surge passes him off smoothly to the outgoing tide, which drags him back the way he'd come . . . or a different way, he can't tell. At last he goes limp, thinking to conserve his strength. He's wishing he hadn't come down to the beach with Jilly to look at the storm-tossed surf; more than anything, he's wishing he hadn't accepted her dare to ride one of the enormous waves. "In or else, Jack," she'd taunted. "You're not chicken, are ya?"

When will he learn? Why does he let her talk him into these things? Bill's going to kill him . . . assuming the ocean doesn't do the job first. He'd give anything to go back and change the moment when he'd pulled off his shirt and run headlong into the water. It seems like ages ago; another life altogether. Pinpricks of light are flaring and dying in the dark of his inner vision, illuminating shapes he doesn't want to see: immense, unmoving forms that also take notice of him somehow, as if the flashes by which he sees them are lighting him up as well, bringing him fitfully, like a flickering ghost, across some invisible threshold and into the range of their perceptions. He senses a sluggish stirring in the depths and imagines a scaly arm or tentacle reaching for him as he might reach to swat a fly. He strikes out blindly.

The current falls away as if grown weary of the game. With the last of his hoarded strength, Jack kicks and claws his way toward what he hopes is the surface.

All at once, there's air to breathe . . . if you call it breathing. Sputtering, half-blinded by spume and spray, he flounders, legs churning, arms splashing. Shards of leaden sky shatter across his

eyes, but no glimpse of shore obtrudes to guide him, no hint of where he is in relation to the land. For all he knows, he's been swept miles out to sea. His straining toes brush no bottom. Wherever he turns, a wave is waiting to slap him in the face. He wants nothing more than to strike back, bursting with a rage that rises up in him like the wave he'd caught, or that had caught him, and, like it, crashes down. It pours through and out of him, leaving him drained, empty, tossed about like a cork. It's all he can do to keep his head above water.

Dazed and half-drowned, Jack finds himself recalling the expression on Jilly's face, the naked avidity with which, having set these events in motion, she'd watched them take their course, her insatiable eyes drinking in his spill like she thirsted for it, and it's this memory, rather than his current predicament, that swings open, wider than ever, the floodgates of his fear: his deepest, most secret and spectacular fear. Not of dying. No, it's the prospect of losing Jilly that truly terrifies him.

But that can't happen. He won't let it. He opens his mouth to call her name. Water rushes in. He swallows it like a stone. With a last, stinging slap, the ocean slams over his head, severing his sight from the sky. Sinking into those sisterless depths, he feels himself breaking apart, all the bits and pieces of Jack Doone dispersing in different directions like minnows fleeing a predatory darkness.



Kestrel wakes with a groan. He lies unmoving amid the tangled sheets of the bed, his thoughts sluggish and muddy. The room stinks of stale beer and cigarette smoke. What little light filters past the curtains reveals a shadowy murk that looms up like a wave before his bleary, half-open eye. He watches with vague interest the emergence of beer bottles, cigarette butts, pizza crusts, loose feathers, and dirty clothes from this inchoate mass, not quite connecting any of it with certain dimly remembered events of the previous night. He's doing his best to ignore an urgent need to piss. Every muscle and bone in his body hurts. His teeth hurt. His *eyelashes*. He

feels like he might be all right if he could lie absolutely still for about a thousand years.

“Gad?” he croaks. “Pip?”

No answer. His friends still asleep, the lazy good-for-nothings. The burning in his bladder is preventing his own return to that enviable state. With another groan, louder and more self-pitying, not just an expression but an advertisement of suffering, Kestrel rolls onto the floor, a journey of mere inches; at some point and for some reason, both equally forgotten, he or someone else had slid the thin mattress off the bed. Which, he realizes, explains the odd perspective of the beer bottles. Still, as he rises to his feet and lurches into the bathroom, a nagging doubt accompanies him, as if he’s overlooked something. He passes his hand over the lumen on the bathroom wall, then immediately deactivates it, senses shrieking in protest at the hammerflash of light, and does his business in the dark. It’s only when he staggers back into the room that Kestrel notices the other beds are empty.

And freezes long enough to digest the implications of this discovery. When he has, he rushes to the window and yanks the curtains open, recoiling from an explosion of sunlight and startled pigeons on the ledge outside. He squints with horror into the brightness of day. Two floors below, Bayberry Street bustles with carriages and pedestrians. Kestrel feels like he’s been caught in a downdraft, a dangerous wind shear.

Cursing, he faces back into the room and sees that a note has been left on top of one of the beds. He wafts it to him, reads Gad’s scribbled hand: *Kes—tried to wake you. Gone to the Gate. See you there!*

He crumples the paper, lets it fall to the floor. *Tried to wake you*—not too Oddsdamn hard, they hadn’t! How difficult can it be to wake one sleeping person? That, come to think of it, he does kind of half-remember, like the ragged remnant of a dream, having been jolted awake by the impact of his mattress striking the floor, and threatening the disturbers of his sleep with grievous bodily harm if they didn’t leave him alone, is irrelevant. What matters is that his two best friends have deserted him. The pendulum clock on the wall

reads twenty past ten: pentad assignments are almost certainly posted by now.

But maybe it isn't too late, after all. Perhaps there's been a delay, and he can still catch the tail end of the ceremony. Scarcely pausing to preen before the bathroom mirror, licking his hands and smoothing the worst of his ruffled feathers back into place so that it doesn't look quite as much like he's just flown backward through a hurricane, Kestrel throws on clean clothes, fastens his dice pouch to his belt, swings his half-empty waterskin over his neck, and clatters down the stairs to the lobby of the Pigeon's Roost . . . where he collides with the eponymous innkeeper, a cadaverous, something-more-than-middle-aged airie with a scarred and withered wing his colorful clothing cannot heal or conceal.

"Getting a late start this morning, young Kestrel?" There's nothing pleasant in Pigeon's pinched smile or the frosty glitter of his gray eyes beneath bushy pewter eyebrows. The vibrant red feathers of his headcrest fan open as he speaks, resembling a crown of flames in the brilliant sunlight streaming through the front windows.

Kestrel blushes at the sudden memory of jeering at Pigeon and pelting him with pizza crusts when he'd come to their room for the third time with a complaint about the noise; this after the common room had closed, and they'd moved the party upstairs. "Er, about last night," he begins. "I feel terrible . . ."

"You look it." Pigeon grunts with satisfaction, headcrest stiff and at its full extension. His pointed ears have pricked up as well, hoisted by fine silver chains that run from the top and sides of his scalp to a series of small rings and studs piercing the helixes of his ears. Such elaborate architectures of jewelry, reminiscent of the rigging of sailing ships or suspension bridges, are considered fashionable among airies of Pigeon's generation, but Kestrel and his friends eschew such garish ornamentation. Kestrel wears but a single piece of jewelry, a thin chain of three braided threads—two gold, one silver—that coils about his left ear to dangle an inch below the lobe. He has a habit of flicking the loose ends with his index finger when nervous or impatient, as now.

"I'm sorry about the noise and, well, all the rest of it," he gamely

presses on, keeping his voice low so that the clerk at the front desk—a delph in dark glasses who stands as motionless as the pile of rocks he pretty much resembles—won't overhear the humiliating apology. And because he's a trifle sensitive just now to loud voices, including his own. On the hangover scale of one to ten, he's got to be pushing eleven.

"So you've got some manners after all." Pigeon's head bobs in a fashion queasily reminiscent of his namesake bird, which Kestrel has never encountered in such numbers as here in *Mutatis Mutandis*, strutting about the busy streets of the Commonwealth's capital like they own the place. The pigeon population of distant Wafting, his home nesting, is kept small and timid by the many species of raptors that call the Featherstone Mountains home.

"Which is more than I can say for your molting friends," the innkeeper continues in a growl. "Slunk out of here this morning without so much as a peep. I was within a feather of tossing the lot of you out last night. I still might."

Eager as he is to be gone, Kestrel's ashamed of his behavior and doesn't want to make things worse by rushing off. Rumor has it that Pigeon's withered wing is a souvenir of his pilgrimage; but however he got it, the injury prevents him from flying now. Oh, he can summon a wind strong enough to sweep himself aloft, but that isn't *real* flying. Not to an airie. There's no precision to it, no grace. The truth is, Kestrel and the others treated him so meanly because his handicap had awakened not just their pity but their darkest apprehensions of suffering a similar injury. But that's no excuse. Kestrel thanks the Odds that his parents are staying with boggle friends in another quarter of the city. His father, Scoter, had admonished him during the long flight from Wafting to remember that he would be representing his nesting at the Proving and afterward and to act accordingly. Kestrel's pretty sure that throwing pizza crusts at the crippled proprietor of one's lodging while singing obscene limericks at the top of one's lungs isn't what his father had in mind. "We're grateful that you didn't," he says. "We'll pay for any damage or inconvenience."

Pigeon's smile grows warmer, his headcrest relaxing into a less

martial display. "Hard as it might be for some to imagine, I was young once. Raised a bit of a ruckus myself the night after I passed my Proving. Took me four tries: of course, the tests were harder in those days—ask anyone. So I had cause to celebrate!" He whistles his laughter, fine chains glittering frostily amid his feathers; across the lobby, the delph behind the front desk turns a face as rough and inscrutable as granite in their direction. "No, I don't begrudge noise or high spirits," says Pigeon. "It's rudeness I can't abide. After all, master Kestrel, we're airies, ain't we?"

"Yes, sir." Kestrel swallows, wondering if Pigeon's feathers are dyed or are naturally that excruciating shade of red. His hangover has entered into sadistic symbiosis with his senses; the noises from Bayberry Street, the countless bruises and muscle strains the Proving had inflicted on his body and wings, the smells from the common room, of frying sausages, eggs, and onions mixed with tobacco and marijuana smoke . . . all of it's growing more and more intolerable. He can feel each individual feather on his body, and every one of them aches in its own unique way.

"I expect that sort of behavior from the, er, *lower races*," Pigeon continues, dropping his voice a notch and flashing Kestrel a wink at the phrase, employed by some airies as a euphemism for their earth-bound brethren, "but we airies should be above all that. They look up to us, you know. We have to set an example."

"Yes, sir," Kestrel repeats, impatience and discomfort finally outweighing his guilt and very nearly his politeness. It's like listening to one of Scoter's interminable lectures. He flicks the end of his earpiece. "It won't happen again."

A trio of dark-skinned manders has meanwhile entered the inn: two females and a male. The air shimmers with radiated heat around their scantily clad bodies, giving them an insubstantial, shadowy look, like walking mirages.

"I'll be right with you, gentlemutes," Pigeon calls out in a hearty voice, gesturing to the desk clerk to remain at his post, although the delph has shown no inclination to leave it.

With polite nods, the manders step into the common room, just off the lobby.

Pigeon puffs out his sunken cheeks in a theatrical sigh. "Well, you'll excuse me: duty calls. Good as they are for business, for no one thirsts like a mander, I'm always worried they'll burn the place down, and the servant, Odds save her, is a flighty thing who gets so nervous around manders that she costs me a fortune in spillage. Will you be wanting breakfast, master Kestrel?"

Kestrel winces, stomach churning at the thought of food. "I'm late as it is."

"Then I wish you good fortune. May your pentad prove as loyal and brave, and your pilgrimage as profitable, as mine."

Kestrel's smile freezes at the possibility that Pigeon's words, in the guise of a blessing, are actually a curse: a wish, in revenge for those pizza crusts and cruel taunts, that Kestrel, too, enjoy the profit of a crippling injury.

But the innkeeper has already turned and is hurrying away.



Jack? Wake up, damn it! Don't you do this to me!"

How long has he been hearing that voice? Even before he could make out the words, or remembered there were such things as words, it had been present, an essential thread weaving in and out of his awareness, stitching its purposeful way through tangles of other nameless sounds, now here, now gone, but always returning . . . and in that going and returning a pattern first sensed, then apprehended, finally anticipated and followed, until out of it had emerged the hiss of windblown sand, the drumming of surf, the quarrelsome keening of seagulls, and, running through it all, holding it all together, Jilly's anxious, imperious voice.

"Jack, I'm warning you . . ."

He lies still. He feels like he's reached the end of a long journey, one that ate up miles and years, exhausting strength and memory. But now he's come home.

"You're faking. I can tell."

With that, he's taken hold of by the shoulders and shaken, the back of his head slipping from a cushioning softness he hadn't been

aware of until then to strike something hard yet yielding: sand. His eyes flutter open, less from the impact than the sensation, pregnant with *déjà vu*, of tumbling from a greater height.

"I knew it!" crows the blurry shape of his twin, triumph in her voice but also relief. Then she's hugging him, scattering kisses over his face, butterflies lighting on his wet skin for an instant before flitting away again.

Blinking past her into a sky from which the sun seems to have disappeared, eyes stung to tears despite the premature darkening of the day beneath clouds as gray and menacing as a wasp's nest, Jack remembers all at once: the wave cresting, crashing; his headlong fall; fighting his way to the surface only to sink again as though pulled down by an unseen hand. He turns his head and retches into the sand.

"Hey, watch it, *jeezus!*"

He feels himself shoved away. Indignation rises, but it's another moment before he's able to prop himself on one elbow and glare up at her: a skinny girl with straight black hair blown forward to frame her narrow face like wings, sun-bronzed skin glistening against the shower-door opacity of the sky.

"Are you okay?" Dressed in cutoffs and a drenched I ♥ NY T-shirt (a birthday gift from Uncle Jimmy), Jilly kneels before him in the sand. She regards him warily, keeping her distance as if afraid he might start puking again. Her eyes are sea-blue pansies cored with dark, dilated hearts. The blue of Jack's eyes is softer, more sky than sea: the sun-bleached blue of cloudless August afternoons here in Middlesex Beach, Delaware, the kind of day when no hint of a breeze stirs the sultry air and time hangs limp as laundry pinned to sagging clotheslines. Not this kind of day.

Jack's whole body is a single undifferentiated throbbing bruise. He spits away the sour aftertaste of sickness and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand . . . transferring a gritty film of sand to his lips. He spits again, growls: "Fat lot you care. It's pure luck I didn't drown."

"Luck nothing. Who do you think pulled you out? Superman?"

"You pulled me out?"

"Somebody had to. You should be thanking me."

"It's because of you I went in. You dared me."

"You dared me first; I just dared you back."

Jack sits up at that, wincing with the movement and claspings his knees to his bare chest. He shivers in the wind and what it carries: not simply a chill and scattered drops of rain or sea spray but grains of sand that sting like tiny arrows. Was she right? Had he started it? He can't remember who'd issued the first dare. "Anyway," he insists, "you should have stopped me, Jilly. You should have *known*."

Instances have become enshrined in Doone family lore wherein one of the twins, for no apparent reason, has flinched or cried out or burst into tears, it being established only later that the other, separated by a distance beyond the normal range of human senses, had stubbed a toe or pricked a finger, their responses so finely attuned, so closely calibrated, it's like they share a single nervous system. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. There's more, lots more, that Jack and Jilly keep to themselves as much to avoid being labeled freaks as because it's nobody else's business. Such as, for example, dreaming the same dream, overhearing snippets of each other's thoughts, and sensing when something significant is about to happen to each other (but, weirdly, not to themselves) before it does . . . sometimes with sufficient notice and precision to permit a warning by which the other can avoid whatever destiny was or had been or would have been (such distinctions become a bit confusing!) lurking around the next corner. None of these things take place routinely or predictably, but they do take place.

Jilly shrugs, hugging herself against the stiffening wind; Belle is coming on fast. "I said something bad was going to happen. I warned you not to go in. You called me a chicken and went in anyway. What was I supposed to do: sock you?"

"I did it, though," he says. "I rode the wave."

She rolls her eyes. "If you call that riding."

"I did too ride it!"

"Jack, you didn't make it out past your waist before you got clobbered. And I mean *clobbered*. Pow! I thought you were a goner!"

Jilly's lower lip is trembling with more than cold, and Jack real-

izes she's on the verge of tears because of him, or the nearness of losing him, just as he'd suffered most, even in what he'd thought were his last moments, at the imminence and inevitability of a final parting from her, a parting he'd told himself could have been avoided with a simple warning in a past fast receding yet still as close as the fast-approaching future that had seemed to hold, like an open grave into which he couldn't help but tumble, the empty space of his drowning. Except he hadn't drowned. Jilly had saved him. Given that fact, it's no longer so important to insist upon having ridden the wave. How could he have doubted her? Her distress is a gratifying reminder of how deeply they're connected. The currents of happiness and pain that buffet her heart have their source in him, just as his heart, bulging with guilt and gratitude, rises and falls to her tides.

She pushes to her feet. "C'mon, Jack. Let's go home." She holds out her right hand; they clasp arms, mirror images, and she hauls him up with a grunt. But she doesn't let go. Her grip tightens, fingernails digging in until he winces and nearly cries out, would cry out if not for her forbidding eyes, which fix his own from inches away with a stare of such piercing severity he can't move or speak. He's hypnotized, heart thudding in the hollow of his chest.

"Next time I *will* sock you, jerk," she says in a low voice that underscores the threat in her eyes. "See if I don't!"

Then she's off, running across the beach toward the grass-covered dunes (the long, silvery green stalks pressed almost flat by the strongest gusts), where weathered wooden stairs rise like the remains of an ancient shipwreck returned to the surface by slow-cycling currents of sand. A pair of seagulls sidling stoop-shouldered from her path spread their wings and are snatched up and flung away like shuriken hurled by ninjas. The keening complaints of the birds beat back briefly against the wind before they, too, are carried away. All the while, the wind is howling through the rusting metal struts of the old World War II observation tower that stands alone, between the houses of Middlesex and those of Bethany Beach a mile beyond, a bare-bones structure rising a hundred feet or so above the dunes, no longer used except by birds and kids who ignore the NO

TRESPASSING signs to climb the corroded iron ladder up to a cramped platform with a grillwork floor where you can see all the way to the high-rises of Ocean City. Jack and Jilly are no strangers to that climb, nor to the punishments that follow, for it's impossible to hide up there, in plain view. What, Jack wonders, would it be like to be up there now?

He limps to where his discarded T-shirt (like Jilly's, a birthday gift from Uncle Jimmy) lies wadded on the beach. Reaching to pick it up, he sees a thin smear of blood along his forearm and left hand. A queasy feeling invades him, a weakness in the knees as though he might faint. But then it's gone. He stalks stiff-legged as any seagull down the slope of the beach, kicking his way through dirty brown agglomerations of sand and sea-foam skittering by like tumbleweeds, and wades up to his ankles in the surf. Squatting, he washes the blood and sand from his arm, scratched either by Jilly's fingernails or by the abrasive ocean floor; the cuts are shallow and have already stopped bleeding. He takes a moment to dig out as much sand as he can from the folds and pockets of his cutoffs, but there's plenty he can't get to without undressing. He stands and, hugging himself, looks out at the ocean.

Has the surf grown rougher? The waves are living mountains wrestling against each other, a no-holds-barred free-for-all that extends all the way to the horizon . . . not that there's much of a horizon, just a nebulous zone of dense, gunmetal gray flecked with whitecaps and the occasional pale flash of a gull's wing where sea and sky commingle. Was he really out there? It hardly seems possible that he would have been brave—or stupid—enough to go, much less lucky enough to survive.

He shudders, remembering the feel of water closing over his head. The finality of it. And at something else, too, less presence than corrupting essence, something with him in the water and, he senses, here with him still on land: a cold, uncanny dread like that which clings to accustomed objects in the aftermath of a nightmare, turning them strange without making them unfamiliar.

Jack steps back from an ocean made similarly strange, an old friend he can no longer trust. He's afraid to turn his back, afraid it

might reach out for him and drag him in again. But he forces himself to do so, and to walk at a measured pace all the way back to his T-shirt. He picks it up, gives it a desultory shaking and tugs it (gasping as a sharp pain stabs his left arm) over his head even though it's inside out, its message visible through the wet white cotton as YH ♣ I.

Still not looking back, he hurries after Jilly, running up the stairs and down the narrow walkway between the Scelsa and Cardis houses (both boarded up, abandoned), the tough soles of his bare feet scuffing over the worn wooden boards as pine boughs thrash overhead and the rope of the Cardis's flagless flagpole, bellying loosely in the wind, strikes the metal again and again like the frantic ringing of an alarm.

UNCLE JIMMY, ELLEN, AND BILL HAVE FINISHED taking down the porch screens and are wrestling plywood boards over the big downstairs windows when Jack enters the yard. The Doone house is an A-frame perched—like its neighbors here on the ocean side of Route 1—some nine or ten feet above the ground on wooden pilings that have the look of telephone poles . . . which is pretty much what they are, only driven so far into the sandy soil that little more than a third of their length protrudes above the surface.

“Change out of those wet clothes and lend a hand,” roars Bill above the wind as Jack hurries along the flagstone path that runs down one side of the brown-and-white-pebbled driveway. A rain-spattered, burgundy-colored Toyota Corolla with DC tags and a Washington Redskins bumper sticker is parked there, pulled halfway under the shelter of the overhanging deck. Beside it is Uncle Jimmy's battered Beetle, a sixties survivor with a patchy paint job of different colors like some automotive tie-dye, fuzzy red dice hanging like overripe apples from the rearview mirror, New York plates, and a pair of bumper stickers: *ROLE PLAYERS DO IT WITH IMAGINATION* and *I PLAY DICE WITH MY UNIVERSE*.

“Aye-aye, sir,” Jack calls out, beginning to climb the stairs to the deck.

"Where do you think you're going?"

He halts at the peremptory tone, one hand on the railing, foot resting on the bottom step, and looks up to see his father's stern face and seventeen-year-old Ellen's amused, half-gloating one in its blowsy nest of blond hair peering down at him. *Uh-oh*, he thinks. "Um, to get dry clothes like you told me?"

"Not before you shower off that sand. How many times do I have to tell you kids not to track sand into this house?"

"But I thought—"

Bill interrupts as though Jack's this week's guest victim on *Inside the Beltway*. "No, Jack, you didn't. I mean, look at you. You promised me you wouldn't go into the water. Just a quick peek, you said."

"But Jilly—"

"I don't care who did what to whom."

He feels his stomach clench. Oh, Ellen is enjoying this! She can barely contain herself; there's nothing she finds more entertaining than the troubles of others. Especially if those others happen to be her little brother and/or sister. Jack calls down curses on her head. A bolt of lightning to frazzle that phony dyed hair, a bomb of bird shit, a falling house, anything to wipe away her smug smile. All, however, in vain.

"Both of you are going to be punished," Bill continues. "But right now we've got to get these windows boarded up before Belle gets any worse. I want you back, ready to help, in five minutes. Understood?"

He nods.

"What are you waiting for: an invitation?"

Face burning, Jack turns away to the bark of Ellen's laughter.

"I'll give you something to laugh about, El," his father warns.

"But I wasn't—"

"Whoa! Hang on, Jim!"

"Damn!" comes Uncle Jimmy's voice. "Sucker almost blew right out of my hands!"

"Here, I've got it now . . ."

Jack ducks behind the stairs, stepping onto the walkway that leads beneath the porch to the outside shower stall, occupied by a pair of bony ankles. "Hurry up, Jilly. I gotta get in there!"

“So come in already. It’s not locked.”

He opens the door and enters, stepping out of the worst of the wind, which shoves the door shut behind him like the palm of an invisible hand. Jilly flashes him a smile. And a smile’s not all she flashes: drying herself with a maroon-and-gold beach towel decorated with fist-sized images of football helmets bearing the Indian-head logo of the Redskins, she exposes a patchwork of bronze and ivory skin. But it’s nothing Jack hasn’t seen before; Jilly’s string-bean body is nearly as familiar to him as his own. Which doesn’t mean he’s unaware of the physical differences, or uninterested in them, especially now that puberty has begun to shape its changes like a sculptor working from the inside out. But this is not just some girl here. This is *Jilly*. His twin, the sharer of his thoughts, his senses . . . even—or so it seems to him at times—his skin. There are no secrets between them, no need for conventional modesties.

Jilly’s T-shirt and cutoffs, flung over the wooden shower rod, drip onto the glistening dark boards of the floor. A fresh towel hangs from a hook on the wall behind her, protected from the splashing of the shower, which she’s left on, by a thin plywood partition that splits the stall in two. Spiders find the corners cozy and have proved impossible to evict; any webs torn down by day are woven anew, Penelope-like, overnight. No one even bothers anymore except their mother, and Peggy has yet to put in an appearance at the house this month.

“Dad’s pissed,” says Jack, trying to ignore the stab of pain in his left arm as he peels off his T-shirt, turning it right side out in the process, I ♣ NY. He steps into the forceful spray of middling-hot water whose sting, for a second, reminds him of the pins-and-needles sensation of sand grains pelting his skin.

“Big whoop.” Jilly shrugs, rolls her eyes. “He’ll just ground us again.”

Bill and Peggy divide the beach house between them. By the terms of the divorce, he gets one week, she gets the next. But since they both work for a living—Peggy as a paralegal, Bill as a political reporter for the *Washington Star* and a regular on *Inside the Beltway*

(a fractious local TV talk show)—the best they usually manage, vacations aside, is weekends. Most summer weeks they rent out the house, but Uncle Jimmy takes August off from his job (“If you can call it that,” says Bill) as a game designer in New York City and drives down to stand *in loco parentis* (“Accent on the loco,” quoth Bill) for Jack, Jilly, and Ellen. Bill and Peggy pop in, if at all, on alternate weekends during the month, sometimes alone, sometimes with friends or lovers. Four years after the divorce, neither of them has settled into a serious new relationship, much less remarried. Ellen still holds out hope of a reconciliation; but Jack remembers the tense, sullen silences and shrill shouting matches too well to indulge in the fantasy that things would be any better now.

The arrangement with Uncle Jimmy, like all such arrangements, has evolved its own set of unspoken rules and understandings, one of which is that any weekend punishment meted out by Bill or Peggy vanishes when they do. Uncle Jimmy doesn’t like playing the heavy with his nieces and nephew. Ninety-nine percent of the time he’s on their side anyway. At twenty-six, a man who dreams up games for a living, he’s closer in age and sensibility to them than he is to his half brother and his half brother’s ex-wife; he could pass for Ellen’s cool older brother. But this unofficial amnesty policy has to stay their little secret. If Bill or Peggy were to find out what’s going on—or not going on—in their absence . . . Well, better safe than sorry. That’s one thing Jack, Jilly, and Ellen agree on. Pretty much the only thing.

“Jeez, will you check out all this sand,” marvels Jack as he steps out of the cutoffs that are his last remaining piece of clothing. “It’s weird to think of the ocean being so goddamn sandy.” Turning the pockets inside out, he deposits piles of the stuff on the floorboards at his feet, where the shower whisks it all away.

Jilly’s unimpressed. “Huh. Be weirder if it wasn’t. What’s the ocean but a bunch of sand with tons of water on top of it?” And begins singing in a voice like a squeaky door hinge: “*The ocean is a desert with its life underground and the perfect disguise abooooove . . .*”

Jack’s too busy flashing on pyramids at the bottom of the sea to listen. Obsidian temples loom large as mountains in his mind’s eye,

outlines wavering in a murky, phosphorescent glow. It's an image he's seen before, something out of a comic book, or one of Uncle Jimmy's prototype games, or perhaps a movie or a dream. He feels his senses swimming, sucked under, and reaches out to steady himself.

"Hey!"

Jilly's cry snaps him back. She's there with him in the shower, naked, propping him up in her arms. "What's the matter with you?"

He can't find words to answer. A hissing haunts his head like the ghost of the sea in a shell.

"Shit. You better sit down. Come on."

She leads him out of the shower, around the partition to the narrow bench built into the back of the stall. "Say something, Jack. You're scaring me!"

He shakes his head as she guides him onto the bench. The solidity beneath his butt is reassuring, a promise from the world not to let him fall. He hunches forward, elbows on knees, forehead nestled in the palms of his hands, and breathes slowly, deeply.

"Jack? Jilly?" Bill's voice booms from above, making them jump. "What's going on down there?"

"Nothing," answers Jilly.

"Are you fighting?"

"No!"

"You better not be. I want you up here on the double. Both of you."

"We'll be right there!" Then, in a whisper as she kneels beside him: "Jack!"

"I'm okay," he manages, eyes closed, head still bowed. The hissing in his ears is softer now, receding, the dizziness passing along with it. The throbbing in his arm is like the drumbeat of surf on a faraway shore. "I just need to sit here for a minute."

Her fingers unclench, releasing him. "Jesus, you just about passed out! What's wrong? Are you sick?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think you have a concussion or something? Did you bump your head on the bottom when the wave knocked you over? I mean, maybe you should see a doctor . . ."

"No! Don't tell anybody, Jilly. I'm fine."

"Don't try to bullshit me, Jack Doone! Who do you think you're talking to? I felt it, too, okay? Some of it, anyways."

He looks up at that. "What did you feel?"

Blue eyes widen in a face not so much masked in shadow as aged by it, so that for one disconcerting second he's seeing a teenaged Jilly gazing back at him in alarm, translucent features superimposed over his sister's in the manner of a double exposure: inexactly, out of phase. "You're bleeding," say the two Jillys as one, and with that the illusion shimmers like a mirage and is gone, the older face sinking back into the younger.

"What?"

"Your nose." She moves to touch him, but his own hand gets there first.

"Damn." What glistens on the backs of his fingers doesn't resemble blood. It's more like some liquid form of darkness.

"Does it hurt?"

"No."

"Dad sees that, he's gonna think we've been fighting for sure."

"Help me into the shower." He can't bear to have it on him another minute, as if the stuff might spread up his arm, engulf him . . .

Jilly guides him under the spray. He flinches, drawing back from the unexpected chill with a gasp. She reaches past him matter-of-factly to turn up the hot water, and a shivery glissade of relief runs through him from head to toe as the temperature rises, salving the tension and soreness from his body. "Thanks."

"Should I stay?"

"No; go on. Tell Dad I'm coming."

Her eyes are skeptical.

"I said I'm okay. Quit looking at me like that!"

"Asshole," she growls, but turns away, the curve of her haunch as she dips to retrieve her towel from the bench a gentle wave molded in sand. She wraps the towel about her once more. "Just hurry, okay?"

"Okay, okay."

Then she's out the door, leaving him standing on wobbly legs in

the tingling heat of the shower as a powerful gust of wind buffets the stall like some gigantic bird trying to force its way inside. Screwing his eyes shut, Jack thrusts his face into the spray. The hot water drums against his eyelids to coax blooms of color from out of the inner dark. He relieves a burning in his bladder, not bothering to aim, just letting go.

He's trying not to think about what just happened, afraid that by doing so he might trigger it again. But he can't help touching the edges of the experience, exploring its outlines with the same masochistic thrill that seduces the tip of the tongue to a cold sore over and over again. Just so does his mind touch and recoil from the sharp edges of drowned pyramids. Where has he seen them before? Dislodged by his probing, the huge shapes float upward, tumbling in the dark waters of memory like objects in space. But it's a riddle without an answer. As in some time-travel paradox, what he remembers has been changed by the effort of remembering it. He feels different himself, though it's hard to say exactly how. If he gazed into a mirror, would he see a second, ghostly Jack gazing back at him like the glimpse he'd caught of an older Jilly? His heart is beating faster, stirred by more than his brush with death, which has already begun to lose its immediacy, becoming less real, more dreamlike, the further it recedes from him, and he from it, the two of them carried in opposite directions by the same currents of chance that had brought them briefly together.

The stream of water is shedding heat again; Jack turns it off, raises a hand to his upper lip, checks his fingers. *Whew*: no blood. He hurries to his towel and rubs himself dry, then wraps himself in its fluffiness and steps out of the stall into the full blast of the wind and rain. Fat, chilly bomblets pummel him from all sides. It's not as forceful as the shower, but it's getting there. The sky is covered with a single cloud, a solid mass of marbled gray that appears to have the density of cookie batter and looks like it's being stirred, ever so slowly, by a gigantic, invisible spoon.

Hurricane Belle has arrived at last.

Bayberry Street is crowded with norm-drawn and steam-propelled carts and carriages, along with pedestrians from each of the five races. Kestrel, who'd come bursting out of the inn after Pigeon had gone to wait upon the manders, draws back now, overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle of *Mutatis Mutandis*, the Many-sided City: so called from its ever-swelling population of gates. According to the guidebook issued to him at the start of his Proving (doubtless already out-of-date), there are 674 gates . . . and those are just the officially sanctioned ones.

Wafting has but two. And its narrow, twisting streets are never this jammed, not even during the Festival of Becoming. Kestrel sips from his waterskin and takes deep, calming breaths as his fellow mutes pass by in an endless stream, most ignoring him as if he's no more visible than a virt, though a few glare at him in their hurry, seeming to accuse him of some crime or breach of etiquette so severe it might qualify as criminal. Is there a law against standing still and watching the world go by? He wouldn't be surprised.

This is Kestrel's second morning in the city proper; during the Proving itself, all aspirants sleep in tents pitched along the fringes of the Proving Grounds, situated outside the Proving Gate; once the grounds had lain beyond the city walls, but over the years the creeping sprawl of *Mutatis Mutandis* has spread around them, enclosing them, until now they're a bubble of open space a mile and a half in circumference that nonetheless remains legally outside the city limits. Such fictions of law and custom are common in a city whose gates are continually being dismantled and rebuilt farther outward, riding successive waves of new construction, or are engulfed by those waves and left behind, becoming civic or religious shrines, the memory of their original functions and symbolic associations lost, finding new uses, new names: the Gate of Glorious December Seventeenth; the Gate of the Waking Beauty; the Gate of the Inn of the Weeping Norm.

Kestrel hasn't yet grown used to the careless ease with which the races mix and mingle here: he's forever finding something to gawk at. For instance, this bevy of manders and merms in close conversation, their striped armband of blue, green, white, red, and black—

the colors of the Commonwealth flag—marking them as Council functionaries on official business. Or that pair of Holy Rollers, a stout delph and an all-but-emaciated airie, their faces palimpsests of incision patterns, strolling serenely in their robes of motley, coiled normskin whips and bone-handled daggers hanging from their belts and two red six-sided dice bouncing upon their chests above the oversized silver squares of belt buckles stamped with the lemniscus, infinity's fallen figure eight, symbol of the Odds. And there, a young merm male and boggle female walking with arms twined about each other's waists and eyes only for each other.

Blushing, Kestrel looks away; such displays are unimaginable in Wafting. Yet despite the physical difficulties involved, the mute races can and do interbreed; indeed, the Council of Five—the executive body of the Commonwealth, composed of one representative elected or appointed by each of the Five Nations—encourages such unions, as do the Holy Rollers. The genes of one parent or the other dominate in the offspring, with some secondary characteristics from the nondominant partner sometimes in evidence: a merm whose scaled headcrest proclaims the presence of airie blood; a boggle with the elevated body temperature of a mander. The changed races love and welcome healthy children, and even the breederborn, like Kestrel, are treated the same as those born from the union of pure-blooded mutes . . . at least, in theory. In practice, Kestrel often feels—or has been made to feel—painfully conscious of the fact that his birth mother was a norm.

The other thing Kestrel hasn't gotten used to here—and he wonders if he ever will—is the sight of so many norm slaves pulling carriages and performing other menial tasks. Some are even tending to the needs of sidewalk vendors, veterans left too crippled by the war to fend for themselves. The slaves—invariably males; captured females are assigned to maternity wards as breeders, or, if too young or old for such work, dispatched to the inseminaries to be injected with new savvee strains or subjected to experimental surgeries—are little more than flesh-and-blood virts. Castrated and lobotomized by the Holy Rollers, conditioned by the Therapeutic Faculty of the College of the Virtual Mind, they're incapable of independent thought

or action, zombies who work without complaint until their bodies give out. Kestrel knows they're harmless, but they give him the willies anyway. His crest comes snapping up at the sight of them, and every instinct in his body cries out to kill. Were it not for the presence of the psionic dampening field that the boggles of the College keep in place over the city, using their own powers to repress the powers of the other races for the good of all, he would have acted on that impulse a dozen times by now.

STARING AT THE PARADE OF PASSERSBY, Kestrel tries to ignore his hangover and remember the way to Pilgrim Square. Like all airies, he prides himself on his sense of direction, but his present condition has left that sense thoroughly flummoxed. He's too shy to ask directions of anyone, too poor to splurge on a taxi or rickshaw, too proud to go back into the Pigeon's Roost and seek assistance from the delph at the front desk. Fortunately, his memory hasn't completely deserted him, and at last he's able to recall the route. Settling his wings more comfortably against his back, he steps into the pedestrian flow and lets it carry him up the street. Bayberry runs into Dune Road; a left turn on Dune will take him to Middlesex Lane; a right on Middlesex will bring him to Bethany Street; a left on Bethany, after a number of twists and turns, will spill him into Rehoboth Avenue, which in turn leads to Pilgrim's Gate.

Striding along, he does his best to mirror the purposeful yet casually unconcerned demeanor of those around him, pretending to ignore the vendors who have divided up each block between them, two or three to a block, where, in the narrow spaces between the brightly colored awnings and signposts of shops and inns, they sit or stand behind folding tables and politely or not so politely cry their wares: dice of many colors and sides; boxes and books of matches; lighters; pipes and cigarette holders; pens, pencils, and notepaper; sunglasses; watches; chess sets in a variety of sizes, with hand-carved pieces and dice of wood or bone; handmade jewelry; sticks of incense; fresh lumens; pocket editions of the sixty-four sutures of the *Book of the Odds* (with or without commentaries); blade-

weed stalks and slivers; and all the other knickknacks the law permits them to sell (and a few, Kestrel notes, it does not). Some sell their services as fortune-tellers or offer games of chance with dice or cards; others spill their blood for a price, carving fresh incision patterns over yesterday's scars.

Begging is illegal, but the Commonwealth supplies needy veterans with a vendor's license and wares to sell. In Wafting, returning soldiers—especially those badly wounded—take advantage of this generosity until they can fend for themselves, and the townsfolk do their patriotic duty by buying whatever is offered for sale; but here Kestrel has the sense that there are veterans who never move on, haunting the sidewalks and alleyways for the rest of their lives. No one seems eager to purchase their wares, either; most of the transactions he observes are conducted grudgingly, with an appearance of mutual mistrust and resentment very different from what he's used to. It's depressing and confusing. At last he stops to purchase a box of matches from a one-armed mander. The mute accepts his money without so much as a grunt of acknowledgment, then tosses the matches purposefully beyond Kestrel's reach, so that he must scoop them up from the dirty sidewalk before they are trampled. After that, whenever a vendor calls to him or tries to block his way, he passes by with a surge of annoyance, even anger, and this in turn fills him with guilt, for these mutes, however unpleasant they might be, have fought for him, after all, have suffered and sacrificed so that the Commonwealth can remain free.

It begins to seem to him after a while that he's seeing the same faces again and again, hearing the same pitches repeated word for word, as if he's wandering in a circle. His head is pounding; his stomach churning. He hopes Gad and Pip are suffering twice as badly from the effects of too much beer and pizza. He'd fly to Pilgrim Square in a moment if not for the dampening field. It's annoying to be hobbled this way, but he understands the need. Only thus can so many mutes dwell safely in such close quarters. Still, that doesn't mean Kestrel likes the idea of ceding this authority to boggles, who—as far as he's concerned—have too much authority already: the College of the Virtual Mind, though technically subor-

dinate to the Council of Five, often seems more like a rival branch of government, its leaders loyal to no cause beyond that of their own race. Even the Holy Rollers, whose dice hold the power of life and death, and whose inseminaries hold things worse than death, fear the Faculty Invisible, that shadowy branch of the College devoted to matters of internal security.

Kestrel consoles himself with the thought that, no matter how dreadful he feels inside, on the outside, at least, he's blending in, to all appearances just another citizen about his very important business. And his business *is* important; the most important of all, for pilgrimages are the glue that holds the races together and keeps the Commonwealth united and strong. Without them, the five races would have slipped long ago into the kind of fractious squabbling that's kept the norms at each other's throats for centuries.

Once his pilgrimage is done, and his time of rest and recuperation in Wafting completed, Kestrel will be assigned a tour of duty in the armed forces, an obligation that will recur annually until he reaches the age of sixty-five . . . and after that he'll still be required to report twice a year for duty in the home guard. But he's impatient; he dreams of a hero's destiny, of single-handedly changing the course of the long war by some audacious act of bravery that will break the spirit of the norms and turn the tide in favor of the mutes. What that action might be, he doesn't know, but if a chance for it ever arises—or, rather, *when* it arises, for he feels certain somehow that it will, whether during his pilgrimage or later, on some distant battlefield—he knows he might have only instants to recognize the opportunity and seize it.

In a favorite fantasy, he imagines himself a forward spotter for ground troops in a battle going badly for the mutes. The order to retreat has gone out; his fellow airies have fallen back. Kestrel is the last spotter left. He is, of course, bleeding from half a dozen wounds but still able to fly. The voice of a boggle officer sounds stridently in his head, repeating the command to retreat, but Kestrel ignores her, pushing forward, impelled by some obscure instinct. And then he

sees him. Far below, sitting astride a white charger, is the unmistakable figure of Pluribus Unum, emperor of the norms, his psibertronic armor glittering like a shell of diamond and steel. Officers and priests on horseback surround him; a page stands at his side, holding up the standard of the Starcrossed Crescent. The attention of Pluribus Unum and his entourage is focused on the battle; none of them has yet glanced up and seen the speck in the sky that is Kestrel. The decision is made before he's aware of it; suddenly he's in his dive, the roar of the wind rushing past his ears louder than any avalanche in the Featherstone Mountains, the force of it peeling his lips back from his teeth and making his vision blur behind the nictitating membranes of his inner eyelids as he summons the power of a hurricane to speed the screaming kamikaze projectile of himself toward everlasting glory . . .

But such fantasies seem premature when he hasn't yet reached Pilgrim's Gate, much less passed beyond it. Come to think of it, shouldn't he have reached Dune Road already? Has he sailed right through the intersection, lost in heroic daydreams? Slowing, he continues on for another block, reaching Atlantic Avenue before it strikes him with the force of a revelation that he's heading in the wrong direction. His mental map is accurate in its particulars, but his orientation to it, or its to him, is reversed. He halts, rotating the map in his mind even as, with a curse, he wheels his body around. A cry, a collision; the next thing he knows, his backside hits the sidewalk as pedestrians veer around him without breaking stride. Except for one.

"I thought airies were supposed to have the eyes of eagles," says a female boggle, glaring down at him with her hands on her hips. At first Kestrel takes her for a child, judging by her diminutive size, but then he realizes that she's older, close to his own age. Her heart-shaped face is tanned a deep brown, as if she spends every spare moment in the sun. She's wearing a short skirt of black leather, knee-high boots of supple black normskin (the polished bone hilt of a dagger protrudes from the top of the left boot), a black denim jacket and, beneath it, a loose black blouse that has the breezy shim-

mer of silk. Her own hair is close-cropped, bristly, and black as a raven's feathers. Kestrel wonders if the touch of it would thrill like crushed velvet. But there's no softness in the piercing blue eyes, rimmed with electric green shadow, that regard him now.

"What?" is the best he can manage.

"Allow me to translate, birdbrain." She jabs her index finger at him, bringing it closer to his head with each word, the nail like a dagger point stained with blood. "Watch. Where. You're. Fucking. Going."

Kestrel stammers an apology. The blue-gray feathers of his headcrest, which had flared reflexively, droop under the lash of her anger and scorn.

"Aw, it's no fun insulting airies." The boggle relents, rolling her eyes. "You're all too Oddsdamn polite." She extends her hand invitingly. "Go on. I don't bite."

He takes the proffered hand, and she hauls him to his feet.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to how light you guys are," she marvels, looking up at him and shaking her head, the top of which comes to the level of his stomach. "How much do you weigh?"

"Thirty-eight pounds." Kestrel flicks the end of his earpiece. He's sensitive about his weight, which is on the low side, more appropriate for a female than for a male of his age and height, as Gad and Pip never tire of reminding him.

The boggle hoots. "Thirty-eight! I weigh three times that, and I'm small for a boggle! Hey, do you have a handkerchief?"

He stares at her, uncomprehending. What makes the question so odd, apart from its being a total non sequitur, is that she meanwhile produces a white handkerchief from a pocket in her jacket and holds it up to him like she expects him to take it. Is this some strange boggle custom? A hankie exchange? Who *is* this person?

"Your *nose*," she explains. "It's *bleeding*. Guess I popped you pretty good, huh?" She doesn't seem at all sorry about it.

Kestrel touches his nose; sure enough, his fingers come back red. Though inured to the sight of his own blood, his sensibilities as scarred in that regard as the skin of his chest and belly, arms and

legs, all crisscrossed with incision patterns old and new, he feels his gorge rise, his hangover reasserting itself: *Hey, remember me?*

"Wow, I always thought 'turning green' was just an *expression* . . ."

"'Scuse me," he manages, polite to the last, and stumbles past her to the curb, where, doubled over, he contributes the contents of his stomach to the street.

"Ewwww," comes her voice from beside him.

He groans in misery and humiliation, sinking to his knees as another spasm turns his insides into outsides.

"Well," she says, "I don't have to read your mind to know what *you* had for dinner last night."

"Go." He gasps. "Away."

"I won't" is the indignant reply. Her hands slip under his arms and tug. "On your feet, flyboy."

"Leave me alone." Breathing raggedly, hoping the show is over but afraid it's only intermission.

"You can't just sit there."

He fumbles for his waterskin, fills his mouth with tepid water, spits into the gutter. "I'm not sitting. I'm kneeling."

"You want to kneel? Go to casino." She tugs again.

"Stop yanking at me! It's very annoying. *You're* very annoying."

"Trust me, I haven't *started* to get annoying."

Kestrel glares up at his tormentor. She grins back, blue eyes shining with amusement. But behind the amusement is a determination that makes him realize he doesn't have a chance. Plus, while he hasn't forgotten where he is or that mutes are passing in the street and on the sidewalk, it's one thing to see their shoes, along with the filthy bare feet of norm slaves and the painted wheels of carriages, and quite another to see the disapproving expressions on their faces as they regard the sorry spectacle of himself. So much for representing Airieland and Wafting, he thinks, burning with a shame that lights the fuse of anger. Maybe he shouldn't have drunk and smoked so much last night, but this infuriating boggle shouldn't have bumped into him like she had, either. She's the one who hadn't been paying attention, probably too wrapped up in netspace to pay attention to the physical

world. "Look, if I get up, will you promise to stop bothering me and just go away?"

She traces the lemniscus above her heart. "Boggle's honor."

He sticks out his hand with a sigh, letting her pull him to his feet for the second time.

"There," she says, producing her handkerchief again and offering it to him with a flourish. "That wasn't so bad, was it? How are you feeling?"

"Like my stomach just went through a Proving of its own, and failed." He takes the handkerchief, wipes his lips, then folds it over and dabs at his nose.

"You're a pilgrim?" the boggle asks meanwhile.

He gives a wary nod.

"What a coincidence: so am I. Hey, congratulations!"

"Um, yeah. You too." Kestrel turns the blood-spotted handkerchief inside out, exposing a clean white surface, and tries his nose again. The bleeding has stopped, brought under control by his cell-coms. "Here's your hankie back."

"Consider it a Proving gift."

"Thanks," he says, laying a thick coat of irony over airie politeness, and stuffs the handkerchief into his pocket. "Say, do you know the shortest way to Pilgrim Square from here?"

"Are you kidding? I know this town like the back of my hand." But it's the front of her hand she raises and waves at him. "Well, see you around, maybe." Turning on her heel without another word, she begins to walk toward Atlantic Avenue.

Flabbergasted, it takes him a moment to shout after her. "Wait!"

She pauses and glances back at him.

"Aren't you going to tell me how to get there?"

"I promised to stop bothering you and go away, and I always keep my promises." With that, she's off again.

Kestrel hurries after her. "Hey!" he calls. "Hey! Hold on!"

She picks up her pace, forcing him to break into a jog, dodging pedestrians, his waterskin sloshing as it slaps against his side. By the time he catches up to her, she's reached Atlantic Avenue. And still

she refuses to stop or even acknowledge him. Finally, angry and frustrated, he grabs her by the arm.

She pulls free, spinning to face him. "You are the rudest airie I've ever met!"

"I'm sorry, but you wouldn't stop."

"And that gives you the right to assault me?"

"I'd hardly call it—"

"Is this airie bothering you?" interrupts a passing delph. He's even shorter than the boggle, but his massive arms have twice the circumference of Kestrel's legs, and he looks as though he'd like nothing better than to use the former to break the latter. With delves, discretion is the better part of survival, but Kestrel's beyond all caution.

"Mind your own business," he snaps. "Nobody asked you to butt in."

"'What affects one, affects all,'" the delph intones in reply, quoting from the *Book of the Odds* like some sermonizing Holy Roller as he stares up at Kestrel, his eyes hidden behind a pair of glasses so dark it's a wonder he can see out of them at all. Kestrel scrutinizes the delph's dark blue vest for some badge or insignia of authority, but there's nothing. Which doesn't rule out the possibility that he's a molting Invisible . . .

"It's okay," says the boggle. "He's annoying, but harmless."

"I'm annoying?" It's too much. "First you knock me down and give me a bloody nose; then, when I ask a simple question, how to get to Pilgrim Square, you go rushing off like a—"

"Odds, is *that* all you want to know?" the delph interrupts again. "It's easy. Just keep—"

"Keep your shirt on," the boggle chimes in, silencing the delph with a glare. "And listen closely, flyboy, because I'm only going to explain this once."

TEN MINUTES LATER, Kestrel suspects he's been lied to. Another five minutes and he's sure of it. Seething with anger, certain that

everyone who sees him can guess what happened and is laughing at his predicament, Kestrel tries to retrace his steps, becoming even more lost in the process. By now it's well past noon, the day hot, his waterskin dry. And to top it all off, his hangover, which had faded to a distant throb, is making a comeback.

At last, bowing to the inevitable, Kestrel swallows his pride and asks a passing Holy Roller for directions to Pilgrim Square. The priest, a merm, listens unblinking to his tale of woe, then wordlessly produces two four-sided bone dice from within the folds of his robe of motley. Snapping down the covering of his oversized belt buckle to make a small silver tray, he traces the lemniscus in the air. Kestrel flicks the end of his earpiece, watching as the priest, with the heart-catching grace that merms bring to even the most insignificant gestures, rolls the yellowed dice three times in quick succession, then folds the tray back into his belt buckle, tucks the dice back into the folds of his robe, hitches up his belt, clears his throat, and looks Kestrel in the eye. "There is nothing for you at Pilgrim's Gate," he says.

"Wh-what?" Kestrel is shocked, indignant; this is the last straw. "There must be some mistake, Your Randomness. I passed my Proving!"

"The dice do not lie." The merm speaks without inflection, his voice flat as a flounder. The scales of his head, or as much of them as Kestrel can see, are dull as old pewter, spiderwebbed with an intricate lacing of incision pattern scars, but the unmarked scales of his graceful hands glitter in the sun like water stippled by a breeze, catching the colors of his robe and throwing them back in a scintillating dazzle. His almond-shaped eyes are a solid, inky black; even as close as he's standing, Kestrel can discern neither sclera nor iris, as if they're all pupil. They do not blink, showing Kestrel nothing but his own reflection.

"I don't understand," Kestrel says in a broken voice. His anger is spiraling out of him, unspooling into the bottomless pools of those eyes. "Was there an error, Your Randomness? Did I fail the Proving after all? What are you telling me?"

"Go back to your lodging," the Holy Roller says, not unkindly.

“B-but I don’t know the way,” he stammers, fighting back tears.
 “That I can tell you,” says the priest, and he does.



There goes another one.” Ellen looks up from her letters as a car creeps by on Route 1, heading north toward Rehoboth Beach. Over the past three hours, as the hurricane has worsened, the volume of traffic seen through the unboarded windows of the inland-facing side of the house has fallen from a steady rate of three or four vehicles per minute to the occasional solitary car or van or pickup. “I think we should leave. I think we should’ve left already.”

Bill shrugs from his recliner, eyes resting on the TV, where an old black-and-white Western is showing through a wavery snowfall of static, the volume dialed down to nothing as the latest weather reports and public safety advisories scroll half-legibly across the bottom of the screen. The wind seems alive and purposeful in its sustained intensity, huffing and puffing like an army of wolves whose howls echo weirdly down the black stovepipe of the chimney as waves of rain lash a discordant music from the house that all but drowns out the drone of the radio announcer delivering updates on the hurricane. “Everybody knows what you think, El,” says Bill. “But we’re staying put. Try to have a little faith. If not in the house, at least in your father.”

“The neighbors have packed up and gone, Dad. Even the locals. Maybe they know something we don’t.”

“That’ll be the day. You’ve heard the weather reports the same as I have, El. So far, evacuation is voluntary. If that changes, or if Belle keeps getting worse, we’ll go, okay? The car is packed; we can make it to the Dagsboro shelter in ten minutes. But that’s an ordeal I’d as soon avoid. Wouldn’t you rather sleep in your own bed than have to fight for space to unroll your sleeping bag on the floor of the Lord Baltimore Middle School gym?”

“Oh my God,” Jilly chimes in, flashing on some vision of indescribable horror. “Talk about the slumber party from hell. I mean, packed into the gym with a bunch of locals!”

Jack says nothing, engrossed in the letters on his and Jilly’s tray:

a bookended pair of double word scores, and the lead, are tantalizingly close.

“Ah, you kids are snobs,” says Uncle Jimmy, Ellen’s partner in this, the second game in a best-of-three match for the Doone family championship. Since boarding up the windows, the five of them have clustered around the TV, playing games to pass the time and warming themselves in the flicker of information that, for all its sober sincerity, has proved unable to banish or keep at bay the chorus of creaks and groans issuing from the house as it tosses beneath them with a fierce and seemingly untethered motion that makes it feel like the structure is not merely afloat but adrift, at the mercy of wind and wave, a sailing ship from an earlier century riding out a storm at sea.

Uncle Jimmy is folded into one corner of the couch; Jack sprawls in the other, letter tray balanced on one raised knee; between them sits Ellen, rocking back and forth above her letters while Bill, across the table, leans back in the light brown leather recliner, watching TV through heavy-lidded eyes as though he might fall asleep at any moment. It’s the same lethargic attitude he adopts on *Inside the Beltway*, lulling talkative guests and fellow panelists alike into a false sense of security before skewering them with a pointed observation or ironic aside delivered with the impeccable timing and crocodilian malice of W. C. Fields. Jilly has dragged the recliner’s footstool over to the couch, where she perches birdlike at her brother’s side. A portable radio with brand-new batteries, a couple of flashlights, ditto, a box of kitchen matches, and an assortment of candles—some standing partially consumed in candleholders amid colorful drips and dribbles of melted wax like fairy-tale castles, others still undiminished by any flame, fresh as candy canes in plastic wrappers—have been assembled on the table in case power is lost. They’ve had a number of close calls, lights guttering as if the wind has forced its way through the walls and into the wires, scattering electrons like grains of sand.

“Even worse,” adds Uncle Jimmy, stabbing the air with a cigarette stub held pencil-like in the fingers of his right hand, “you got no sense of adventure. No imagination. Staying at the shelter could be fun. We can play Mutes & Norms.”

A groan from Ellen. Mutes & Norms is Uncle Jimmy's latest project, a role-playing game developed to both cash in on and undermine the success of Dungeons & Dragons, that upstart phenomenon whose popularity has the designers of traditional military strategy and tactics games—such as Uncle Jimmy's employer, Bunker Hill Games—looking over their shoulders in fear of being outflanked on a battlefield already thick with the bodies of tin soldiers and other casualties of the toy wars. Uncle Jimmy, an early enthusiast of D&D whose dungeons had gained fame among gaming cognoscenti for Escher-like intricacies of composition and story lines as elaborate as they were addictive, had been hired two years ago by Bunker Hill to make them a leader in this hot new genre. Mutes & Norms will be his second release, following a hastily produced but nevertheless profitable D&D knockoff called Gods & Monsters. That game, drawing on Greek mythology, had been aimed at D&D's core audience of fantasy gamers, but Mutes & Norms sets its sights on the untapped market of sci-fi and comic book fans. Scheduled for Christmas release, the game is not yet commercially available, but Uncle Jimmy's brought an advance copy with him to Delaware. He's been playing a few evenings a week with Jack and Jilly. The three of them hunch by candlelight over the cluttered kitchen table or, weather permitting, the picnic table on the front deck like scholars pouring over illuminated manuscripts as Uncle Jimmy's tape collection provides a sound track ranging from Pink Floyd to the Sex Pistols. Ellen makes herself scarce at such times, haughtily dismissive of the multicolored, many-sided dice and tiny hand-painted lead figurines, the dense, hermetic rule books and sheets of blue-squared graph paper on which Jack and Jilly guide their norm knights-errant through post-Apocalyptic land- and cityscapes of Uncle Jimmy's design.

"No way am I gonna play that nerdy game," she says now. "Especially not in public!"

"No, listen." Uncle Jimmy leans forward, dragging on the cigarette while unfolding his limbs from the pillowed recesses of the couch like a spider in the outside shower stall responding to a tremor in its web. Black *Toys in the Attic* T-shirt, black jeans, black Converse All-Star high-tops, long black hair hanging to his shoul-

ders, his sunken cheeks and sharp chin sandpapered with black stubble (which he shaves away every other morning with his straight razor in a somewhat gory ritual that Jack finds fascinating to watch); not for nothing has Bill taken to calling him the Lower East Side Ichabod Crane. Only the silvery glint of the St. Christopher medal he wears on a thin silver chain about his neck breaks this mordant color scheme. Seen from behind—or from the front, stringy hair blowing across his features—as he stalks the Village streets in a battered black leather jacket, Uncle Jimmy is routinely mistaken for Joey Ramone, total strangers calling out a cheery “Gabba Gabba Hey!” as he passes by.

“I mean play for real,” he says now.

“For real?” Jilly’s skepticism is plain.

“Sure. Without the dice, without the graph paper, without the rule books even.”

“What do we use then?”

He takes another, deeper drag, then continues, the words spilling from his mouth in torrents of smoke. “That’s just what I’m talking about: no imagination. We use what’s around us, Jilly. And what’s in here.” Tapping his forehead. “What else?”

“He means pretend,” Jack offers, looking up from the tiles.

“Duh,” says Jilly. “But pretend what? I mean, in *Mutes & Norms* there’s been this humongous war, right? Civilization destroyed. Hundreds of millions of people killed by genetically engineered viruses and stuff. So now there are these survivors. Some of them are still human, but some have turned into mutants, airies and delves and like that, and the mutes’ve got these superpowers. They can fly, or are superfast or -strong, or can take over your mind and make you do whatever they want.”

“Duh,” interrupts Jack, evening the score.

Jilly shoots him a glare. “Well, in case you didn’t notice, Uncle Jimmy, there hasn’t been a war. Nobody’s got powers like that. Sure, it’s fun to play the game and all, but we’re not gonna find any mutes at the shelter. We’re just gonna find the same fat, sunburned slobs we see on the beach every day.”

"And the local variety of rednecks," adds Ellen. "Don't forget about them."

"Yeah; them, too."

"And any one of them could be a mute," says Uncle Jimmy. "I don't see what's so hard to grasp about that."

"But in Mutes & Norms the mutes don't look human anymore. Well, most of 'em, anyway."

"Didn't I say forget the rule books? This isn't Mutes & Norms. Or it's a new version, okay? And in this version, mutes look like normal human beings." He drops what's left of his cigarette into the empty bottle of Budweiser he's been using as an ashtray. The brown glass darkens with smoke as the stub is snuffed in the dregs. Jack notices that Uncle Jimmy's eyes are the same dark shade of brown, as if all the smoke he's inhaled is swirling around behind them. They glitter with amusement as he draws another cig from the pack of Marlboros lying beside the bottle and lights up with a red Bic lighter also lying close to hand, atop an unabridged *Webster's*.

"Yeah, in this game the mutes look normal on the outside, but inside they've started changing, evolving psionic powers. Telepathy, telekinesis, clairvoyance, and like that. Later they'll start changing physically, too, turning into airies and delves, manders and boggles and merms. But not yet. Now the norms still outnumber the mutes by, say, twenty to one. Which is why they gotta hide, blend in. That way they can pick off the norms one by one. They'll kill if they have to, but mostly they prefer to take 'em over. You know: possess them. They need slaves, see? So they get inside people's heads and turn them into zombies, puppets on a string. If there's any killing to be done, they get one of the zombies to do it. They make it look like an accident, or a fight that got out of hand, or cold-blooded murder, or suicide. But nothing out of the ordinary, nothing that doesn't take place a hundred times a day as it is. That way no one suspects the truth. Except us."

"What makes us so special?" asks Jilly, without missing a beat. "How come we're the ones who know the truth?"

"Jeez, Jilly." Uncle Jimmy shrugs. "Do I gotta fill in all the blanks?"

We overheard a bunch of them talking. Or . . ." He takes a drag, exhales. "Look, it doesn't matter *how* we know; we just *do*, okay? It's part of the game. An arbitrary initial condition; all games got 'em."

"I still don't understand what this game is or even how we're supposed to play it."

"The object is simple: to figure out who the mutes are."

"I got that much, Uncle Jimmy. But how? I mean, they look normal, right? So how are we supposed to find out who they are, or who's being controlled by one? How could I be sure you weren't a mute or zombie yourself?"

"You couldn't." Uncle Jimmy's grin is so guileless that Jack can almost forget he's a grown-up. "That's what makes it fun."

Jilly rolls her eyes, not buying it for a minute. "Lemme get this straight. Nobody else at the shelter would be playing the game. And they wouldn't know that we were playing, either. They wouldn't even know there *was* a game."

An encouraging nod from Uncle Jimmy.

"Okay. So let's assume we're playing, and I decide for some reason that somebody, anybody, is a mute. How am I supposed to prove it? There's no way. But you guys wouldn't be able to disprove it, either. And even if we agreed that so-and-so was a mute, there's nothing we could do about it anyways."

"By George, I think she's got it!"

"So how do you win?"

"Who said anything about winning?"

"A game's got to have a winner, Uncle Jimmy." Her tone at once pitying and scornful. "Or else who'll bother to play?"

"There's plenty of games that don't have winners or losers. Games you've gotta play whether you want to or not."

"Name one."

"Well, Mutes & Norms."

Jilly shakes her head. "I gotta play even if I don't want to? I don't think so."

"Okay, how about life? No, not that stupid board game. I mean all this," gesturing broadly with one hand. "Being alive."

"Being alive isn't a game."

"I wouldn't be so sure if I were you."

"Look, Uncle Jimmy," as though explaining the concept to a dim-witted alien, "a game has rules, okay? And an object. Something you have to do, or someplace you've got to get to. Like in Scrabble, the object is to get the highest score. In chess, it's to checkmate the other king. A game has a beginning and an end. A winner and a loser. Sometimes it's got do-overs! And when it's finished, you can play again if you want or just put it away and do something else. Life's not like that." She gulps a breath, tucking her hair behind her ears with quick, catlike motions of her hands. "I mean, okay, maybe it is, sort of. In a way. I can see that. But really it isn't."

"I think your uncle might be a little more knowledgeable about games than you are, Jilly," Bill says without looking up from the TV screen; he seems mesmerized by the ceaseless drift of static in which grainy figures can be seen moving about, their shapes blurred and indistinct, their purpose even more so. "He makes them up for a living, remember?" His gaze flicks to his half brother. "I've gotta hand it to you, Jim. You're the only guy I know who gets paid to play games all day. You never have to grow up, Peter Pan with a steady paycheck."

"Some people might say the same about you guys on *Below the Beltway*."

"*Inside the Beltway*."

Uncle Jimmy grins. "Sorry. Anyway, I play this version of Mutes & Norms all the time up in Hunger City." That's Uncle Jimmy—speak for New York, on account of how it gobbles you up and spews you right back out. "Makes life a hell of a lot more interesting. You'd be amazed at some of the mutes I've found on Fifth Avenue!"

"You're weird, Uncle Jimmy," Jilly says, not for the first time, and not without affection.

Ellen, meanwhile, smirks. "Hey, I know a couple of mutes right now."

"Shut up, El!" In unison from Jilly and Jack.

"I rest my case."

The twins retreat behind a shield of smoldering resentment at

the eruption of laughter around the table. Their effortless connection, which at times strikes even Jack and Jilly themselves as uncanny, is like a public display of something that should remain private, hidden, an unwelcome reminder to others of how alone they truly are, with nothing to anchor them in the world, no one to ease the burden of every bad thing or make every good thing better just by existing, without needing to exchange a word or a touch or even a look. Their physical resemblance is just the tip of the iceberg; it's what's below the surface that disturbs people, provokes them, as if every single person in the world is the surviving half of a sundered whole, millions of men, women, and children with wounds they feel acutely but can't see or remember receiving, clueless as car-crash victims with no visible injuries trying to act normal while stumbling around in shock, bleeding on the inside. If not for the laughter, it would be easy to feel sorry for them. But there's always laughter: at home, at school. And resentful whispers a hundred times worse. It's been plain to Jack and Jilly for years that what the others want, on the most basic level, is to inflict the same crippling on them: to strip away what makes them special and leave them no different than everybody else, just two more mismatched socks in this spinning dryer of a world that can cling together all they want but will never again make a perfect pair.

Desperate to lash back in some way, Jack picks five tiles from his and Jilly's tray and lays them down on the board, building around the letter "E," already in play, to make "insect." That's, let's see, one, two, three, four, seven, eight points, plus a double word score on the "I," for a total of sixteen. If they'd had another "S," he could have finished with a second double word score, for a total of thirty-six, which would have put them four points ahead of Bill, the reigning champ, who, unpartnered as always, won the first game of the match handily and is leading in this one. Well, Jack thinks, sixteen points isn't too shabby. At least we're still in the running.

Or are they? The recliner creaks sharply over the other creakings of the house as Bill, who hadn't appeared to be paying attention, leans forward like a striking cobra to lay down his own set of tiles.

Before he sees the first letter, just from the swiftness of the play and the simultaneous deflating pinprick of dismay from Jilly, Jack knows he's done a stupid thing.

Sure enough, starting with the letter "S," Bill empties his tray of tiles to a chorus of groans human and inanimate. He takes his time, building the word backward, clicking each square loudly against the board as he sets it down, "E," "T," "O," "G," "Y," drawing out his triumph while Jack looks on in misery, stung by his own insect. He'd give anything to take back his turn. Bill pauses, hand poised above the board as his glittering eyes sweep once around the table. Then he places the final tile.

"Damn," Uncle Jimmy says. "Three double word scores!"

Jilly jabs her elbow into Jack's sore arm, hard. "Whose side are you on anyways?"

"Hold on," says Ellen. "Is that even a *word*?"

Bill presents his best poker face; everybody knows he's not above trying to slip in a ringer, bluffing his way to victory on the strength of paternal authority and an intimidating vocabulary, even, when pressed, though the rules place him under no obligation to do so, providing definitions that sound just outlandish enough to be true, and sometimes even are true, which makes it tough to decide whether he's bluffing or baiting a trap. "Do I detect a challenge?"

"Forget it, El," says Uncle Jimmy as she glances to him for guidance. "It's a word, all right."

"What's it mean?"

"Well, it's, it's . . ." He waves his cigarette. "A kind of cell or something."

"Dad?"

"Look it up, El. There's a perfectly good dictionary sitting right on the table."

As Ellen pages through the dictionary, Jack calculates Bill's score, or tries to. The letters keep blurring, as though his eyes are tearing up. Great, he thinks. Nothing like a little extra humiliation. He blinks angrily.

"One hundred and forty-eight points, I believe," says Bill. "You

should have made 'nicest' instead, Jack," he adds with his best *Inside the Beltway* smile, like Jack hasn't figured that out for himself already, thank you very much.

Far from clearing, his vision's getting worse. The letters drift out of focus until he's seeing two boards, each trembling superimposed upon the other like reflections on the surface of a pond. Jack rubs his eyes, trying to merge the bifurcated images, shift them into proper alignment, but it's no use. He can't make out the words on either board; they look half-formed, unfixed, tiles rising into view, then sinking again like letters in a simmering alphabet soup.

Jack glances up, remembering the moment in the shower when Jilly's face had undergone a similar transformation. But the world's as solid and singular as it can be in the midst of a hurricane. No one appears to notice anything out of the ordinary. Not even Jilly, who glares at him so fiercely that he drops his eyes, unable to meet her gaze, though he can't escape what's behind it, her blame and displeasure jabbing him like another, sharper elbow. Jilly hates losing worse than he does.

Nothing has changed. The boards maintain an uneasy coexistence as if waiting for him to choose between alternate words or worlds. The smoky air feels weighted with the breed of wrongness that bends dreams into nightmares; there's no escaping the distortions of its gravity. How is it that the others can't sense the struggle going on here, right before their eyes? How is it that he can? Not that it does him any good, unable to influence or begin to understand what's taking place. Or is it all the result of a blow he can't remember? No big mystery, just a bump on the noggin. Maybe Jilly was right, he thinks. Maybe he needs to see a doctor . . .

"Got it," Ellen announces, and makes a noise like a droning hornet as she begins to sound out the unfamiliar word.

A tremendous bang rattles the house, accompanied by a searing flash of blue light like a shower of sparks thrown up from the brake-locked wheels of a train derailing in the night. Jack's heart shears off its accustomed track, and the whole house seems to follow, as if swept from its pilings by a gust of wind. He hears Ellen shriek, star-

tled exclamations from Uncle Jimmy and his dad. Jilly gasps; her hand meets his, fingers claspng tight.

The house is sunk in darkness, the TV dead, the radio silent, their own voices squelched as sense stumbles after event through the wreckage of an instant impossibly prolonged. Belle grows louder, wilder, crowding in on all sides until the bubble bursts, and the world comes rushing back. Then everybody's talking at once, lurching to their feet and moving toward the window, the room illuminated fitfully in the beam of the flashlight materialized in Bill's hand.

". . . the *fuck* was that?"

"Everybody stay calm; the electricity's gone out, that's all . . ."

"Look! Is that cool or what?"

"What *is* it?"

Across Route 1, no more than twenty yards away, a telephone pole is crowned with icy blue fire. It looks like some ghostly apparition in the bruised half-light of the hurricane, one of those harbingers of disaster that, in horror movies and comic books, can be relied upon to roost atop the masts of doomed ships. A pair of sparking wires squirms in the empty road like electric eels. Jilly squeezes Jack's hand, a squiggle of dread worming between them as the writhing flames atop the pole are beaten down and snuffed out by the wind and rain, mad mother Belle turning against her children.

"Dad," Ellen begins.

"All right, El." He cuts her off, shining the flashlight into her eyes. "You got your wish. We're going."

A groan of protest from Jilly.

"No arguing." Bill trains the flashlight on her, the beam so bright, reflected in the glass of the window, that Jack has to look away. "Just give me a second to throw some food and supplies together. No telling what they'll have at the shelter."

"I'll check the fuse box," Uncle Jimmy volunteers from over by the table. "Make sure everything's shut off in case the electricity comes back on while we're gone."

"It won't. That was the transformer."

"Can't hurt to check the fuses." The end of his cigarette flares to

a brighter burning that limns, like a sketch in charcoal, the line of his jaw, the shadowed hollow of his cheek. Then the second flashlight ignites in his hand. "Put on your poncho, El. You can come hold the flashlight." The fuse box is located under the house.

"All right," she says, moving to join him. "I just hope I don't blow away out— *Ow!*" A thud. Something, a beer bottle, hits the floor. It bounces with a brittle, hollow sound but doesn't break. "Fuck!"

"Language," warns Bill as Uncle Jimmy asks, "Are you okay?"

"What are you trying to do," she demands. "Blind me?"

The two flashlight beams converge, cross, then swing away.

"That's what you get for going barefoot," says Jilly, who's barefoot herself. But it's the thought that counts.

Jack contributes a bark of laughter, riding a wave of revenge all the sweeter for being shared.

"Shut up, freaks!"

"Make us," Jilly taunts.

"Mutes!"

"Norm!"

"That's enough," says Bill. "I've had it up to here with the three of you. Jack, Jilly, come give me a hand in the kitchen while your sister helps Jim."

Right now Uncle Jimmy's doing the helping; down on one knee like a knight before his lady, he holds the flashlight steady as Ellen, perched on the edge of the couch, wiggles her toes. For a queasy instant, Jack, moving to the table with the intention of lighting a candle, mistakes her nail polish for blood. Picking up the box of kitchen matches, he draws one out and strikes it to life. As he brings the flame toward the charred wick of a candle, he notices that the tiles on the Scrabble board have been knocked askew. He can still make out the words, but neither Bill's nor his own is among them.

"Nicest" is.

Somehow, under cover of the darkness and confusion, Jilly must have switched the tiles . . . though how she'd managed it so adroitly, and how she could think such a blatant bit of cheating would escape detection, he can't imagine. But however artfully executed, the ac-

tion was artlessly conceived. As usual, Jilly leaped without looking. Now it's up to him to fix things. Also as usual.

"Ow!" Jack fumbles the match and lets it fall, a flaring comet, from his fingers. This provokes the predictable cackle from Ellen, but the joke's on her, on all of them. In an instant, the deed is done. He lights another match, and a candle, and confirms that the tiles are scrambled. Which is what Jilly should have done in the first place.

"Stop dawdling, Jack," Bill calls from the kitchen, where Jilly has already joined him.

"Be right there," he says. But he lingers, basking in the glow of his satisfaction . . . and in the knowledge that Jilly feels it, too, sharing the effect even if ignorant, for now, of the cause. He watches a drop of melted wax fall as if in slow motion to strike the edge of the board.

Except it isn't wax.

His nose is bleeding again.



The fifteen-minute walk back to the Pigeon's Roost is the longest and bleakest journey of Kestrel's life. He scarcely notices his surroundings; all he can think of is what the Holy Roller had told him. The shame is suffocating. What will Gad and Pip say when they learn that he failed his Proving after all? What will his *parents* say? How can he show his face in Wafting again? By the time he arrives at the inn, he feels like he's failed not once but ten times over.

He's greeted by the sounds of a party in full swing from the common room, about as welcome under the circumstances as a punch in the mouth. He hurries across the lobby, trying to ignore the laughter and shouting, the ragged voices singing to the accompaniment of a guitar . . . Gad's and Pip's prominent among them. The delph at the front desk shows no sign of interest or recognition as he slinks by.

"Ah, young Kestrel!"

Kestrel cringes as the voice he'd been dreading booms out behind him. Wiping his eyes, steeling himself for an ordeal, he turns.

"Your friends have been wondering what became of you," says

Pigeon, drying his hands in the folds of an ample white apron as he bustles across the lobby. "Splendid lads, Gad and Pip."

"You didn't think so this morning."

"High-spirited, to be sure," the innkeeper replies. "A little rough around the edges, I won't deny. But good, honest airies at heart. Fetched their pentads back to the inn with them; some custom to make up for last night, they said, bless 'em. The beer hasn't stopped flowing since, nor the silver. Go in to them, lad. Join the party."

"I'm not up for a party right now."

"What kind of talk is that?" Pigeon's fiery headcrest flares; silver chains chime and flash. "Did you three quarrel? Now's not the time to nurse a grudge, young Kestrel. Pilgrimages are uncertain things. Who knows when or if you'll see each other again?"

"There'll be no pilgrimage for me, Master Pigeon." He hadn't intended to confess the shameful news, but the words just slip out. "Not this year."

"No pilgrimage?" Pigeon blinks, his sunken features a mask of incomprehension. Even the delph behind the desk perks up and takes notice.

"There was some kind of mistake," Kestrel explains. "I didn't pass my Proving after all."

Pigeon's expression grows fierce, though his voice is gentle, as is the hand he rests on Kestrel's shoulder. "My dear boy. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"A Holy Roller told me. After a threefold divination."

Pigeon's bushy eyebrows rise. "Threefold, eh? And what did His Randomness have to say? His exact words, if you can remember them."

"I remember them, all right. You don't forget something like that, Master Pigeon. He said there was nothing for me at Pilgrim's Gate."

"And you assumed . . ."

"What's to assume? It's plain as day."

"Is it? Those Oddsdamn priests do more harm than good with their cryptic comments. I think they take malicious pleasure in obfuscation. You didn't fail, Kestrel. Your pentad is here."

Now it's Kestrel's turn to gape. "B-but how . . .?"

“Gad and Pip ran into them at the gate and invited them back to join the party, figuring you were bound to turn up sooner or later. But don’t take my word for it.” Smiling, Pigeon gestures toward the common room. “Go see for yourself.”

“He did tell me to come back here,” muses Kestrel, feeling less like he’s awakened from a bad dream than slipped into a good one.

“My point exactly. Cryptic to the point of incomprehensibility. A little straight talk once in a while; is that too much to ask?”

But Kestrel is already halfway across the lobby. As he bursts into the common room, Pip’s voice cuts through the din: “The prodigal returns! Over here, Kes!”

The place is packed, the air fragrant with the odors of tobacco and marijuana. Clouds of drifting smoke obscure the light from a mix of lumens and candles. Wearing a loopy grin, Kestrel makes his way to a cluster of tables at the back of the room, where Gad and Pip are holding court surrounded by mutes of all races. Every eye is fixed on him. Staring back with equal interest and wondering which of the faces belong to the mutes of his pentad, Kestrel is startled to recognize the delph who had interceded in his argument with that bitch of a boggle. The fellow, who is still wearing his impenetrable dark glasses in the smoky twilight of the common room, seems just as surprised to see him, but, recovering quickly, roars with laughter.

Gad, meanwhile, strikes a portentous chord on his guitar: “Gentlemutes, I give you the late—the very late—Kestrel of Wafting!”

Glasses are raised amid more laughter, loud whistling, and shouts of welcome. Kestrel, blushing, makes a clownish bow. “Gentlemutes, fellow pilgrims,” he cries. “Normally, as the last of my pentad to arrive, I’d be expected to stand my new comrades to a round of drinks. However, I’m not going to honor that tradition.”

A chorus of boos and outraged whistles. He ducks a scattering of peanuts, a few of which, hurled by manders, blaze by like miniature comets. Gad and Pip are staring as if he’s lost his mind.

Before anything larger can be thrown, he rustles his wings and makes shushing movements with his hands. “No, I’m so Oddsdamn happy right now that I’m going to buy *everyone* a drink. That’s right—the next round’s on me!”

Cheers erupt around the room. Suddenly Kestrel is surrounded by grateful mutes slapping him on the back and pressing joints and cigarettes upon him. A mug of cool ale finds its way into his hand, and he drinks from it gratefully. His lateness, if not forgotten, will be forgiven, and he feels sure that his parents will understand and, however grudgingly, advance him whatever money he needs when it comes time to settle the bill.

It occurs to Kestrel that Perula and Scoter must be worried sick; they would have expected to see him at Pilgrim Square, and he feels sure they would have sought out Gad or Pip for an explanation of his absence. He cranes his neck, searching for them through the drifting haze, but he sees with relief that they're not present. His friends must have fobbed them off with a convincing story, covering his butt as they'd done countless times for each other over the years. Good old Gad and Pip! No better wingmates in all the world.

As he makes his way toward them, someone takes hold of his elbow and steers him to one side. "You must be a lot richer than you look to make such a generous offer, my friend," says the delph he'd recognized from earlier.

"On the contrary, I'm a lot poorer." Kestrel grins down at the reflection of his own features in the mute's dark glasses. The smoke-filled, beery atmosphere of the common room masks the earthy smell of delph, which Kestrel has always found unpleasant—just one of many things he'll have to get used to now. "But I should be angry with you, Master . . ."

"Chalcedon," the delph replies with a rough but courteous bow. "Look, about earlier, I came along in the middle of things; I didn't know what the situation was, or I would have said something."

"That boggle witch steered me wrong on purpose," Kestrel says, crest flaring. "I never did make it to Pilgrim's Gate. If I ever—"

"Forget it," Chalcedon interrupts. "Life's too short. Come meet the gang."

"You're part of my pentad?"

"Funny how things work out, isn't it? Could have knocked me over with a feather, if you'll pardon the expression, when I saw you walk in and realized who you were!"

Chalcedon leads him to a pair of mutes seated at one end of Gad's table; his friend, conversing with a pretty blond boggle, shoots him a wink and raises his mug in a silent toast as he walks by. But Kestrel scarcely notices, entranced by the loveliest merm he's ever seen. Of course, as the saying goes, the most beautiful merm in the world is the one you're looking at right now.

"That's Namora," whispers Chalcedon. "Stop drooling; it's not polite."

Namora, wearing a sleeveless, pale green drysuit that clings to her body like a second skin, is exquisite; but then, so are all merms, with their delicate facial features, almond-shaped, coffee black eyes, and lithe, strong bodies covered with a fine mesh of scales whose patterns of coloration shift in response to external variations of light and internal currents of emotion. Because of the ebb and flow of colors across their skins, merms are said to be forever dancing, even when they hold themselves still. But when they move! To watch a merm in motion, any motion, from the most insignificant gesture to the most purposeful, from the most graceful action to the most brutal, is to be at once uplifted and humbled. Kestrel has no doubt that if merms could fly, their airborne acrobatics would put those of his own people to shame. There's an expressiveness to their movements and their stillnesses alike that goes beyond the play of colors, the ripple of sleek, hard muscles beneath scales that are smoother than silk yet as strong as steel. Gazing at a merm is like gazing at the ocean in its endless variety of moods . . . with the unsettling difference that the ocean does not gaze back.

Which, to Kestrel's discomfort and delight, Namora is doing now. A rosy flush edged in soft purple is creeping up the sides of her neck as though a sun is rising inside her, and he can't help feeling that he is the secret cause of that sunrise, whose light is about to come spilling out of her eyes, shining for him alone. But of course it does not. The hypnotic, seductive effect of merms is well-known, and, with a bit of effort, Kestrel can, if he chooses, break Namora's spell. But for now he's happy to sink into the unconditional acceptance and love she seems to be offering. He's had a rough day. He deserves a little acceptance and love.

Sitting beside Namora is a male mander smoking a needle-thin joint. He gets to his feet and extends a hand as black as a lump of coal in Kestrel's direction. "The name's Fenix. That was some entrance." His teeth flash around the joint like pearls dropped into a pool of tar, and his eyes, in sharp contrast to Namora's, seem to be all sclera, two white opals afloat on the surface of that pool. Fenix is wearing nothing but a baggy pair of purple shorts; in Manderly, or so Kestrel's heard, they go about without a stitch of clothing, male and female alike. The thin scars of incision patterns glow dull orange against the denuded darkness of his skin.

"Pleasure to meet you, Fenix," Kestrel says. The mander's grip is firm and pleasantly warm, the skin dry and smooth.

"This guy's going to be handy to have around," says Chalcedon. Producing a cigarette, he lights it by the simple expedient of pressing its tip against the mander's skin. "For one thing, we'll save on matches."

Fenix blinks placidly behind a bluish cloud of exhaled smoke. "You'll have to excuse the delph," he says to Kestrel. "He's spent so much time underground, I fear his wits have begun to mold. Let me introduce you to our merm, Namora."

Her hand rises to him as though lifted on the swell of an invisible wave, and Kestrel, as he reaches to take it, thinks, *Odds, if she's like this on land, what must she be in the water?* Her skin is cool and dry, not at all rough: like snakeskin. But it's not the touch of her that makes him gasp; rather, it's what his touch calls forth in her, or seems to, a scarlet efflorescence spreading up her bare arm in a feverish blush that he can't help reading as a mark, a confession, of attraction. Yes, but whose? Is her chromatism reflecting back his emotions in myriad tiny scaled mirrors? Or is she displaying her own desire, signaling interest or availability? For merms, despite their contemplative reserve, give their bodies as unreservedly to fucking as they do to fighting . . . except, it's said, they keep their hearts aloof, empty of love and hate, as if nothing that occurs on dry land can touch them, and nothing can possess them but the sea.

Namora withdraws her hand, the blush already fading from her arm, replaced by an idle drift of pale, smoky colors. "That was a

generous gesture." Her voice flows from her lips without inflection, as untroubled as the inky surface of her eyes, which have not blinked once in all the time she's been looking at Kestrel, drinking him in, pulling him into their depths while taking his measure.

He shrugs with what he hopes is nonchalance. He feels dizzy, awkward. Small. The thought of being in close proximity to this beguiling creature for all the months of his pilgrimage is either wondrous or terrifying: he can't decide which.

"I wonder," she continues, "if you will be as generous in sharing the spoils of our adventure, or if you will be tempted to keep them for yourself."

Kestrel's eyes widen.

Fenix guffaws. "What's the matter, Namora? Afraid the airie's going to cut you out of your fair share of treasure we ain't even found yet?"

She turns to him. "Kestrel's gesture was both less generous and more calculated than it appeared. He hoped to purchase our admiration and place us in his debt while ameliorating the effects of his tardiness."

"Go on, Namora," Chalcedon chimes in. "Tell us what you *really* think."

"Wait a minute," says Kestrel. "I bought a round of drinks for the whole bar. That makes me selfish how?"

"To be alive is to be selfish," Namora replies, as though quoting from a suture.

"I don't remember reading *that* in the *Book of the Odds*," Kestrel says.

"There are truths not written in the *Book of the Odds*. Experience and history show that every action begins in self-interest."

"Maybe," Kestrel grants. "But they don't all end up that way."

"Who can say how an action, once begun, will end? Since the outcome of things lies in the realm of probability, of chance, surely it is wiser to restrict one's speculations to what can be known or, through reason, discovered. I mean motivations: the causes of things. Only fools try and predict the future. The dice will reveal what they reveal."

"And what of the Holy Rollers? Are they fools?"

"They predict nothing; that is a common misconception."

Chalcedon asks gruffly: "What are they doing then, when they roll their dice and speak of things to come?"

"You will have noticed, surely, that they do not speak *plainly* of things to come. Their words are riddles that the future answers, not the answers to future riddles."

Kestrel glances at the others. This is perilously close to the sort of talk that results in midnight visits from the Holy Rollers and their chastising whips, or trips to the Therapeutic Faculty of the College of the Virtual Mind.

"Do you believe, then, that the Holy Rollers have no special knowledge?" Fenix demands.

"Beyond their training in probability theology and the interpretation of the dice? No, I do not."

"So they roll the dice and, what, make something up? Lie to us?" Smoke is beginning to drift off the mander's skin, and Kestrel feels a distinct rise in ambient temperature. Stepping back, he bumps against someone standing close behind him and mutters an apology, wondering if the first meeting of his pentad is about to degenerate into a brawl.

"On the contrary," Namora replies, her voice as calm as ever. "They have hundreds of years of statistics at their disposal, meticulous records of the results of dice rolls in every category of question and situation imaginable. When the Holy Rollers speak to us of the future, they are actually referring to the past. In my experience, that is knowledge worth listening to. What is history, after all, but the voice of the Odds?"

"But, Namora," Chalcedon protests, "it's true I've only known you since this morning, which isn't much of a history; but even in that brief interval it hasn't escaped my notice that you carry a set of dice just like the rest of us. Why, I saw you roll them to decide whether or not to come back here and wait for Kestrel; what's more, you obeyed the result of that roll. If the future can't be predicted, then why bother to throw the dice at all, much less obey the results?"

It seems to Kestrel that the expression on the merm's face is one

of genuine curiosity. Autumnal flickers of orange and yellow dance across her scalp and over the hollows of her earholes as she leans forward to pose a question of her own. "By the Odds, Chalcedon, do you mean to tell me that you've never heard of *faith*?"

A whoop of laughter rings out behind Kestrel. "She's got you there, Chalce! Never argue with a merm; they'll whip you every time."

Kestrel turns. He knows that voice.

"Ah," says Fenix. "Our last member. Kestrel, allow me to present—"

"We're old friends," says the grinning, heart-shaped face of the boggle who'd led him astray. She holds out her hand. "I'm Polaris. No hard feelings, I hope."

Ignoring the proffered hand and, as far as possible, its owner, Kestrel turns to Chalcedon. "Why didn't you warn me? That's twice today you've held your tongue when you should have spoken."

"Er, I was afraid you'd do something hasty," says the delph, looking as uncomfortable as a pile of animated rocks in dark shades can look. "We're a pentad now. We've got to get along."

Kestrel scowls. "I don't think so."

"Lighten up, Kes." Polaris runs a hand through her bristling black hair. "It was a joke."

"A joke?" He faces her angrily. "Thanks to you, I missed my chance to see the Posting of the Names!"

"The Posting was already over," Polaris says dismissively. "Besides, it's strictly for the rubes."

"Are you calling me a rube?"

Fenix is glancing from one to the other. "Is this . . . ? You mean . . . ?"

"This is the airie I was telling you about," Polaris says. "The one with a tendency to, um, *lose things*." She giggles. "First his breakfast, then his way. Look: now he's losing his temper!"

Kestrel's crest is at its full extension. He wants nothing more than to wipe the smirk from the boggle's face. But as satisfying as that would be, it wouldn't accomplish anything beyond getting him in trouble with the Holy Rollers. "I'm not going to lose anything," he

says with as much dignity as he can muster. "Except you." He turns to leave.

"Where are you going?" Polaris asks.

"To the Council."

"Do you need directions?"

He storms off, pushing his way through the crowd, pursued by her laughter . . . and not only hers.

"Kestrel, wait!"

It's Chalcedon. Kestrel ignores him, exiting the common room and striding across the lobby to the front door. But before he can reach it, the delph's huge hand closes around his arm and pulls him to a halt. He tries to wrench free but can't break the iron grip. Not without his psionics. And thanks to the dampening field maintained by the boggles of the College, he can't use his powers here. He's helpless as a norm. "Let me go, Chalcedon."

"It won't do any good to go to the Council," Chalcedon says. "Once the assignments are posted, they're final."

"I'll petition for reassignment."

"They won't reassign you. Not on the basis of what they'll see as no more than a private dispute."

"Then I'll go over their heads, appeal directly to the Odds. I have that right."

"Yes, you can roll the dice, but think of the penalty if you lose!"

Every free mute has the right to appeal a decision of the Council by a roll of two twenty-sided dice. The Holy Rollers set the hazard and witness the appeal. A successful roll reverses the Council. But the price of failure can be steep, ranging anywhere from a period of indentured servitude to permanent exile.

"Face it, Kestrel," Chalcedon says, releasing him at last. "You're stuck with us. Polaris isn't so bad, for a boggle. You've just gotten off on the wrong foot."

"Whose fault is that?" he demands. "I don't trust her, and I don't trust you, either. Only a fool puts his life in the hands of people he doesn't trust. I'll drop out before I step through Pilgrim's Gate as a member of this pentad."

"That's up to you, of course. But do you really want that on your

record? First of all, you'll have to go through the Proving again, and I've heard the examiners are extra tough on dropouts. Then, assuming you pass and get assigned to a new pentad, don't you think the other mutes are going to hear about your history? Will they ever be able to trust a dropout? Would you?"

"Once I explain . . ."

"Don't kid yourself; it won't make a bit of difference. You'll wind up suspected of backsliding or worse by the Holy Rollers, to say nothing of, well, you know." It was considered bad luck to speak the name of the Faculty Invisible aloud. "Besides," Chalcedon continues, "think of the others. You may not have warm feelings for Polaris and me at the moment, but what have Fenix and Namora done to you? Why punish them?"

"I'm not punishing anybody."

"I doubt Namora would agree. What was it she said? 'Every action begins in self-interest.'"

"You're a fine one to lecture me on the subject of self-interest! You could have saved us all a lot of trouble by opening your mouth when Polaris gave me the wrong directions."

"I know, and I'm sorry for it, believe me."

"You're a coward," Kestrel says.

To his surprise, the delph nods his big, misshapen head. "Yes, I suppose in some ways I am. But the question is: are you?"

"I'm the victim here!"

"That's not an answer: it's an excuse." Without another word, Chalcedon turns and walks back to the common room.

Kestrel watches him go. Then, before Gad or Pip—or, Odds forbid, Pigeon—can swoop down on him, he hurries out the front door of the inn.

THIS TIME HE TURNS LEFT INSTEAD OF RIGHT, and his memory does not play him false. In less than twenty minutes, he comes to Pilgrim Square. It's all but deserted, though just hours ago it had been packed, teeming with pilgrims and their families and friends, all gathered before the massive wooden doors of Pilgrim's Gate. He'd

wanted so much to be part of that crowd, watching the Holy Rollers parade across the square from the great casino to the stirring beat of normskin drums, the long strips of colored paper on which the pentad assignments were recorded thrown back over their shoulders in gaudy streamers. He'd dreamed for months—years, actually—of how he would raise his voice in the national anthem as the priests cut the streamers into shorter strips of five names apiece and nailed them to the doors.

Still don't know what I was waiting for.

Time was running wild, a million dead in streets . . .

Countless times he'd anticipated the moment when the Holy Rollers would step away from the gate as the anthem drew to its close, the last strains swallowed up in the sounds of cheering and frenetic drumming as he and others flung themselves forward to seek out their names. But is this lonely moment before the doors worse than what he'd dreamed of just because it's different? It has, at least, the advantage of being real. His absence from that crowd had been a kind of presence in the minds of those who'd missed him, just as the presence of the morning's vanished throng is sensible to him now in the starkness of their absence, the silence and stillness of the square broken by the desultory barking of a dog, the grinding of a carriage wheel over the cobblestones from somewhere behind him, the cooing of pigeons as they search for spilled food, the brilliantly colored strips of paper rustling upon the doors like the fluttering wings of impaled butterflies.

Kestrel feels the feathers of his headcrest stir, nerves shivering as if he's strayed into the ambient energies of a piece of antech or stands exposed to the electronic gaze of a virt . . . the latter of which, he reflects, is surely true, for every one of the city's gates has its invisible guardian, watchers chained in netspace by the College of the Virtual Mind.

He steps up to search for his name. There must be at least two hundred slips of paper attached to the doors, which means a thousand names or more. Each paper, in addition to listing the five mem-

bers of a pentad, carries a departure date and time, beginning with early tomorrow morning and continuing around the clock over the next five days, at which point *Mutatis Mutandis* will be emptied of pilgrims.

Because the psionic powers unique to each of the five races emerge capriciously, in some cases slowly, fitfully, a little at a time, and in others suddenly, all at once and without warning, the process of learning to control them is slow, laborious, and fraught with peril. There are accidents, injuries, deaths. When the Featherstone Mountains tremble underfoot, airies take wing, cursing the clumsiness of young delves, just as, whenever a hurricane blows or a tornado touches down, young airies receive the blame. Responsibility for floods and tsunami is laid at the webbed feet of merms, and manders take the heat for wildfires and blazes of the domesticated variety that get out of hand. As for boggles, the responsibility for every mood, every whim, every action may be laid at their doorstep, for anything is possible in the playground of the mind.

The young of the five races are therefore raised among their own kind. But how, then, their powers mastered, to integrate adult mutes into the Commonwealth? How to remedy the evils of enforced segregation?

At the age of seventeen, mutes from all across the Commonwealth are summoned to the Proving Grounds in *Mutatis Mutandis* to demonstrate mastery in the psionic arts. The Proving, a three-day course of examinations, is so mentally and physically arduous that it's rare for more than half of all aspirants to pass on their first try, or even their second. Although a new Proving takes place each quarter, aspirants are permitted to stand but twice in a year and only ten times altogether. Some take years to pass; a sad few never do. After failing for the tenth and final time, an aspirant is faced with three possible fates, determined by the roll of a twenty-sided die: service, sacrifice, or exile. Naturally, those rolling service or exile are first sterilized, for whatever flaw in their blood has kept them from achieving psionic mastery cannot be permitted to weaken the five races by propagating itself further. The exiles are dispatched through Doleful Gate, which leads by a long, straight road directly

into the Waste, beyond the western and northern borders of the Commonwealth. Servants—not to be confused with slaves, who are exclusively norms—are assigned by the Holy Rollers to assist needy families or labor in government institutions: hospitals, farms, factories, schools, branches of the armed forces, faculties of the College of the Virtual Mind, maternity wards, inseminaries. Servants are held in the highest esteem, their labor accepted humbly, with gratitude, like a sacrifice offered up to incline the Odds in favor of the Commonwealth, as if, in place of the blood libations they are no longer permitted to offer, their failure to pass the Proving itself proof of tainted blood, they are offering the libation of their lives in a slow but unstanched bleeding of hours, days, years, until there's nothing left of them at all. As for those who roll the fate of sacrifice, they, too, are honored for a service equally essential, if more quickly consummated: sent into the inseminaries, they serve as guinea pigs for the experiments of the Holy Rollers, helping to ensure that new savvee strains developed for use against the norms have no harmful effects on mutes, as well as assisting in the search for the fabled savvee that, according to the dice of the Rollers, will one day trigger the Second Becoming, the next phase of mute evolution, in which mutes will be invested with powers far beyond those they now possess . . . powers that will enable them to crush the armies of Pluribus Unum and exterminate the norms forever.

Successful aspirants, known as pilgrims, are assigned to pentads composed of one member from each race. The pentads are dispatched into the Waste, that untamed wilderness where the wounds of the Viral Wars fester unhealed and norms, exiles, rogue mutes, and worse roam the twisted countryside and haunt the crumbling ruins of pre-Becoming cities built on a scale that dwarfs the Many-sided City itself. Largest of all is Hunger City, poised halfway between the Commonwealth and the country of the norms. The pentads make their pilgrimages to Hunger City and back again by randomly selected routes that are to be followed as faithfully as possible; some of these head straight for the city, while others are circuitous. Pilgrimages can be completed in as few as six months, but in most cases the journey to and from Hunger City takes at least a

year, and frequently longer; the Waste is an unforgiving place, to say nothing of Hunger City itself, or the other, lesser cities passed through on the way. Pentads often return with diminished numbers. Some never return at all. But for those that do, years of racial prejudices and misapprehensions have been melted down in the crucible of shared dangers and hardships, triumphs and tragedies, and individuals from five separate races have been forged into a fellowship that, while self-sufficient, is part of a greater whole, just as the fingers are to the hand, the hand to the arm, the arm to the body. Thus are the nations and races of the Commonwealth knit together, generation by generation.

It gives Kestrel a sense of how wide the Waste really is to reflect that traveling pentads seldom encounter one another; the routes laid out for each pentad are designed to keep such contacts to a minimum . . . except when the opposite is true, and the dice indicate the advisability of a meeting. Of course, as Namora had pointed out, the future isn't fixed, and nothing is a sure thing; presumably, pentads never intended to meet cross paths from time to time, while others who'd been aligned for some future intersection go astray, without the world coming to an end. Kestrel is content to leave probability theology, and all its paradoxes, to the Holy Rollers. He supposes Namora was right about that as well. In the end, it all comes down to faith.

Ah, there it is! Pride and excitement swirl through him at the sight of the powder blue strip of paper bearing his name—Kestrel of Wafting—along with the names of the others. At the bottom of the fluttering paper is tomorrow's date and an early-afternoon departure time. He'll have to hurry to finish outfitting himself for the journey before the shops close for the day. And settle his bill with Pigeon. And say good-bye to his parents. He sighs.

Is he going through with it after all? Despite everything, will he be standing here tomorrow with Polaris and the rest to receive the map of their assigned route and hearty handshakes all around from a smiling Holy Roller? Chalcedon had asked if he was a coward, but Kestrel isn't sure which course of action merits that label: dropping out or not dropping out. There is, of course, the option of the dice.

Yet as his fingers stray to the normskin pouch dangling from his belt, in which he carries his dice, carved from the bones of his birth mother, Kestrel feels an unusual hesitation. The decision to roll the dice may be his, but once rolled, the final decision is theirs—or, rather, that of the great and powerful Odds. For the moment both alternatives are still possible; they possess an equal potential. Yet as soon as the dice leave his hand, one of those alternatives—superpositioned eigenstates, in the baffling language of probability theology—will begin to collapse into nothing while the other will expand until, by the time the dice are still, it has become fully real. It makes him dizzy to contemplate.

When he was a boy, compelled by his parents or teachers to throw the dice in situations that, like this one, he'd been reluctant, for one reason or another, to resolve, Kestrel had raised, as all children do, the Paradox of Infinite Regression; that is, instead of simply rolling the dice to determine whether he should do X or Y, he would insist on rolling the dice to determine whether or not he should roll the dice to determine whether he should do X or Y. The paradox lay not so much in that single iteration but in the door it opened to an infinity of similar rolls, each made to determine whether or not its successor would take place, with the result that, ultimately, there need be no result at all.

Kestrel smiles, remembering how he'd racked his brains over that concept, which had seemed to break the smallest and simplest choices of daily life into an endless number of smaller, intermediate choices, each of which had to come out a certain way for the original choice to happen, a circumstance that seemed about as likely as rolling an endless number of sixes in a row. What had reduced him to a state of baffled anxiety as a child was the realization that, when he thought about it, there was nothing in existence, whether action or thought, that didn't involve a choice of alternative actions or thoughts; it didn't matter if he physically rolled the dice or not; somewhere, on some level, an equivalent operation must be taking place to decide among the various alternatives, which seemed to mean that it should have been impossible for him to perform any action or think any thought at all, since, for that action or thought to

take place, an infinite series of unlikely operations would have had to have been carried out first, each coming out just so.

Finally, after Scoter and Perula had failed to answer this conundrum to his satisfaction, he'd gone to Wafting's small casino and put the question to the nesting's Holy Roller, an ancient airie named Crane whose face and neck were so thoroughly carved with incision patterns as to resemble the keratinous skin of a delph. But instead of resolving the paradox, Crane had expounded on the sacred mysteries of probability theology, informing the eleven-year-old Kestrel that his interest in such matters was evidence of an avocation, and that he should consider taking the motley. In fact, Crane had told him, many boys his own age and younger heard and heeded the call of the Odds. He himself had entered the insemnary at the age of nine. If Kestrel was uncertain (which was only natural!), well, why not let the dice decide? What a relief (he'd said) to put one's faith in fortune's ebb and flow, to align oneself with the great flux of the Odds like a feather floating on the wind! Terrified that Crane was going to pull out a pair of dice and force him to roll for his future then and there—for he'd heard that the Holy Rollers left little to chance when it came to recruiting, and that the specially blessed dice they used for this purpose were not to be trusted—Kestrel beat a hasty retreat.

"Tell your fortune, young pilgrim?"

Kestrel jumps at the childlike voice from close behind him; he'd been so wrapped up in thoughts and memories that he hadn't heard anyone approach. He turns, annoyed at the intrusion, but the curt words on his lips die there at the sight of a male boggle with two heads. He gapes, astonished.

The impossible creature is strikingly tall for its race, though still shorter than Kestrel. Its bare torso, crisscrossed with straps of brown leather, bulges disproportionately large; filthy trousers encase its slim but muscular lower extremities. Its two heads are not on a level, but set one above the other like two blooms on a single stem. The face of the uppermost is a scarred ruin behind a patchy gray beard and a rat's nest of tangled and matted brown hair that would not have looked out of place on a dog. Tied across its eyes is a ragged

strip of stained black cloth. The second face is handsome but expressionless, with close-trimmed blond hair, smoothly shaved cheeks, and mismatched eyes: one slate gray, with a pinprick pupil, the other amber, its pupil so greatly dilated as almost to eclipse the iris, which surrounds it in a slender ring.

A grin like another, deeper scar splits the ruined upper face. "Pay what you like," shrills the voice that had just spoken, emanating from the thin lips of the handsome lower face. "Mizar is no beggar. He provides a valuable service."

The creature blinks its odd eyes calmly while, with one hand, it holds out and jiggles a red plastic bowl in which a few copper coins rattle feebly. "What's the matter, kid?" comes the voice again. "Never seen a mounted boggle?"

Only now does Kestrel grasp that he's looking at two distinct individuals. One—an armless, legless, eyeless, and seemingly voiceless boggle wearing a dirty jacket whose empty sleeves have been pinned or sewn to its sides, imparting to its wearer the incongruous look of a bearded and swaddled papoose—is strapped by means of a leather harness to the back of the other, a norm who's apparently supplying the boggle's missing limbs, his missing eyes, even his missing voice . . . is, in fact, a physical extension of the boggle. Kestrel's seen prosthetic limbs before, but never a prosthetic *body*.

"Ugly, ain't he?" The high-pitched voice testifies to castration at the hands of the Holy Rollers. "He's always frightening people with those eyes. One of 'em's antech: bet you can't guess which one."

Kestrel shakes his head; he's still wrapping his mind around the fact that it's the boggle who's calling the norm ugly and not vice versa.

"Ha! The right one: the one like a chip of blue ice. But don't worry. He may look like a Husky, but St. Christopher don't bite. And neither"—here the norm laughs, while the boggle grins in accompaniment, perfect white teeth flashing—"does Mizar." The norm . . . or, Kestrel thinks, the boggle acting through the norm, gives the bowl another shake and adds, like an afterthought, "Much."

Kestrel, back pressing against the wooden doors of the gate, can retreat no farther. He assays a weak laugh at the boggle's joke—at least, he hopes it's a joke—while digging into his pocket for a coin with which to buy his escape from this madmute. But then he sees, like stars winking through a scrim of clouds, the glint of a major's pips beneath the grime of the boggle's jacket. “Y-you're an officer!” he stammers.

“I was once.” The boggle—who, Kestrel notes, has referred to himself both in the third person, as Mizar, and in the first person, as if he finds his partnership with the norm just as confusing to keep straight as Kestrel does—pulls whatever invisible strings work the body to which he's physically and psionically attached, drawing it into a posture of ramrod-stiff attention that seems a mockery of all things military. “Is that so shocking?”

Kestrel blushes, fumbling a handful of coins from his pocket. He thinks of all the veterans he's seen hawking their wares in the streets and feels ashamed of himself for, well, basically just for existing. He's ashamed of the whole Oddsdamn Commonwealth, to tell the truth. That a crippled officer should be compelled to scrounge for survival on the streets of the capital is a molting disgrace . . . and so is the way that he and everybody else seems eager to look away from the ugly fact of it in one way or another.

“Here!” he blurts, half-flinging the coins into the bowl. A few bounce and fall, striking the cobblestones of the square and rolling in different directions; one hits the grubby bare foot of the norm, who disregards it utterly, continuing to stare at Kestrel with all the evident intelligence of a grouper fish.

“Sorry!” Completely flustered now, he stoops to retrieve the coins.

“I told you.” The voice issues placidly from above his head. “Mizar is no beggar. And yes, it is a disgrace.”

Kestrel stands and places the coins carefully back into the bowl. He forces himself to look at the boggle, not the norm. “You shouldn't be reading my mind like that,” he scolds, trying to fortify himself behind an assertion of authority. “It's against the law.”

“So are many things,” pipes the norm, as Mizar’s fine teeth are once again framed by his ugly slash of a grin, more like a sneer. “If the College wants to punish me, they know where St. Christopher and I can be found.”

“Saint . . . That’s what the norms call their holy men, isn’t it?”

“Some of ’em.”

“Strange thing to call a slave.”

“Not at all. Haven’t you read the Holy Trilogy?”

“We studied it in school, but I haven’t actually read it.” He doesn’t know anyone who has. Not that the books—the sacred texts of the norm religion, the Trinitarian Church—are forbidden, exactly. But in Wafting, at least, Crane had discouraged their study, nor had Kestrel’s netspatial instructors, boggle lecturers from the various faculties of the College, gone deeply into the subject. “Why bother? It’s just superstition and lies.”

“You can learn a lot about the enemy from studying his lies—especially the ones he tells himself.”

“I know everything I need to know about norms.”

“Then you are wise indeed. But it was in the pages of the Trilogy that I learned the story of St. Christopher, a prince who bore an infant aspect of the three-faced god upon his shoulders. Just so was my trusty steed once a prince, the half brother of Pluribus Unum himself. Among the norms, it’s not uncommon for the nobility to sacrifice an eye or limb in order to be fitted with an antech prosthetic. If you can believe it, such barbaric mutilations are admired as acts of pious devotion!”

“They are mad.”

“True, but that doesn’t make them less dangerous. St. Christopher’s ocular implant, for example, functions as both a netaccessory and a powerful laser. No doubt you’ve wondered how I suffered my wounds, but, being an airie, are too polite to ask. I will tell you. They came in battle—battle against this norm and his all-too-literally piercing gaze. I defeated him, though at the cost you see, and my troops took him prisoner. When it became clear that I wasn’t going to die of my wounds, terrible though they were, the Council, as is customary, presented him to me as a reward for my victory and

a replacement for what I had lost. Now Mizar, like the three-faced god, is borne upon the shoulders of a prince! What else could I call him but St. Christopher?" Mizar's mouth opens wide in a cackle whose sound is supplied by the norm, and Kestrel sees a stubby, blackened bud of flesh, like the tongue of a parrot, where the boggle's tongue should be. "I am his god now. It is Mizar he worships; Mizar he fears. The god of the norms is, as you say, a lie, a myth. But Mizar is real, and so is his wrath."

Kestrel feels sickened and ashamed, though in a different way than before. "Does . . . does he remember who he was?"

"While Mizar rides, St. Christopher knows only what I permit him to know, feels only what I permit him to feel. But when Mizar rests, St. Christopher remembers. I keep him close beside me then, that I may hear his tears and groans; they are the sweetest music I know."

All at once, St. Christopher begins to cry. No sound escapes his lips, nor does his blank expression alter, yet tears are suddenly spilling from his eyes . . . and those leaking from the icy antech orb are indistinguishable from the ones that flow from its natural neighbor. Then, with as little warning and less reason, the norm begins to laugh, his tear-streaked face lighting up with intense, entirely unself-conscious joy.

Kestrel jerks back as if whatever madness has afflicted St. Christopher might infect him as well. He's beginning to appreciate just how powerful and strange the boggle race really is. Mizar's psionic abilities do more than compensate for his missing limbs and eyes; they make them irrelevant. Without wings, an airie is forever diminished. Poor Pigeon, for instance: though winds and weather still answer to his psionic summons, his crippled wing has left him incapable of finesse in flight. Even if he should use his powers to lift and propel himself through the air, he can never again maneuver with the grace his wings had given him. Flight under such circumstances is no more than a grotesque parody. But a boggle could be armless and legless, deaf, dumb, and blind, and it wouldn't matter a whit. A boggle with a brain is still a boggle. The senses and bodies of norms are Mizar's to use as he pleases, putting them on and tak-

ing them off like clothes, and, unlike Pigeon, he can make himself whole again in netspace whenever he chooses: Kestrel's willing to bet that the boggle's virt doesn't mirror his present physical condition but is instead some idealized version of the mute he'd been before his costly victory over St. Christopher.

"You're unhappy with your pentad," comes St. Christopher's high-pitched voice. At these words, his tears stop flowing and his exalted expression vanishes, though the wetness on his face gives him a dazed, distressed look, like an accident victim in a state of shock. "You're wondering if you can trust them. Wondering if you should drop out."

Kestrel forces his gaze away from the slave to the master; he doesn't know which is more disconcerting, the mismatched eyes of the one or the strip of black cloth covering the eyes of the other. "You *are* reading my mind!"

"It doesn't take a mind reader to know what brings a young airie to Pilgrim Square long after pentad assignments have been posted. Do you think you're the first mute to come here full of doubts and misgivings?"

Kestrel frowns. This is getting too personal. "Look—"

"Mizar hasn't forgotten," the norm interrupts. "He will tell your fortune now."

"Never mind," Kestrel says. "I don't believe in that stuff."

"Don't you?" St. Christopher gives the plastic bowl a rattle. "Then you'd better take your money back."

"You can keep it."

"Mizar is no beggar," the norm asserts testily. "He is a business-mute who provides a valuable service for a fee. He neither accepts nor needs charity."

Kestrel sighs in defeat. "All right. Go ahead."

"I'll need a personal item."

"A what?"

"Something that belongs to you; something you're carrying in your pocket or your pouch, for instance. You'll get it back; no need to worry about that."

"Aren't you going to use dice?"

“Please,” huffs St. Christopher, as though accused of rank charlatanism, and the lips of Mizar curl in an accompanying sneer. “I’ll leave that to the Holy Rollers. Though you can give me dice as your personal item, if you like.”

Kestrel doesn’t like. No way is he going to entrust his precious bone dice to Mizar and his “trusty steed.” He searches his pockets: loose change, a box of matches, a wadded-up something . . . He pulls out Polaris’s handkerchief. His blood has dried, leaving tea-colored spots.

“Ah-ha!” St. Christopher exclaims.

“It’s just a handkerchief.”

The boggle’s nostrils flare. “Got blood on it,” the norm observes. “Yours?”

Kestrel looks from one face to the other, flustered. “Yes, but—”
“It’ll do.”

St. Christopher snatches the handkerchief with his free hand, brings it to his nose, and sniffs deeply, as though savoring a rose. Then, to Kestrel’s astonishment, he lowers the rag to his lips and touches the bloodstains with the tip of his tongue, like a child sampling the taste or temperature of an unfamiliar food. All the while, a low and tuneless humming proceeds from deep in Mizar’s throat, and his blindfolded head weaves back and forth, keeping time to a melody only he can hear.

Taking the opportunity to study the boggle more closely, Kestrel is surprised to see precise incision patterns underlying the tangled beard and battle scars. Each of the sixty-four sutures of the *Book of the Odds* has an incision pattern associated with it, and the patterns grow increasingly elaborate, incorporating the lines of their predecessors, from the simple horizontal stroke of Suture One, *Horizon*, to the complex arabesque of Suture Sixty-four, *Cloud Chamber Collisions*, which contains every previous pattern. Every evening, in the ritual of blood libation, mutes over the age of twelve roll their dice to determine which suture will constitute the text of that night’s prayer and where on their bodies they will simultaneously inscribe the associated pattern using slivers of bladeweeds. The wounds heal overnight, thanks to the cellcoms that are another legacy of the Viral

Wars, leaving a new set of scars in the morning. When the ritual is performed by a single mute, acting alone, or in certain other circumstances, simplified versions of the more complex patterns are prescribed, and impossible-to-reach areas of the body proscribed, so that even the highest suture, if rolled, can be executed. There are two exceptions to this practice. First, because any boggle might be drafted at any time into the Faculty Invisible and dispatched into the Trumen Empire to serve as a spy or assassin, boggles possess no telltale incision pattern scars (save for those who take the motley and become Holy Rollers), though boggles still know the pain and joyful release of blood libation, practicing the ritual in netspace upon their invirted selves, which receive the self-inflicted scars as the nerves of their unmarked flesh-and-blood bodies jangle and thrill to the breezy cold kiss of imaginary bladeweeds. And second, only Holy Rollers incise patterns into the flesh of their necks and heads; everything above the shoulders is prohibited to ordinary mutes, and everything below the shoulders is off-limits to Holy Rollers. The scarred and hairless head of an old Holy Roller resembles nothing so much as the carapace of an insect: for this reason they are called, though never to their faces, by the nickname Beetles.

What the scars mean is that Mizar was not just an officer, but a priest. While Holy Rollers serve in the armed forces, they don't take an active role in fighting and are not commissioned as officers; thus, Kestrel reasons, Mizar must have left the priesthood prior to serving as an officer. Whether he'd left voluntarily or been stripped of the motley for some offense or other, Kestrel has no way of knowing, and he isn't about to ask. But the boggle's contemptuous rejection of the idea of using dice to foretell his future suggests that his parting with the Rollers was not altogether amicable. Which leads Kestrel to wonder if the Faculty Invisible might have been involved in some way. Knowing almost nothing for certain about the Invisibles, he finds it easy to believe almost anything about them.

But this is a line of questioning he doesn't feel comfortable pursuing, even in the privacy of his mind . . . assuming such a thing exists; for all he knows, Mizar is eavesdropping on his thoughts right now. The boggle hasn't shown much respect for, much less fear

of, the law, perhaps on the theory that he doesn't have anything left to lose . . . although surely St. Christopher could be taken away from him.

Meanwhile, the norm has left off tasting Kestrel's handkerchief and is examining it from different angles, turning his hand this way and that while kneading the cloth between his fingers like a tailor assessing a piece of fabric. Kestrel notes with the queasy abhorrence he always feels in the presence of antech that the pupil of the ice-blue eye is dilating and contracting rapidly; the aperture freezes for a microsecond at a certain diameter, then shifts to another, then another, transitioning between disparate states without any discernible regularity or pattern. Mizar continues weaving his head in a rhythm that has no apparent relation to his tuneless humming. Kestrel can't help wondering if this is another malicious joke like the one Polaris played on him earlier; he feels naked standing here, exposed to the ridicule of the city. But while what few passersby there are cast curious glances in his direction, no one stops or approaches for a closer look, much less laughs or comments. It comes to him that even such sights as this, which would have drawn a crowd in Wafting, are unremarkable in the Many-sided City. Despite the presence of so many people, so many eyes, he's all but invisible here.

At last, like a child grown weary of a toy, St. Christopher looks up from the bloodied handkerchief. The norm's antech eye lacks the flash of primal recognition by which living creatures announce their existence to one another and reaffirm it to themselves. It's cold and brittle, dead as tinted glass. Even his natural eye seems like a clouded yellow marble. And yet, Kestrel reminds himself, Mizar is gazing out at him through those eyes as if through crystal-clear windows. So much for invisibility, he thinks.

"The blood was yours, but not the handkerchief." Mizar's white teeth flash as the norm's voice squeaks with sly amusement. "You can't fool Mizar so easily!"

"I wasn't trying to fool Mizar," Kestrel says, unconsciously adopting the boggle's habit of referring to himself by name.

"The owner of the handkerchief: a female, yes or no?"

Kestrel nods. "She—"

St. Christopher's forestalling hand still clutches the handkerchief. "You do not tell Mizar; Mizar tells you. Now, this female: a sweetheart, yes or no?"

"Odds, no! She—"

"Silence! Not yet, perhaps, but in the future? Your fates are intertwined; blood binds you to this female . . . a boggle, unless I am much deceived; a member of your pentad, perhaps? Do not answer!"

Kestrel keeps his mouth shut with difficulty. If Mizar doesn't want him to answer, he shouldn't ask so many Oddsdamn questions.

"You will not drop out, young pilgrim; but then, you already knew that, did you not? Tomorrow afternoon you will step through this gate with your pentad and make your way with them toward Hunger City. But not all who set out will arrive. You do not trust your pentad; in this, your instinct is sure. There will be betrayal; faith will be broken. Tears will be shed, and blood. Yet despair not, for I see—"

"Hold on," Kestrel interrupts. "What do you mean, *betrayal*?"

"That I cannot tell."

"Can't or won't?"

Mizar and St. Christopher smile in eerie unison. As they do, Kestrel feels the boggle's psionic touch for the first time. It comes swiftly and powerfully, like the expert thrust of an assassin's blade. Before he can say a word or react in any way, the invirting is accomplished. Kestrel is held fast in Mizar's mental grip, his body frozen where it stands, his mind invaded and dragged into netspace, that nightmare realm, created by norms, where all mutes but boggles hate and fear to go.



Jack! Psst, Jack!"

Jilly's voice hisses in his ear. "What is it?" he whispers, turning from his back to face her in the gloom of the old gymnasium, where their sleeping bags lie side by side on the fringes of a field of mats tiled together over a quarter of the floor. The mats are tough

and hard and smell like they've absorbed every last drop of sweat shed on them by generations of junior high school tumblers and wrestlers. Just inches away, Jack can't make out more than the vaguest outline of Jilly's features. Her breath smells of milk and vanilla wafers, something to savor amid the odors of the mats and their fellow refugees, not to mention the unpleasant haze of cigarette and cigar smoke that hangs in the hot, humid air.

"I can't sleep."

"Me neither."

"I wish we'd stayed home."

"Me too."

"This stinks worse than I thought."

"You can say that again."

"This stinks—ow, quit it!"

"You quit it!"

A flurry of pinches and punches flares, subsides. It's too hot. The sounds of people asleep or trying to sleep surround them: snores of every stripe, sighs, moans, coughs, smacking lips, the restless shiftings and stirrings of limbs, occasional farts no longer as funny as they'd been at first. There's a hum of conversation, a low murmuring that drifts from place to place like the buzzing of bees in a garden.

The best spots were already claimed when they reached the Lord Baltimore Middle School after a drive that seemed to take hours, days, centuries, the five of them packed into the Toyota, with Bill fighting the wind and car every slow and terrifying inch of the way, his knuckles white where they gripped the wheel, the windows constantly fogging up and so thoroughly inundated with rain it was, Jack thought, like driving across the ocean floor. It wouldn't have surprised him to see schools of fish go swimming by, and the solitary car that passed them on the way, traveling in the opposite direction, looked more like a submarine than any surface vehicle, floating *Nautilus*-like within the blurry yellow nimbus of its own headlights while, in the waterlogged opacity beyond, the writhing limbs of the trees that lined the road appeared to be moving with purpose, like the groping tentacles of a giant squid or, no, some-

thing bigger, a creature grown to incomprehensible size in the icy, absolute, bone-crushing dark at the bottom of the sea.

At least there had still been electricity when they plunged through the double doors of the air-conditioned gymnasium, drenched to the bone despite their ponchos after one last epic struggle across the maelstrom of the parking lot. Gasping, shivering, they stood there for a moment, shedding water, stunned by the visceral absence of the hurricane as heads turned toward the drama of their entrance, a few voices calling out in welcome over the murmurous clash of radios and tape players kept to the same low volume as though out of respect for the greater cacophony that was Belle. Then a woman bustled up with dry towels and blankets as chatter resumed and spread around them, comforting in its ordinariness.

Under the joyless glare of the gymnasium lights, the sight of the gray mats crowded with towels, blankets, and sleeping bags, toys, folding chairs, and coolers, as if the public beach had been transported indoors by the starship *Enterprise*, wasn't exactly welcoming: not to Doonish eyes, which scorned the easy intimacies of such close congregation, used to the more open spaces of Middlesex Beach, reserved for members only . . . and even there they would spread their towels as far from others as possible. Here, though, they'd had to settle for leftovers, squeezing their sleeping bags and assorted stuff into a sandy sliver of gray matting between two jovial clans, one black, the other white, who rearranged their own campsites to make a little extra room for the latecomers.

"Nothing like a natural disaster to promote racial harmony," Bill observed a moment later in the boys' locker room.

"Right," said Uncle Jimmy with a wink at Jack. "Fight racism: drop the Bomb!"

Then, with everybody in dry clothes, Bill and Uncle Jimmy ambled over to where a makeshift bar was doing a brisk business under the management of the local Lions Club, leaving the kids to fend for themselves.

What followed was hours of excruciating fun as self-appointed camp counselors wasted no time in rounding up Jack and Jilly and injecting them into a numbing series of games, sing-alongs, and

arts-and-crafts projects that didn't merely continue but intensified once Belle got around to knocking out the electricity. The school was equipped with an emergency generator, but a shortage of fuel kept its use to a minimum: isolated lights shed a moonish glow too weak to do more than punctuate the darkness of the long hallways outside the gym like pale ellipses trailing off into obscurity, and were even less useful inside, remote as stars in the high ceiling.

Ellen's age won her the leadership of Jack and Jilly's play group, and the pleasure she took in her position of authority was enhanced by the many opportunities it afforded for petty revenge, that stubbed toe not forgotten for one minute, nor any of the thousand and one other slights she kept sharpened on the whetstone of memory for just such occasions, an arsenal of knives that were all blade, wounding her as she held them . . . which only made her grip them tighter, with a martyr's zeal, as if the shedding of her own blood blessed her with the moral right to make others bleed. Small wonder Jack and Jilly went unprotesting to bed when dispatched by Bill after a raucous candlelight meal to which everyone contributed something, a potluck dinner like some post-Apocalyptic Thanksgiving feast of cheese and crackers, cookies, potato chips, pretzels, carrot sticks, peaches and plums and bananas, succulent tomatoes, an assortment of lunch meats, fried chicken, homemade apple pie, cupcakes and brownies, and slices of watermelon, all preceded by a prayer from the minister of the First Baptist Church of Bethany in which Belle was cast as the scourge of the Almighty sent to chastise a sinful flock strayed from the path of righteousness, Uncle Jimmy rolling his eyes as the man gave Belle a run for the money in the windiness department.

That was a while ago. Bill, Uncle Jimmy, and Ellen (who, gallingly, has been granted provisional adult status for the duration, sort of like a field promotion, even permitted to drink beer at dinner) have yet to turn in. They're across the gym, where a good fifteen to twenty people are milling, the hard core of a party fueled by Belle and determined to outlast her. Jack hears trills and barks of laughter, the bass drone of his father's voice holding forth as on *Inside the Beltway* when he sets his lethargic mask aside, other voices

singing along, some drunkenly, to the strumming of a guitar while music spills from tape players in styles ranging from gospel to country to disco to rock and roll, the disparate sounds strangely warped and welded in the cavernous, high-ceilinged space as if on the verge of spontaneously evolving into a mutant music that's never existed before: a music capable of changing the world. If he shuts his eyes and listens closely, past the music and Jilly's voice, Jack imagines he can hear the echoes of old basketball games and pep rallies lingering like enervated ghosts: the sharp squeaks of sneakers skidding across the polished pine boards of the court, a multitude of voices chanting rhythmically, words drowned beneath the steady stamping of feet on bleachers. He feels himself falling, swooning into a darkness deeper and more solitary than sleep. Then a shudder racks his body. His eyes snap open with a start, heart thudding against his chest.

"Hey," Jilly whispers, and it occurs to him that she's been talking for a while now, though he can't recall a word she's said.

"Jesus," he breathes in the ebb tide of adrenaline, still not fully back. The flickering and steadily glowing lights behind and above the silhouette of Jilly's recumbent form are miles away, the lights of a town located beyond a cluster of hills on the far side of a wide, dark river. It's a place he knows. He's traveled there before, walked its streets and entered its buildings, talked with its citizens; the name is right on the tip of his tongue . . . and then it bursts like a bubble, releasing a flavor both familiar and mysterious into the space of its absence. Sad with loss and longing, he gropes in vain after a misplaced memory.

"Hey!" Even fiercer, punctuated by a stiff finger in his left arm, the sore one. "Are you listening?"

"Ow! Quit it, Jilly!"

"You fell asleep on me." As though accusing him of the basest betrayal.

"I wasn't asleep . . ."

"Bullshit you weren't!"

"You kids pipe down," growls a man's voice from the nearby darkness, accompanied by a chorus of shushes.

"C'mon," Jilly says, ignoring them.

"Where are you going?"

But she's already on her feet, making her way to the edge of the mat.

"Hold up . . ." Jack rises and follows, stumbling once as his bare toes kick what could be the spine of a paperback or the rubber sole of a sneaker lying on its side before catching up to her at mid-court. It's still too dark to make out her features, though he can see the glitter of her eyes. "Dad's just gonna send us back to bed, you know."

"He's gotta catch us first. Now shut up. We're getting out of here."

"Um, aren't you forgetting Belle?"

"Don't be stupid. Not out into the middle of the hurricane: out of the gym."

The lash of her scorn raises a blush, the sting made worse by the knowledge that these shadows aren't deep enough to hide his feelings from her. What shadows are? "What's your problem, Jilly? You've been on my case all night." Suddenly he knows. "It's the Scrabble game. You're still pissed at me."

"Why would I be pissed?"

"You think it's my fault we lost."

"We didn't lose; we never finished the game."

"That's why you switched the tiles around. As if Dad wasn't gonna notice!"

"I never touched anything."

"I saw it, Jilly, okay?"

"You saw me switching tiles?"

"No . . . But when I went back to light a candle, the board was different."

"Well, it wasn't me. You were sitting next to me the whole time, Jack. You would've seen something."

Which would be a pretty good alibi even if he didn't believe her. But he knows she's telling the truth; when it comes to Jilly, he's got a built-in lie detector. "Then who? Not Ellen . . ."

"Why not? It's just the kind of lousy trick she'd pull. Not even to win: just so she could blame us for it later and get us in trouble for cheating."

"Yeah, but I was next to her the whole time, too."

"Then maybe it was Uncle Jimmy. Or Dad. Who cares?"

He does; it feels important somehow. "But—"

"Forget about the stupid Scrabble game. We've got better things to do. As long as we're stuck in this stupid school, let's have some fun. Let's go exploring."

Jack thinks he must have been a lot sleepier than he realized not to have flashed on the idea of exploring the school himself. But he's wide-awake now, Jilly's energy and excitement stoking his own, flowing into him along whatever Route 1 of the soul his own feelings and sensations travel to reach her. "Cool," he says. "We can play Mutes & Norms!"

"Yeah, right," says Jilly. "Except there aren't any mutes around here."

"Well, we'll just play norms then."

They share a laugh at that, harmony restored, then make their way across the gym to the doors farthest away from the festivities. If stopped, they can always claim to be headed for the bathrooms. But no voice calls them back, not even when they push open one door with a noise that seems too loud to miss and freeze in the roseate glow of the EXIT sign like two escaping convicts transfixed in the beam of a searchlight. Then they're through, the door snicking shut behind them.

They're not safe yet. In the sickly wash of the emergency lights, other refugees from within gaze at them with varying degrees of interest: small knots of people seated in loose circles on the floor, drinking and smoking to the echoey strains of Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours*. Not exactly Bill's crowd! More Uncle Jimmy's scene. Or, upon closer examination, El's, for they look to be around her age. Jack and Jilly go tense; it's impossible to predict how a group of teenagers will react in situations like this, or any situation at all, whether they'll decide Jack and Jilly are intruders who need to be taught a lesson or kids too young to matter or even exist. Luckily, this time it's the latter, and the scrutiny is gone in an instant.

"Here," Jilly whispers, handing him a flashlight; she keeps another for herself.

Jack knows what she's thinking: there are dangers to this game they're playing. Consequences no less real for being unanticipated. They hesitate, silently debating whether to go left or right or straight ahead down the wide, locker-lined hallways. Then, coming to their customary inner agreement, they set off down the long hall in front of them, following the bread-crumbs trail of emergency lights, the dusty tiles of the floor smooth and cool beneath their bare feet. They keep the flashlights off by another shared if unspoken decision, not wanting to disturb the couples who lean against the walls and lockers in the lightless intervals as they go creeping by. These clinging pairs sway in a breeze of moans and sighs that seems to have some other source than themselves, as if Belle has forced her way into the school, shouldering the very molecules aside only to emerge drained by the effort, her touch gentled to a caress. It's impossible to make out faces or individual bodies; the couples are pressed so close they're like concentrations of shadow coalescing into as-yet-unknown forms, melting into each other and into the walls and lockers behind them . . . or, thinks Jack, emerging out of them, gargoyles crawling butterfly-like from cocoons of concrete and steel.

Soon they come to stairs leading up. They take the steps two at a time, eager to leave the ground floor behind and begin the real adventure. They pause in the weak light at the top of the stairs.

"Wow," breathes Jilly. "Will you listen to that."

With the noisy distractions of the gymnasium gone, and the strains of Fleetwood Mac outdistanced, the remaining sounds belong to Belle. There's nothing gentle about them. More like a dragon clawing to get inside while screaming in a bloodlust of frustrated hunger and rage. It seems a miracle the roof hasn't been torn off, the windows shattered. As it is, they can feel the building shuddering around them, hear the groaning protests of beams and girders strained to their limits and beyond.

Lord Baltimore Middle School has been around forever. It's weathered its share of storms over the years, some of them a lot worse than Belle, if you can believe the locals . . . which, of course, you can't always. But even if they're telling the truth, it doesn't

mean the school's still going to be standing at the end of this one. In fact, to Jack's way of thinking it makes that outcome *less* likely. Surely each elemental assault has weakened the school a little more, until by now it's like a fortress whose walls, impregnable to any single attack, crumble at last from the accumulated cost of all its successful defenses.

Jilly's flashlight beam lances out to sweep over the gray lockers and closed classroom doors of a hallway identical to the one below—except here they've got no company. She heads for the nearest door and tries the knob. It's locked. "Rats!"

"Plenty more where that came from."

They split up, Jack taking the right side of the hallway, Jilly the left, and work their way from door to door.

It happens so quickly—the knob turning, the door swinging inward as his heart leaps to his throat—that for a moment he's speechless, standing on the threshold of a musty dark that seems as likely to hold a mummy's tomb as a classroom. Then, probing with the flashlight though still not entering, as though wary of a curse: "Jilly! This one's o—"

She brushes past him. "What are you waiting for, an invitation?"

He follows her inside, pulling the door closed behind him. He's ashamed of his hesitation and angry at her rebuke, not just the fact of it but the form; it's one of Bill's favorite expressions, something of a trademark, actually, employed with equal enthusiasm, and to the same withering effect, at home and on *Inside the Beltway*.

The classroom has a damp, dusty, moldering smell reminiscent of the pump room under the beach house, where, among other odds and ends, old issues of the *Washington Post* and *Washington Star* await delivery to the recycling center, and green plastic trash bags with ripped sides spill their contents, cornucopias of unwanted sheets and outgrown clothing whose fabric is disintegrating from the potent combination of moist, salty air and the nesting habits of field mice. There, too, Bill keeps his journalistic papers and notebooks in carefully labeled cardboard boxes (raw material for the best-selling novel he talks of writing one day), among which are divided, unbeknownst to him, a supply of cigarettes swiped by Jack

and Jilly from Uncle Jimmy, plus a couple of Bic lighters similarly purloined.

"Kind of creepy, huh?" Jilly's flashlight plays over rows of empty desks, white walls adorned with a Mercator map of the world, the Periodic Table of the Elements, a poster displaying oval portraits of the presidents from George Washington to Jimmy Carter in order of succession, vocabulary words spelled out in large, rounded letters cut from brightly colored craft paper, and other all-too-familiar classroom assemblages and decorations whose existence saps their spirits, bringing home more forcefully than ever the brutal fact that summer's reprieve is ending, another school year already gearing up to begin at t-minus one month and counting: time marching on despite the clock on the wall that's stopped at a quarter past seven.

"It's like everybody vanished in the middle of class or something," Jack says. "*Poof!* right into thin air!" Half-erased words and numbers on the blackboard radiate a spookily obscure significance, like "Croatan" carved into the timbers of the Roanoke colony's walls. Chalk-dust handprints add to the effect, seeming to float in the air, ethereal as ectoplasm.

"The mutes must've got 'em," says Jilly.

"I thought there weren't any mutes."

"All right, a neutron bomb. Hey, forget the Viral Wars: maybe mutes come from neutron radiation. You know, like the Incredible Hulk!"

Jack jumps on the opportunity for a little cheerful payback: "The Hulk was gamma rays, Jilly. Duh!"

"Okay, smart-ass: Neutron Girl."

"There is no Neutron Girl!"

"Is too!"

"Yeah? What's her powers?"

"She makes stupid little brothers disappear!"

"I'm not your little brother, God damn it!" Jack hates when she calls him that; just because she came out seven lousy minutes sooner . . .

Jilly laughs; no matter what, she'll always have those minutes. All she has to do is mention or allude to the circumstances of their

birth and everything changes between them, that seven-minute gap impossible for the moment to ignore: an awkward, glaring, somehow impolite fact, like the missing minutes on that Watergate tape even Bill, Nixon's staunch defender till the bitter end, couldn't excuse or explain away (much to Peggy's sneering delight, the marriage on its last wobbly legs by then, impeachment a synonym for divorce around the Doone household). Or, thinks Jack, it's like some psionic skill from Mutes & Norms that confers a plus seven bonus in mental shield and attack rating. He's got no skill of his own strong enough to offset her power, and they both know it.

Jilly's gone to the teacher's desk, where she's rummaging through the drawers. Jack leaves her to it and wanders over to the blackboard behind her. Pieces of chalk are lying along the silvery ledge like the finger bones of students devoured by some ogre of a teacher on what turned out to be, all too literally, the last day of school.

Jack lifts an eraser from the ledge and clears a space at the center of the blackboard. After some deliberation, he chooses a piece of chalk and, with the flashlight held before him in his left hand, draws a sideways figure eight, placing a "J" at the center of each loop. Underneath, he writes the date: 8/14/77. And stands back to contemplate his work. He's not quite satisfied; something's missing, but he's not sure what . . .

"Hey, that's cool," comes Jilly's voice as his shadow swells and stretches, leaping across the blackboard like a living thing.

He turns, ducking his head to avoid staring into the beam of her flashlight. "Find anything in the desk?"

"Here, give me the chalk."

Eyes averted, Jack feels her pluck it from his fingers. Then she's past him, her shadow swallowing his own; he follows her with his flashlight as she strides up to the board and begins to write in big capital letters to the right of the infinity symbol, the chalk tapping across the slate like a message in Morse code and twice emitting a shrill, shivery *eeek* that makes him wince all the way down to the bare soles of his feet, toes curling against the tiles of the floor. Her back is blocking his view, and he can't see what she's written until,

finished, she steps away, adding her spotlight to his own. "Ta-daa!"

She's written: "DEATH TO NORMS!"

Jack laughs admiringly; once again, Jilly has surpassed him, completing what he started and in a way he hadn't contemplated or imagined. It's perfect, he thinks. Except: "Wait a minute, Jilly. Doesn't that make us mutes?"

"Who wants to be a boring old norm? I was thinking about what Uncle Jimmy said back at the house, and I realized that those people down there in the gym are norms. Hell, Jack, *Ellen's* a norm! She doesn't want to be, she pretends she isn't, but she is. Once I figured that out, I knew what I wanted to be."

"Right! Norms suck!" He can't believe he didn't see it before now. Then, like an aftershock, it hits him: "Hey, you know what? Maybe Uncle Jimmy's a mute, too!"

"'Course he is," says Jilly. "The game's a test. It's not about norms figuring out who the mutes are. It's about figuring out you're a mute yourself. And that mutes are cool."

"Wow, and all this time we've been playing as norms. I mean, the other game, with dice and graph paper and all."

"Don't you get it, Jack? They're the same game."

"They are? You mean there really are mutes?"

Jilly rolls her eyes. "It's a, what do you call it, *metaphor*, okay? A way of looking at things."

"Right, a metaphor." He nods. "I'll tell you one thing, Jilly. Next time we play, I'm gonna be a mute."

"Me, too. Come on, Jack, grab a piece of chalk. We gotta spread the word. Death to norms!"

"Death to norms!"

Laughing, they spill back into the hall and resume their search for open classrooms. When they find one, they rush inside to chalk the symbol and its accompanying slogan, half-warning, half-rallying cry, onto the blackboard. They're not alone in the hallways; a few times they see other flashlights and hear voices, the echo of running feet. They creep past stairwells from whose Stygian depths the sweet pungency of marijuana rises, a drug they've often smelled (especially here at the beach) but never experienced. They're curi-

ous, though. They've heard the schoolyard stories and the school-room propaganda and are smart enough to realize that the truth is probably situated somewhere between the two. But where, exactly? They intend to find out. Uncle Jimmy smokes a joint most weeknights out on the top deck of the beach house after he thinks they've gone to sleep. Sometimes Ellen joins him, and it's this more than anything that's made them determined to steal one of his joints and try it for themselves; they can't bear knowing that their sister has access to an experience they do not. It torments them almost physically to lie in their bunk beds, Jilly on top, Jack below, and smell the aroma that comes drifting in through the open windows despite the electric fan Uncle Jimmy uses to direct the smoke away from the house. They listen with fierce attention to the low tumble of voices on the deck, fighting in vain to fish whole words and sentences from out of the white noise of passing traffic and the ocean's all-dissolving lullaby. So far they've been no more successful in finding Uncle Jimmy's stash. Cigarettes are easy; he leaves his packs lying around unguarded, but his pot he keeps well hidden, and he gets rid of the evidence so thoroughly that not even ashes remain in the morning. He can't be too careful: discovery by Bill or Peggy would mean banishment from the beach house.

At last a moment occurs that in retrospect they should have anticipated: opening the door to a classroom, they're scared half out of their skins by the blinding glare of a flashlight like an unexpected slap in the face. There's a shrill exclamation of panicky surprise. Then a gruff voice, as if they've stumbled into a troll's lair: "Get the fuck out of here!" Which they waste no time in doing, slamming the door, then careening down the hall, arms thrown around each other's shoulders, giddy with laughter. They turn a corner and stumble to a halt in front of another classroom door. Jilly tries the knob before Jack can say a word; the door opens, and she pulls him inside.

"Did you see anything?" he asks breathlessly as she closes the door behind them.

"No. Did you?"

"Nuh-uh. Scared the crap out of me, though!"

"Me, too!"

"Jesus, I guess we should've knocked!"

"Excuse me, any ficky-fick going on in here?"

This sends them into fresh peals of hysterics, the word lifted from a copy of *Catch-22* they've thoroughly perused for the good parts; the well-stocked beach house bookshelves have served as their research library into the exciting and also scary mysteries of sex, giving them a broad if eclectic knowledge of the subject as well as a greater familiarity with the works of such writers as D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Philip Roth, and John Updike than is commonly possessed by twelve-year-olds.

Still giggling, they make their way to the blackboard to complete their mission. But before they start, Jack experiences one of those *uh-oh* moments the two of them flash on from time to time, unpredictably. He freezes, skin crawling, senses buzzing like he's stepped on a live wire. He feels like he's about to throw up.

"Uh-oh," says Jilly, who feels it, too. "My Spidey Sense is tingling."

"We gotta hide," says Jack. "Quick!"

When it comes to these premonitory flashes, they've learned the hard way that there's no time to ask questions or to try and figure out what's going on. There's never more than a few seconds' warning. Usually only one of them—the one not directly affected by whatever's about to happen—feels the telltale tingle on behalf of the other like the fizz of an electric current running up and down the spine, but sometimes they're both directly affected, and in such cases, as now, they both feel it, the sensation amplified by some psychic feedback loop. It's not painful exactly, but neither one of them would place it on their list of favorite things, either.

Jilly's the first to act. She pulls the chair away from the teacher's desk, then thumbs off her flashlight and pulls Jack down to the floor. "In here," she hisses.

There's an opening under the desk, a hollow space deep enough for the two of them to hide in, albeit uncomfortably, knees hugged

to their chests. They crawl in. Jack drags the chair back into place, then switches off his flashlight. An impenetrable darkness descends, heavy with the smell of dust, old wood, and books, like they've squeezed into a library the size of a nutshell. Belle sounds newly distant, muffled behind this oppressive curtain and the pounding of their hearts harnessed in a single rhythm. Crouching, they hold themselves still, hardly daring to breathe.

The doorknob turns with a metallic click that causes Jack, though expecting it, to start. Bare feet scuff across the floor in a choppy shuffle suggesting furtiveness and haste. Jack and Jilly's inner alarm system has turned itself off now that things are in motion, which would be a relief if not for the suspense and fear of discovery that have taken its place. A girlish voice giggles, another voice goes *shhhhh*, the door is firmly shut. The beam of a flashlight skitters flatly under the edge of the desk, and Jack shifts away although he knows it's not seeking them out; whoever holds the flashlight is simply sweeping the room in a cursory investigation the same as he had done. Jack feels a twinge of something like déjà vu yet different: an eerie sense that it's himself and Jilly who have just entered the room, or rather earlier versions of themselves, and are about to repeat their words and actions of moments ago as if for the first time. When Jilly takes his hand, he returns the pressure gratefully.

Footsteps approach the desk, then stop. The wood creaks around them as someone settles onto it. Swinging heels drum an irregular tattoo against the other side of the desk from where Jack is crouched. "What are you waiting for?" asks a voice that is unmistakably Ellen's. "An invitation?"

"Don't you know that patience is a virtue?" laughs Uncle Jimmy's voice in reply.

"Fuck virtue. Anyway, I have been patient."

"You call this patient? You're practically drooling!"

"Gross. I am not!"

"I've created a monster," he says, à la Boris Karloff.

The tattoo accelerates. "Uncle Jimmy!"

A stretch of silence, out of which the smell of burning pot

abruptly blossoms. There's the sound of a deep inhalation, then: "Here ya go, kid."

"Goody gumdrops."

For a while there's no more talking, just lungfuls of air hissing in and out as the joint is passed back and forth. Jack and Jilly are squeezing each other's hands in a desperate attempt to stifle their giggles. This is priceless stuff, inside information they can use to torment Ellenstein, and the best part is, she'll never guess in a million years how they got it. It'll drive her batty. All they need to do is remain undetected until the joint is finished and Uncle Jimmy and Ellen head back to the gym.

"Hey, what are you . . . Are you crazy?"

"I'm hot."

"Put that back on. Somebody might come in."

"Let 'em; I don't care."

"Jesus Christ! What's got into you?"

"Nothing, yet."

"I was right. I did create a monster."

"I don't know what it is—the storm, the school . . ."

"The beer. You're drunk, El."

"So?"

"This is nuts. We agreed we were only gonna do this stuff at home, when there was nobody else around, remember?"

"I don't see anybody around, do you? Hello? Come out, come out, wherever you are!" She giggles. "Anyway, you started it."

"That's not how I remember it!"

"No, silly. I mean this time. Looking at the fuses under the house. Come on, Uncle Jimmy. Finish what you started. You know you want to."

"It's too risky. Besides I didn't bring anything."

"I did." More giggles. "I thought of everything, see?"

"Jesus." His voice is different now; it's lost something, authority perhaps, or control. "We'll have to be fast."

"Not *too* fast . . ."

The desk creaks as Ellen shifts her position. Jack doesn't have to worry about stifling his giggles anymore; they're long gone, and so

is every other feeling, blown out like the flame of a candle in a gust of wind. He's aware of the pressure of Jilly's hand in his own, only it's more of an intellectual experience than a physical sensation, a fact that exists independently of his knowledge of it, kind of like the beating of his heart, the functioning of his lungs, the force of gravity that keeps him from plunging head over heels off the face of the planet. His body feels like it's been numbed with a shot of Novocain. The desk creaks again and continues creaking in a rhythm interspersed with other sounds, breathy animal noises, breathless human words, all building to a climax as obvious as it is incomprehensible. The movements travel through the wood and enter into him so vividly it's like he, too, is moving. None of it is a surprise, exactly; that peculiar sense of *déjà vu* is still present . . . or rather *déjà vu* once removed, as if this is something he's read in one of those books that he and Jilly peruse so avidly. Bits of behavior between Uncle Jimmy and Ellen to which he hadn't given a second thought at the time—exchanged glances, interrupted conversations, knees, elbows, the backs of hands touching in seemingly casual coincidence as they sat or stood—resurface in his mind, their meaning so plain he can't believe he never guessed what had been going on all month, since Uncle Jimmy's arrival. And how long before that? he wonders. As far back as last summer?

A hard metallic clatter startles him, and Jilly, too; but their gasps are drowned in an eruption of voices.

"Jesus! What the hell!"

"*Shhh*. It's just the flashlight. We knocked it off the desk is all."

"Oh, man. I thought it was the *door* . . ."

"Leave it, Uncle Jimmy."

The fallen flashlight lies alongside one leg of the desk. Though it's pointed away, the soft edge of its illumination spills underneath to show Jack the outlines of his and Jilly's legs like the slender trunks of saplings behind which they've taken shelter to spy on a midnight tryst. The creaking resumes, the sound reminding him of how the beach house had creaked and groaned before they'd fled, faithless sailors abandoning ship at the first sign of trouble. He feels ashamed, guilty of some great betrayal.

The desk shifts, thrusting into his back and scooting him forward a fraction of an inch. The flashlight rolls after it, coming to rest against the leg as before but at a different angle now, further diluting the darkness. Jack can see his sister's face. Jilly's staring at him without any sign of seeing him. She seems to be looking right through him, through the desk itself, gazing with X-ray vision at the activity going on above them. Her eyes are glittering black marbles. Her lips are slightly parted, her nostrils flaring with each sip of air in a way that reminds him of a butterfly fanning its wings. Moisture drips down her skin like condensation on a mask of gold. He's seen this avid expression before, this fierce, predatory attention. Once again, as in the shower stall under the house, Jilly's features undergo a strange division, a kaleidoscopic mitosis that births a ghostly second mask. Jack wonders if the process is going to continue, even accelerate, multiplying out of control like some perceptual cancer until there are too many of her to take in. Until he drowns in her. But it stops. The two faces of his sister float before his eyes, almost but not quite superimposed, like an artist's studies of a single expression upon the same face over varying intervals of time. What is he seeing? His heart gives a panicky flutter, and he remembers rocketing in toward the beach on the crest of a gigantic wave like a bolt of lightning swung forward in the fist of Zeus. She'd watched him then with this same look of hungry rapture, thrilled by the spectacle of what was taking place yet not surprised by it, like she'd wanted it to happen. He remembers losing sight of her as the wave slammed him down, more than remembers his body being twisted and dragged across the ocean floor as though in the jaws of a shark, only to surface far from her and the shore into a world of angry water. And sinking again, into airless oblivion, pulled down by the realization that of course she'd known what was going to happen before he'd entered the water. Maybe not exactly, but enough to give him a warning. Enough to hold him back instead of egging him on. Because she'd felt the approach of Ellen and Uncle Jimmy, hadn't she? Sensed it the same as he had.

Then he'd opened his eyes again to find himself on the beach, Jilly kneeling over him. What had happened? Why hadn't he

drowned? Had a lucky wave carried him in to shore? Perhaps a passing dolphin had taken pity and nudged him into the shallows from which Jilly had fished him; he'd read of such things.

Overhead, a gasping cry is twinned to a wordless groan. A shudder passes through the desk, then all is still.

Except Jilly had seen something else. According to her, he hadn't made it out past his waist before a wave had bowled him over. And the strange thing is, Jack remembers that, too. He remembers them both: being slammed down by one wave and knocked off his feet by another. But only one can be true.

Unless, he thinks, they both are.

UP THE HILL

Jack shifts his position in the beach chair, working his toes deeper into the sand, and gazes out over the sparkling blue ocean. The surface is as tame as a swimming pool all the way to the horizon. Groups of kids and teenagers are playing close in to shore, splashing and laughing, while farther out, people drowse in the hot sun on colorful rafts that drift a few inches one way, then a few inches another, as though anchored in place. Ellen and Uncle Jimmy are among them, floating side by side, she lying faceup on her raft, an arm flung over her eyes, he facedown on his, neither seeming to take any notice of the other, even when the swells bump their rafts together.

Jack's finding it hard to believe the world could change so much in a single night. Yesterday at this time, Belle had blocked the sun and whipped the sea to a wildness that had swallowed him up, then spit him out like Jonah from the belly of the whale. Now the sky is a clear and ringing blue in which the only clouds are contrails left by high-flying jets whose silver bodies flash like distant mirrors in the sun, soundless as orbiting satellites. The thin white lines they trace onto the chalkboard of the air make Jack think of skywriting, of

words so huge he'd have to be out in space himself just to be able to read them.

And yet, at the same time, the world goes on as if nothing has changed at all. Vacations have been picked up right where they left off. Slow-moving prop planes drag their banner ads through the air the same as ever, droning north above their own rippling shadows.

"Jack!" Jilly shouts from ten yards away, where she stands in water up to her thighs, small fists planted on her hips above neon green bikini bottoms, an unmistakable challenge in her grin. "In or else, Jack!" With her dark hair slicked back, the coppery skin of her upper body and face glazed with sunlight and dripping diamonds, she looks like a merm swum in close to marvel at the wonders and terrors of dry land. "C'mon, the water's great!"

He shakes his head and calls back, "Maybe later."

She gives him a look of skeptical exasperation, rolling her eyes, then turns and dives with the sinuous grace of the dolphins that are seen sometimes swimming parallel to shore, their presence never failing to evoke cries of admiration and excitement from even the most jaded beachgoers. Jack sees a flash of brilliant green, a farewell splash from feet whose soles are white as the insides of clamshells, and she's gone. Or, rather, he can no longer see her. But he feels the smooth glide of her irritation and disappointment beneath the glittery surface; it tugs at him like a leash, seeking to pull him along behind her. Normally he wouldn't resist. On a hot day like this, or just about any day at all, he'd be in there already, and any dragging would involve getting him out of the water instead of into it. But not today.

The truth is, he's afraid to go in. The memory of his close call is too fresh, and his left arm hurts worse than it did yesterday. Even when he rests it on the plastic arm of the beach chair, there's an unpleasant throbbing deep in the bone, and any sudden lateral movement results in a stab of pain that brings tears to his eyes. The calmness of the ocean doesn't fool him for a minute; he knows what it's capable of now, and he can't shake the conviction that something's waiting for him beneath that expanse of placid blue, for he also remembers, like an isolated detail from an all-but-eroded dream,

immense forms that had shined in the lightless depths with negative intensity, a focused indrawing of darkness fused into a new type of matter both infinitely dense and utterly malleable. Or perhaps what he'd seen or imagined had been a single form so vast that he couldn't take it in except by making it multiple. But whatever it was, whether one thing or many, it had, he senses, been inhabited by an intelligence whose attention he'd somehow attracted, and which would not forget him, ever, even until the end of time. It's crazy, he knows. Here he is, all paranoid over some half-remembered hallucination. Jilly would laugh herself silly if she knew, to say nothing of Ellen's reaction. He's already earned their scorn just by staying out of the water. But he doesn't care what they think. No way is he going back in there.

He still doesn't understand how he escaped the first time. That's the greater and more disturbing mystery. Not because he can't remember . . . although in fact he *doesn't* remember that part of it: whatever it was that took place, hallucinations aside, in the interval between his last clear memory of going under and surfacing again to find himself lying on the beach with Jilly kneeling over him, anxiously calling his name above the roar of wind and surf. Rather, it's because he *does* recall what Jilly had gone on to tell him: that he hadn't made it out far enough to ride a wave before he'd been knocked off his feet and swept under. He's got two clear memories of events that contradict each other; simple logic, as well as everything he knows about the working of the world, tells him that only one of them can be true. Yet unlike Jilly, Jack's no stickler for logic; he's always had a sense that the world has surprises up its sleeve. Last night had supplied ample proof of that, were any needed.

Besides, it's not just this one thing. If it were, he'd put it down to a bump on the noggin, a lack of oxygen; Jilly had said he'd been underwater for a minute or so before she'd managed to drag him out. But there's also the Scrabble game. Jack knows he'd played the word "insect," setting up Bill's game-winning grand slam of double word scores, yet after the electricity had gone out, when he'd looked at the board again, "nicest" was the word he'd seen. Jilly denied having switched the tiles, and he believed her. Nor, upon reflection, did

he think there had been time for Ellen or anyone else to make the switch undetected, even amid the confusion of the exploding transformer across Route 1. So what had happened?

The theory he's come up with is so strange and unsettling that he hasn't even confided it to Jilly. She'd think he was nuts—and to be honest, he's not sure she wouldn't be right. But following the dictum of Sherlock Holmes (whose adventures he and Jilly had devoured the previous fall, confined to their beds with chicken pox), when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, is the truth. Although in this case, it's more the other way around: when you've eliminated the probable and the improbable, then it's time to start considering the impossible.

What if he had both ridden that wave *and* not ridden it? What if he had played both "insect" and "nicest"?

What if there are do-overs in life after all?

The thing is, no one else seems to have noticed any of this, not even Jilly. As far as he can tell from the admittedly guarded questions he's put to her, she recalls only one of each of the pairs of events that he remembers. In each case, it's the one that turned out best. She remembers the wave that bowled him over in the shallows, not the one he'd actually managed to ride, the mountain of moving water that had flung him down, then swept him out to sea. And she doesn't remember how angry she'd been when his play of "insect" had given Bill the opportunity he'd needed to put a close Scrabble game out of reach; as far as she's concerned, he'd played "nicest," and Bill hadn't had time to set down a single tile before the explosion of the transformer had brought the game to an abrupt end and sent them scurrying through the hurricane to the shelter, where they'd spent the night. Stranger still, not only does Jack remember each pair of events, but his memories of them are simultaneous rather than sequential; it's like each of them took place concurrently, in the same space and time, like two movies projected onto a single screen—or two alternate scenes from the same movie, just as he'd seen differing versions of the Scrabble board superimposed . . . and had experienced the same disorienting double vision when looking at Jilly's face in the shower and under the desk in the classroom.

Yet the pattern of what Jilly does and does not remember suggests to Jack that despite his impression of simultaneity, there had been a progression in time: first the more dire of the two events, followed by a correction whose outcome was less severe . . . *for him*.

There's the crux of the matter, the part of all this that he can scarcely bring himself to credit yet can't dismiss, either: his own centrality. It's as though, in order to fix things for Jack Doone, God had turned back the clock of the entire universe and everything in it not once but twice . . . and the second time for an event—a botched play in a Scrabble game—of utter insignificance, although of course he'd been upset and angry at the time, fighting back tears of humiliation. Somehow Jack doubts that God would care enough to award him a cosmic do-over. This is the guy who left his own kid hanging up there on the cross. To say nothing of the countless mundane tragedies and atrocities that take place around the world every minute of every day without his raising an almighty little finger to stop them. Wars, murders, hurricanes, drownings . . . He lets all of that go on, then steps in with a made-to-order miracle when Jack screws up and plays the wrong word in a Scrabble game? Talk about making your saving throw! No, God—assuming there is a such a being, and Jack's suffered through too many Sunday morning Masses to be anything but skeptical on that point—didn't have anything to do with it. That much he knows. Who, then?

The answer is obvious. It must be him. He, Jack Doone, had turned back time twice in order to give himself a second chance. Which is why he's the only one to remember both sets of events: the one that had happened first, and the do-over that had replaced it. For Jilly and the rest, it's as if the initial history had never happened at all; as far as they know, there's been a single, uninterrupted reality: a smoothly flowing river of time and event. Only Jack knows the truth.

But how had he done it?

That's less obvious. He'd thought at first that it must be a matter of wanting something badly enough, of focusing on a particular object or action until he obtained the desired result by sheer force of will. That made sense to him; after all, it's the same way the Green

Lantern's power ring works. He'd spent the morning, even before they got home from the shelter, putting his theory to the test, going so far as to repeat to himself the stirring words of Hal Jordan's crime-fighting oath—*In brightest day, in blackest night, no evil shall escape my sight . . .* while (the irony unnoticed) squeezing his eyes shut and concentrating with all his might on performing some trivial action with the power of his mind. All he'd succeeded in doing was giving himself a headache. And all he wants to do now is just shut his eyes and let the sun massage the throbbing away . . .

"Hey!" His eyes pop open as water splashes across his chest.

Jilly is back, standing a few feet away; he hadn't even heard her approach. She leans forward, hands on her knees, and whips her head from side to side like a wet dog shaking itself dry. The action sends another cold rain lashing across his body.

"Cut it out, Jilly!" He twists up and away from the chair to the sound of her laughter.

Hands on hips, skinny legs slightly apart, she glistens and drips as she regards him with shining, mocking eyes. Her dark hair gleams like sealskin. "How's your arm?"

"Okay, I guess."

She turns and, taking a step, leans down to pluck her towel from the sand. She gives it a desultory shake, drapes it over her head, and starts rubbing furiously. When she's done, her hair is spiky as a punk rocker's. She runs the towel over her shoulders and torso with diminishing vigor, then lets it fall, turning to the nearby cooler. Opening it, she plunges a hand into the ice and roots around for a moment before pulling out a can of Coke. "Thirsty?"

"Sure."

She tosses him the can, which he manages to catch, barely. "Hey, watch it!"

"Somebody got up on the wrong side of the sleeping bag this morning." She pulls the tab on another Coke and, tilting back her head, takes a long drink, then produces a burp that draws admiring giggles from a little boy playing in the sand a few yards away and an evil glance, over the top of the current issue of *People* magazine, from a woman lying on a towel a few feet beyond—presumably his

mother. Jilly ignores them both. "Ahh." She sighs, smiling. "C'mon, Mr. Grouch. Let's go for a walk."

They haven't had a moment to themselves all day. Upon returning to the house early that morning, Bill had phoned Peggy to let her know that everybody was okay. She, too, had weathered the hurricane safely, though, unlike them, she'd done so from the comfort of home; in Arlington, the damage had been limited to some flooded streets from backed-up storm drains, a few fallen trees, downed wires, and the like, nothing serious enough to merit evacuation. Peggy had spoken to everyone, fighting as usual with Bill and promising to drive up the following weekend. Then they'd inspected the house, which, apart from the loss of some roof shingles, had come through unscathed. They'd taken down the plywood boards shielding the windows and stowed them under the house, then hauled the porch screens back up and fitted them into place.

When that chore was done, the five of them had gone for a stroll along the beach, heading south past houses that hadn't been as lucky as their own. Built right on the dunes, these homes had felt the full force of the storm. The surge of the tide had reached beneath their elevated porches, flowing among the forest of pilings that raised them high above the beach and carrying away so much sand in the process that the houses appeared to have shot up as much as ten feet overnight. They saw broken windows, sections of railings ripped away, porch and patio furniture smashed and twisted, staircases that hung surreally in midair some three or four feet above what had become ground level.

Detritus littered the beach: bottles and cans; plastic six-pack holders; two-by-fours; cinder blocks; sodden cigarettes and cigarette packs; the empty shells of clams and oysters and crabs; small silvery fish half-eaten by seagulls; colorful deposits of polished stones, shell fragments, and bits of driftglass like spilled pirate treasure; plastic shovels and buckets looking as slick and bright as candy; tangled strands of brownish green kelp; the gray and white feathers of gulls; plastic cigarette lighters; single flip-flops; a Wiffle ball; Styrofoam cups and containers—all of it scattered over the sand like the remnants of a rummage sale.

People were already hard at work on some of the houses, beginning to clean up and repair the damage, the echoes of hammers ringing out like gunshots in the clear morning air. Knots of onlookers drifted up and down the beach. Jack thought he recognized some faces from the shelter. Everyone nodded and smiled to everyone else, said "Good morning" and "Hello" as if such acts of ordinary politeness were newly important in the aftermath of Belle's violent visitation. Even dogs were friendlier, trotting up with wagging tails to sniff at outstretched palms before loping back to their owners or tearing off in barking pursuit of seagulls and sandpipers or other dogs. A few people carried plastic bags they were filling with trash; others walked with downcast eyes, stooping to select stones and shells and turn them between their fingers with the focused intensity of antiquers in search of hidden bargains. An elderly couple wearing bulky headphones swung his-and-her metal detectors back and forth over the sand as they shuffled along in some kind of search pattern like norms with psibertronically enhanced senses moving simultaneously through netSPACE and the physical world.

All the damage had put Bill into an expansive mood; nothing cheered him like the troubles of other people. He commented the whole time on the folly of throwing away the natural protection of the dunes for a view that, while inspiring, would inevitably turn out to be a fair-weather friend, and congratulated himself on his foresight in not having bought beachfront property years ago when he'd had the chance. Back at the house, they'd shared a quick lunch before he'd said good-bye and driven off to DC for an afternoon taping of *Inside the Beltway*. Uncle Jimmy, Ellen, Jilly, and Jack had then filled the cooler and returned to the beach, where Jack had planted himself in a chair and continued trying to make sense of all that had happened, while the others plunged right into the placid, inviting waters.

AS HE AND JILLY RETRACE THEIR STEPS of the morning, that question is still uppermost in Jack's mind. How had he done it? All those months ago, when he and Jilly lay confined to their beds,

feverish and itchy, devouring book after book as though the act of reading constituted a cure for chicken pox, had the disease been working a deeper change upon him, like the Viral Wars had changed norms into mutes? Had the illness triggered a mutation, leaving him with the ability to . . . to what? Change history with a thought?

Just thinking it, saying the words to himself, makes Jack's stomach twist. His mind recoils. There are no boggles. No delves or manders or airies or merms. No mutes at all, whether drawn from role-playing games or the muscular pages of comic books. To believe otherwise is crazy. And anyway, if there *were* real-life mutes, wouldn't it be obvious?

Of course it would. Unless he's the only one. Which is even crazier. Yet Jack can't just will himself to forget what he remembers, no more than he's been able this morning to will a change into the world. All his efforts failed to alter history by even a single grain of sand. He knows what he knows, but he can't figure out how to prove it.



Kestrel. Psst, Kes!"

Kestrel wakes at the sound of his name from outside the tent. "Shh," he hisses back. He'd been dreaming, as he often does, of flight, but his sudden waking has dispersed the details, leaving him with an impression of loss, as if something of great beauty or value has just slipped through his fingers or been snatched from his grasp. "I'll be right there." He sits up in the darkness, fluffing his wings with a shimmy of his shoulders, trying not to wake the sleeper beside him. But it's too late; with a gentle crackling sound, the soft white radiance of a lumen fills the interior of the conjoined tents like captured moonlight.

"Your watch already?" Pale blues and silvers, the hues of his own wing feathers, drift across the scales of Namora's face and forehead like smoke as, propped on one elbow, holding the shining stalk of the lumen in her hand, she regards him with fathomless black eyes.

Kestrel nods, yawning, and folds back his wings. Hard to believe

he'd found those eyes intimidating once, just over three weeks ago, before the pentad left *Mutatis Mutandis* and entered the Waste. "Duty calls," he says. "Or *Polaris*, anyway."

"Hurry back." She leans toward him, the top of the bedroll falling away to expose the swell of her breasts, where lazy swirls of sunset colors pool. Their lips meet. Kestrel feels his headcrest stir. And not only his headcrest.

"None of that," comes *Polaris*'s voice from outside the tent.

"Keep your shirt on," he calls, pulling away from *Namora*.

"Put yours on, and your pants, too, and get your ass out here," she replies. "My watch is over at midnight, and it's already ten minutes past."

"You'd better go," *Namora* says.

"I'm sick of her attitude," Kestrel grumbles as he crawls out of the bedroll and dresses in the cramped interior of their tents. "She acts like she's a member of, well, a certain faculty."

"I heard that!" *Polaris*'s head thrusts through the tent flaps. "It would serve you right if I was!"

"Odds, Pol! It's crowded enough already without you barging in." Kestrel tugs his trousers up over his legs, not bothering to hide his nakedness; by now, there are few secrets between any of them, at least as far as their bodies are concerned.

Polaris isn't looking at him anyway. "It'll be less crowded once you're gone," she says, practically leering at *Namora*, who makes no move to cover her breasts, which have turned a frigid blue. The merm's inky eyes return the boggle's stare as emotionlessly as ever, without seeming to blink . . . although Kestrel knows this is an illusion, that *Namora* possesses nictitating eyelids much like his own, only less visible against the black void of her eyes.

"I'll be happy to keep you company while he's gone, *Namora*," *Polaris* offers.

"Dream on, Pol."

Polaris screws her features into a scowl and rubs one hand over the black bristles of her hair. "It's not right: the two of you hooking up like this. Pentads are supposed to share and share alike. But you've shut me out. The others, too."

"We can choose to be with each other if that's what we want," says Namora, still not covering herself. "There's nothing illegal about it."

Polaris shakes her head. "I never said there was. It's just unnatural to be so Oddsdamn exclusive. That's how norms do it."

"As usual, Pol, you've gone too far," says Kestrel. And he shoves her from the tent with a blast of air. One good thing about being in the Waste: there's no psionic dampening field out here.

"You shouldn't have done that," says Namora. "Not that she didn't have it coming. But she'll get back at you one way or another. She always does."

"I know. But she gets me so mad . . ." He frowns, remembering how that crazy old boggle back in the Many-sided City—Mizar—had implied, among other lunacies, that he and Polaris would become lovers. Instead, here he is with Namora. Which only proves what he'd known all along: the boggle was a fraud.

"She's just jealous." Namora sets the lumen on the bedroll between them. Half-swallowed in the mussed coverings, the glowing stalk casts a tangle of shadows upward.

Kestrel straps his airie-made watch to his wrist and slides a fresh lumen into the back pocket of his trousers. "I guess I can't blame her. I'd be jealous, too." He sighs. "Look, much as I hate to admit it, she's got a point."

The placid expression with which Namora regards him now is identical to the look she'd worn while listening to Polaris. As always, the absence of any outward indication of emotion beyond the inscrutable play of colors across the fine mesh of her scales inflames Kestrel's desire. He feels like she's holding her deepest and truest self apart, an ambadress to dry land carrying a kind of diplomatic immunity of the heart. He's known for some time now that he's fallen in love with her . . . but does she love him back? Is she capable of it?

"What are you suggesting?" she asks at last.

"Maybe we should invite the others to join us once in a while."

"But I'm content as we are."

"So am I," he hastens to assure her. "But we have to think of the pentad. The farther we go into the Waste, the more dangerous it's

going to get. Pentads that can't trust each other and work together have a tendency to get killed out here."

"You're making things out to be worse than they are. We can still trust each other."

"That's why we should act now, before things get worse."

Namora shrugs. "Do as you please; that's always been our agreement." She settles onto her side, closing her eyes.

Clearly, he's been dismissed; he finds this imperiousness of hers to be maddening—and, he has to admit, enthralling. "We'll talk later, okay?"

"I had other things in mind for later," she says without stirring or opening her eyes.

"The libation." They perform the ritual together whenever possible; tonight, because he'd rolled the second watch and Namora had made her saving throw, winning a night off, they'd agreed to postpone it until his return. "I haven't forgotten."

"Good." Languidly reaching out, as though already holding a sliver of bladeweed above his body, she extinguishes the lumen with a touch, plunging the interior of the tent back into darkness.

POLARIS IS GLARING AT HIM, fists on her boyish hips, as he crawls headfirst out of the tent and gets to his feet in the cool night air. There's no need for a lumen in the generous wash of light from a moon as yellow and plump as a lemon . . . at least, not for the keen eyes of an airie. Polaris, whose eyes are no better than a norm's, holds a kindled lumen in one fist.

"Don't start," Kestrel says before she can get a word out. "I'm sorry I shoved you, okay? But you shouldn't have said what you did."

"You're lucky we boggles are prevented by law from using our psionics against other mutes without their consent," Polaris says, then adds pointedly: "Except in self-defense."

"I said I was sorry." It's amazing how much emotion can be expressed in one small, heart-shaped face, he thinks, not for the first time. All of it directed against him. And none of it friendly. He

walks past her, toward the flickering embers of the cookfire; whatever she has to say to him, he doesn't want Namora to hear it.

Polaris swings into step beside him. "I just don't get it. What does she see in you?"

"That's none of your business, Pol." The truth is, he doesn't get it, either. She'd come to him the morning after their first night in the Waste, when all five of them had slept together, as was traditional, and confessed, to his astonishment, that he'd pleased her more than all the others put together. She proposed that the two of them join tents on a regular basis. It was supposed to be a relationship of preference, not exclusivity. But it wasn't working out that way. Hence the discord.

"'What affects one, affects all,'" Polaris quotes meanwhile from the *Book of the Odds*.

That passage, reflects Kestrel grimly, is responsible for more mischief than the rest of the book put together. Reaching the fire, he squats to add fresh wood from a pile of kindling, then summons a breeze to stir the coals. The camp is quiet, the only sounds the crackling of the fire and the intermittent barking call of a night heron hunting frogs and snakes along the banks of a nearby stream. A dozen yards beyond the fire, like a scale model of the Featherstone Mountains, stand the high, hard, hollow mounds of an abandoned termant colony, the voracious insects having either long since departed in search of a new home to despoil or turned their appetites inward and cannibalized themselves out of existence. In their absence, grass and other vegetation has returned; the soil is rich, watered by the wide stream whose swift-moving course winds its way from east to west at the bottom of a gully thirty yards behind the mounds. Thick clumps of tall bladeweeds grow along the water's far edge, and stands of peripatetic oak ramblers have put down roots. There are a few totem trees, ghoulish combinations of human and plant; these particular totems are still immature saplings, their brown limbs like the arms and legs of starving children, their fruit the size and softness of a newborn infant's head, the features barely discernible as yet, faint smudges and shallow indentations pressed

into the fleshy surface as though by a sculptor working in an unfamiliar medium. (Later, when the fruit matures, human eyes will stare through swarms of gnats and flies with the placid stupidity of grazing cattle while toothless, tongueless mouths work their way through a catalog of expressions all the more unsettling for being recognizable: a sly, confiding smile, a grimace of distaste, a silent howl of horror or hilarity.) Nothing, however, grows on the termant mounds, the tallest of which tops Kestrel by a good two feet; they make an unearthly backdrop in the light of the moon, like something native to that place and not this one.

"Do you think she cares about you, Kes?" Polaris squats beside him. "As far as merms are concerned, fucking is just another bodily necessity, no different than eating, sleeping, and shitting. Feelings, as opposed to sensations, aren't relevant terms in their equations."

"So"—taking a slender branch, he begins to break it into smaller pieces, which he feeds one by one to the flames, imagining they're the bones of a particularly obnoxious boggle—"you're an expert on merms now?"

"Don't forget that I grew up in Mutatis Mutandis, among mutes of all races. I've seen this sort of thing before. She's using you."

"You know what I think?" He glances at her face, the skin glazed red and orange in a garish parody of merm chromatism. "I think you wish that you were the one being used."

She sighs. "I won't deny that I'd like to be joining tents with her on a regular basis. Odds, she's a merm, isn't she? Who wouldn't? But I'm worried, Kes."

He tosses the last piece of kindling into the fire and stands, brushing his palms together. "Smells more like jealousy to me. You're all jealous; you want her for yourselves."

Polaris gets to her feet. "Fenix is more interested in you than Namora, in case you hadn't noticed. As for Chalce, he hasn't got a jealous bone, or boner, in his body."

"Everything's a joke to you, isn't it, Pol?"

"Odds save me." The hostility in her blue eyes melts to something like pity. "You're in love with her, aren't you?"

"What if I am?" A fitful wind begins to gust around him.

Polaris ignores the warning. She jabs the lumen toward his belly like a shining dagger. "She's going to throw you over one day as suddenly and inexplicably as she chose you, that's what. She'll get tired of you and choose one of us instead. Maybe even me. And then what, Kes? How will you deal with that? By lashing out with your psionics like you're thinking about doing right now? By tearing the pentad apart? That's real mature."

He reins in the swirling winds, chagrined at how close she'd come to provoking him. He has no doubt that if he strikes her again, either physically or psionically, she'll hit back, pulling him into netspace, where, invirted, he'll be at her mercy. A cold sweat breaks out on his skin. Kestrel has never felt comfortable in netspace. He accepts the necessity of being invirted in order to better fight the norms, but he doesn't like it. Apart from boggles, few mutes do. Still, netspace has never terrified him before; he wouldn't have passed his Proving if it had. But ever since they entered the Waste, his aversion has grown more intense with each invirting, more difficult to conceal from Polaris and the others . . . and not a day has gone by without her pulling them into netspace at least once, if only to stay in practice. In Wafting or the Many-sided City, Kestrel could visit a boggle from the Therapeutic Faculty of the College and have his aversion treated, but that's not possible here. Perhaps Polaris could do it, but he doesn't dare invite her into his mind. If he gives her permission to mess around with his feelings, his memories, who knows where she'll stop? She could change him in ways he'll never notice or suspect. Perhaps she's already done so. "Anyway," he says, taking the offensive to hide his agitation and the weakness behind it, "you shouldn't be reading my mind."

"Don't flatter yourself," she says with a laugh. "As if I need to do more than just look at your face to know what's going on inside that featherbrained skull."

"So you say. But you could be reading it right now, and I'd never know."

"Why stop there?" she shoots back. "If I was really so unscrupulous, why wouldn't I make a few adjustments in Namora's noggin and convince her that I'm the love of her life?"

Kestrel has no answer for that; in fact, he wouldn't put it past her. "This is pointless." He shrugs his wings. "I should be patrolling. There could be norms out there."

"You think that would solve anything?"

"At least it would remind you who our real enemies are."

"I haven't forgotten that, Kes. Nobody has. But you can't rely on norms to solve our problems. For one thing, we're still close to the border. Not too many norms push this far into the Waste. And killing norms is just part of a pilgrimage. Some pentads never even see one."

"Do you want to jinx us?" He traces the lemniscus in the air between them.

"My point," says Polaris, "is that the success or failure of a pilgrimage can't be determined by body count alone. If a pentad doesn't bond, develop a sense of common identity and purpose, nothing else matters. *That's* what I'm worried about, Kes."

"We've done okay so far, haven't we? We took care of those grizzlers without any trouble."

Norms might not venture this close to the borders of the Commonwealth very often, but there are plenty of other things that do. Grizzlers, for one: a species of vicious, tiger-striped bears possessing crude sapience and rudimentary psionics of an empathic nature. Tribes of them roam the Waste, attacking whatever gets in their way. Three days ago, the pentad had done just that. Outnumbered more than two to one, they nevertheless defeated the grizzlers, killing four of them and dispersing the rest—without suffering so much as a scratch themselves.

"We function well enough as a team," Polaris grants. "But we need to be more than that. We need to be a *family*. Brothers and sisters."

"Do all boggles want to fuck their sisters?"

Polaris's eyes open wide; then she bursts into laughter. Kestrel finds himself joining in. It's amazing how different Polaris looks when she laughs. She changes into a different person . . . a far more likable one. But she can't laugh forever. After a while, she falls silent. A second later, so does he.

"Well—" she begins.

"I guess—" he says at the same time.

Another awkward pause. Then, with a rueful smile and wave of her lumen, Polaris bids him good night and strides off toward her tent, which is joined to Chalcedon's: just because she can't have Namora doesn't mean Pol is depriving herself of bed partners.

Kestrel watches her crawl through the flaps of the tent. His jewelry is gone, removed for the duration of the pilgrimage, but he hasn't yet broken the habit of idly flicking at the end of his earpiece; when he does it, as now, he seems to be brushing a fly away from his ear. Meanwhile, inside the tent, Polaris begins to remove her clothing, the dark silhouette of her body shining through the opaque fabric like that of a norm child undressing behind a gauzy screen. Then Chalcedon's hulking shadow rises like a wave to engulf her.

Kestrel looks away, his glance passing over the dark mound of conjoined tents where Namora lies sleeping; the next two hours, until it's time to wake Fenix, will go slowly enough without thinking of the sharp and shivery delights awaiting him there. The mander's solitary tent, pitched in the shadow of the termant mounds some ten yards away, is lit from within by a weak orange glow: the sleeping Fenix curled like a cat around the smoldering fires of himself. The mander is certainly as skittish as a cat; his tendency while on watch to sound the alarm for what turns out to be no good reason has earned him the nickname "False-Alarm Fenix."

Kestrel begins to walk the perimeter of the camp. When Polaris stops scowling for five seconds, he thinks, that funny, scrunched-up face is almost pretty . . . even if she does resemble a norm. Personality aside, the resemblance draws him; yet it repels him, too. The aura of the monstrous, the forbidden, surrounding norm females exerts a complicated and contradictory fascination. It goes back to his childhood, when, with the other boys in his class, he'd taken field trips to Wafting's maternity ward. There he'd been shown the breeders lying naked in their stalls like cows for the milking, their depilated bodies open to his invading gaze and touch while they dreamed behind the black masks of netaccessories that left their noses and mouths exposed. Boggles from the obstetrics faculty kept the mothers-to-be invirted throughout the six months of their preg-

nancies, ignorant of each other and of their true situations: miscarriages and premature births were minimized when breeders believed themselves to be free and in control of their destinies, pregnant by their own choice and desire, or not pregnant at all. When labor began, however, the pain was frequently severe enough to shatter the invirting and its soothing illusions, and often the screams of breeders in their final moments had as much to do with the revelation of their actual circumstances as with the torments of a delivery nature had not equipped their bodies to survive.

It's the duty of every able-bodied adult male mute, married or single, to distribute his seed among the stock of captured norm females. When his pilgrimage is finished, Kestrel, too, will be scheduled for weekly visits to the maternity ward. This duty, the necessity of which has been drummed into him from boyhood, has acquired over time a strong if ambivalent erotic charge, not least because what goes on inside the wards is never spoken of openly. Only the results are acknowledged: breederborn infants who appear as if by magic and are placed in loving foster homes . . . as he had been placed with Perula and Scoter, an older couple whose twelve natural-born children, his foster brothers and sisters, were long since grown and flown, dispersed throughout the Commonwealth. "Brought by Stork" was how his earliest inquiries into his origin had been answered, so that until he entered school at the age of seven, Kestrel believed with all his heart in the legend of the kindly old airie who delivered babies to deserving couples throughout the nestings and rookeries of Airieland.

But once he learned the truth and put such childish fantasies behind him, Kestrel spent a lot of time thinking about his anonymous norm mother. He didn't care so much about his equally anonymous mute father; after all, his paternal inheritance wasn't in doubt. It was the norm genes on his mother's side that obsessed him. On those field trips to the maternity ward, he would find himself imagining that one of the faceless breeders was his mother, and in that way dark threads of guilt and attraction had woven themselves into the complicated feelings that developed naturally as he grew older and was permitted to familiarize himself to an ever-more-intimate extent with

the submissive bodies it would one day be his duty to impregnate. Dread and desire became twinned in him, one the shadow of the other but impossible to tell apart. He found himself wondering more and more whether his mother had awakened to reality at the moment of his birth, and, if she had, whether a trace of that unimaginable understanding might have imprinted itself in his mind, his cells, like some slow-incubating *savvee* that would remain hidden for years until it manifested in a toxic anomaly of backsliding thought or behavior that would earn him banishment or worse. Perhaps his confused feelings toward breeders were just such an anomaly . . . and not the only one. This has always been Kestrel's deepest, most secret fear, one he kept hidden from Gad and Pip, and even from his foster parents. But boggles from the Therapeutic Faculty had ferreted it out during his Proving. They'd assured him that this and similar apprehensions, common among the breederborn, were baseless. Norm genes, they informed him, were almost always regressive, their traits nonexpressed; statistically, the occurrence of throwbacks or significant backsliding was identical in purebred and breederborn populations. Then they'd gone into his mind and removed his doubts and fears. Cut them out with their oh-so-sharp psionic scissors, snip-snip.

But he finds himself wondering more and more of late if they missed something, cut away the surface manifestations and left the underlying tangle of roots intact, hidden for a time but still growing deep within him, pushing back up into the light like virulent weeds. What else can account for his irrational fear of being inverted? What else can be behind that phobia but a fear of his own mysterious inner spaces and what—forgotten or perhaps never consciously known in the first place—dwells there: monsters more dangerous than the denizens of the Waste? And what if his feelings for Namora are another symptom of this emergence . . . or, rather, reemergence? Because, though he hates to admit it, there's an element of truth to the spiteful accusation Polaris had leveled at them in the tent. It might be legal, but back home a relationship as exclusive as his and Namora's would already have drawn a warning from the Holy Rollers. Perhaps worse than a warning. What troubles Kestrel isn't so much the strength of his desire for Namora as the

possessiveness that goes along with it. Despite his parting words to her in the tent, his plea to make some effort to include the others, Kestrel doesn't want to share her with anyone . . . least of all Polaris.

He wishes with all his heart that he could be rid of these troublesome feelings, but if anything, they're intensifying. Already they've burned any interest he might otherwise have taken in Chalcedon and Fenix right out of him. The one time he'd joined tents with the two of them had been a disaster; while his body gasped and shuddered, licked and stroked, his mind had been exploring with all the perverse ingenuity of a jealous imagination the myriad ways Polaris and Namora could be pleasuring each other within their own joined tents. Finally, unable to continue, he'd dressed quickly and rushed out to confront them. Of course, Polaris hadn't been with Namora at all. But he's been extracareful since then not to give her, or the others, a second chance.

Yet the future of the pentad depends on his doing just that. Or does it? How can he be sure this isn't all Polaris's work, a subtle psionic manipulation of his mind, his feelings? For all he knows, she's manipulating the whole pentad in order to get what she wants. She'd asked him why, if she were that unscrupulous, she hadn't simply tweaked Namora's mind to make the merm fall in love with her. But the question was disingenuous. Polaris is young, inexperienced; she might not have the power to effect such sweeping changes . . . or, more important, the skill to do so undetected. Boggles are prohibited from using their psionics against the mutes of other races in the absence of explicit consent or dire emergency. Violation of this law, upon which the stability, if not the very existence, of the Commonwealth depends, is punishable by death . . . unless, of course, you happen to belong to the Faculty Invisible, in which case exceptions are made in the interests of national security. Kestrel doesn't think, or doesn't want to think, that Polaris is an Invisible, but he feels certain that a boggle as smart and sneaky as she's shown herself to be could find plenty of less risky, less obvious ways to influence events and mutes toward whatever outcome she desires. He doesn't trust her. He can't afford to. Even their brief rapprochement over laughter seems suspicious to him in retrospect.

Spreading his wings with a leathery snap, Kestrel summons a wind to speed himself aloft. His cares and worries fall away as the moonlit landscape spreads before his eyes, a flat expanse of grassland stretching for miles on all sides, cut by the pewter ribbon of the stream and cluttered with dense shadows marking isolated stands of trees and clusters of bright, dancing lights, like watery reflections of the stars, or cities seen from a distance, where patches of lumens grow. As Kestrel soars higher, the memory of his interrupted dream returns in a rush. He'd been flying through the night skies of Airieland, a full moon above him while, far below, in its reflected light, the snowy peaks of the Featherstones glittered like the waves of a frozen sea. Other airies were beneath him, and he'd heard their excited cries and whistles as they sported in the wintry air, riding the winds in games of Follow the Leda and Pluck the Duck. But he'd left them behind, climbing toward the moon—which, he'd noticed suddenly, was not round at all but cut with a multitude of facets like some thousand-sided bone die tumbling forever around the Earth. In one of those occurrences that, even as it takes place in a dream, seems both uncanny and commonplace, the moon had dwindled as he rose, receding before him. He'd redoubled his efforts, wings and lungs laboring, his every breath transformed into crystals of snow. But at last, despite his determination, he'd hit his limit and could climb no higher. Reaching toward the moon with a last, despairing gesture, he'd seen with a shock that his hand had become huge . . . or, rather, his perspective shifting, that the moon was not far away at all, nor had it ever been: it was simply small. He'd laughed in childish delight at the discovery of this optical illusion and stretched forth his hand to pluck the die from the broad black tabletop of the sky—at which point Polaris had woken him for his watch.

Now that delight courses through him again. Surely, he thinks, the dream was a sign, a message . . . for tonight's moon is as full as the one in his dream, a die rolled by a greater hand than his. And isn't he, too, just another die in those hands? Aren't they all, Polaris included? "Roll me," he prays, feeling the exhilaration of being swept up, shaken, and thrown down by the Odds. "Make me your tumbling dice . . ."

Kestrel soars and swoops, his heart following a parallel trajectory. Or, no—he has it backward, inside out: his body is doing the following, dragged along behind his many-sided heart. He shuts his eyes, thrilling to the sensation of blind flying, knowing that, if he can trust nothing else in this world, he can still and always trust the gifts bestowed by the Odds in the Becoming: the powers, instincts, and senses that have given his race dominion over the air and all the things of the air.

Kestrel's awareness flows outward, shaping itself along windy currents of temperature, moisture, direction, and velocity, embracing zones and belts of high and low pressure, precipitation, electric potential, until he scarcely knows where his body ends and the sky begins. Of course, even with his eyes closed, his keen senses of smell and hearing tell him a lot about his surroundings, and a constant stream of information reaches him in sensations transmitted through his feathers to and beneath the surface of his skin. Together, the flow of physical and psionic data transforms his nervous system into a living map whose ever-changing contours reflect the most minute details of the world around him. The night heron he'd heard earlier, for instance, has taken wing and is moving swiftly away, heading downstream in cyclonic eddies of displaced air. A quarter mile to the west, a tangle of stingsails is drifting at an altitude of just under sixty feet, maintaining their height by releasing jets of compressed helium from their translucent pink-and-green-fringed bladder-floats. They're surrounded by insects feasting upon the decaying or still-living prey wrapped in their venomous tendrils: birds, fish, rodents, snakes. The insects are being feasted upon in turn by bats that sometimes blunder into the long tendrils, where they are stung into paralyzed submission and slowly digested. Kestrel perceives all this (and more) instinctively, without needing to concentrate.

Nor, eyes still shut, is he blind to the details of the ground below. Air turbulence and pressure gradients give him a clear impression of the tents of his pentad, the dying cookfire, the termant mounds, the totem trees and bladeweeds, the tumbling stream. Two miles to the east, along the edge of a slow-moving forest of maple and oak rambles grazing the aquifer under a dense cloud of night birds and

moths at the outermost limit of his range, a pack of flyenas glides through the moonlight, following two grizzlers at a wary distance. A mile to the south, Kestrel registers the simple adobe dwelling of an exile, a mander named Faestus with whom they'd stopped to trade and exchange gossip earlier in the day. But he detects no other pentads, no other exiles, no norms at all.

The strongest airies can expand their psionic webs for more than twenty miles, although their areas of active influence rarely reach beyond five unless linked in a gestalt. Kestrel's powers are weaker than that. They'll grow with time and experience, but at present the farthest reach of his senses is about two miles, while his upper limit of direct, appreciable influence is less than half that. Within this zone, however, he has only to flex his mental muscles in order to bend weather systems to his will. With a thought, he can raise or calm a wind, summon or disperse a storm, call down strikes of lightning. And as the distance over which he exercises his powers decreases, his control over them grows finer. He can, for example, suck the oxygen out of an area roughly the size of the campsite below . . . or, on the contrary, flood it with oxygen (or any other atmospheric gas). He can create a vacuum or increase air pressure to crushing intensity in an area smaller still: the size, say, of two tents joined together. In a space the size of a single tent, he can hammer the molecules of the air into a flexible and all-but-impenetrable shield. He can manipulate a wind so dexterously as to lift a single pebble out of thousands, then fling it accurately at near-supersonic speeds . . . and he can propel himself (or weightier, more massive objects) at such speeds as well, though not for long: the greater the inertial mass of the object or objects, and the greater the desired velocity, the greater the drain on his psionics, which, once depleted, take hours or days to replenish. Kestrel, like all young airies, enjoys testing himself against his physical and psionic limits, increasing his strength through the effort of pushing past them. There's always a risk, should circumstance or ambition drive him too far, of suffering grave and permanent injury, even death. But he—again, like the majority of his race—makes light of that risk. He flirts with it, dares it, seems to invite disaster purely for the satisfaction of triumphing over it, the joy of making an unbelievable saving

throw just when it appears the Odds has turned inescapably against him . . . although the risks that Kestrel runs are seldom as foolhardy as they appear to observers of other races; this, too, is a skill that airies quickly master. Those that don't, die.

But even here in his element, reveling in the free play of his powers, Kestrel can't quite forget about netspace. It surrounds him, invisible, intangible . . . yet so strong that neither he nor all the airies in the world acting in gestalt could summon a wind or bolt of lightning sharp enough to shear through its weakest strand. It's impossible to forget for long that Polaris or any other boggle can, with a thought, send his invirted self tumbling down one of those strands and into netspace; there's no point in the physical world through which he may not fall into its virtual shadow, no perch in the air or on the ground or beneath it that is not mapped in the grid of the medianet and might not, however solid-seeming, yawn beneath his feet to swallow him . . .

Opening his eyes, Kestrel rolls onto his back with the easy grace of a swimmer and picks out here and there the slow and stately progress of biotronic satellites in their self-sustaining orbits amid the shimmering stars. His resentment of these tiny white spiders—or, rather, the membrains that live inside them—is so fierce that it seems capable of carrying him out of the atmosphere altogether and into space; only there, he reflects bitterly, in the airless void between the Earth and the moon, can he ever know what it means to be free.

There are airies who have done just that. Used their psionics to break the bonds of gravity and escape the atmosphere, carrying a bubble of air around themselves so that they can look back in the moments before the cold penetrates and the air seeps out, gaze down from the ocean of space in which they float, already drowning, on the world they've left behind, the blue-white island they'll never return to unless long after death, their frozen remains falling out of orbit to flare like shooting stars across the sky. But Kestrel isn't powerful enough to follow their example; nor, beyond the fantasy of a melodramatic moment, does he have any desire to do so. While there are airies who honor such suicides, hold them up as acts of bravery, symbols of defiance and sacrifice, to him they're selfish and sad,

more about despair than defiance . . . which isn't to say that he scorns those airies as cowards or deserters. He mourns them. Pities them. Even envies them in a way. But he knows that true freedom is not to be found in space any more than in netspace. It must be made in the physical world. Which means eradicating the norms on Earth, then destroying the membrains in the heavens.

Kestrel doesn't doubt for a second that the days of the norms are numbered, but he feels less sanguine about the ultimate fate of the twelve membrains in their biotronic satellites. The massive black pyramids are equipped with a formidable array of offensive and defensive capabilities, and not one of the Orbitals, as these membrains are known, has ever been damaged, much less destroyed, from Earth. And in the centuries since the Viral Wars, the godlike monsters have upgraded the fortresses in which they pass their all-but-immortal lives, making them more impregnable than ever.

But all of that may well be beside the point, because Kestrel more than half suspects that the boggles won't permit their destruction in any case. Although the elimination of netspace, along with all other norm antech (including membrains high and low), is official Commonwealth policy, everything he knows about boggles has persuaded Kestrel that they consider netspace to be their birthright, an extension not only of themselves but of the land of Boggling: an extradimensional province of that country whose psionically guarded borders are inviolable by other mutes. He doesn't think they'll willingly give it up. Why should they? Once the norms are gone, boggles won't have to share netspace with anyone unless by their own invitation . . . except for the membrains, of course, but boggles might consider that acceptable, since without the membrains there would be no netspace at all. From their lofty thrones, ranged at progressively higher altitudes, the Orbitals maintain its physical infrastructure, the medianet: coordinating satellites, certain functions of the lesser membrains, and the vast network of cellcoms, cambots, and other information-gathering-and-dispensing devices that extends in a seamless web from the exosphere all the way to the planetary core. The concerns of the Orbitals are narrow; they care little for mutes or norms or even the lesser membrains, and they have no interest in seeking earthly—or, for that matter, vir-

tual—power beyond what is necessary to fulfill the three conditions of their original programming: first, that netspace function optimally at all times; second, that nothing be permitted to compromise its existence; and third, that its infrastructure and performance be continuously upgraded.

The Orbitals take many forms in netspace, their virtues as varied in aspect as they are in purpose. Sometimes they appear as manifestations of their names, recognizable by looks or by associated symbols and objects. Other times they offer no hint of their identity or the business on which they are engaged. Some mingle with the virtues of mutes or norms, others avoid or ignore them.

Lately, whenever translated into netspace by Polaris, Kestrel imagines himself floating at or near the surface of a bottomless informational ocean whose depths are the domain of monsters that rise occasionally to taste the small lives splashing about so far above them. He's aware of these monsters through the enhanced senses of his virtue: entities of unbounded size and prodigious intellect swimming in cold, dense, turbid waters, hungry for minds to consume. Generally, these presences take no notice of him, but sometimes Kestrel senses one or another grow aware of him in return, like slow-moving whales training a massive eye upon a single microscopic krill. The regard of these manufactured aliens fills him with panic and nausea and leaves him feeling soiled to the bottom of his soul. Though the impression of being scrutinized never lasts for more than a second, he always feels as if he's been apprehended utterly in that time, all his secrets absorbed and added to some gargantuan store of knowledge. Dismissed then, he won't be forgotten, not ever; indeed, he trembles sometimes to think that the same inverted intelligence might be returning to him periodically like a nurse in a maternity ward checking up on a dreaming breeder.

Worse still, at such moments he's able to sense something of the mind or minds regarding him with such casual-yet-crushing interest. Blinded by the brilliance of their attention, he nevertheless continues to see with a kind of retinal memory, a ghostly persistence of vision. What imprints itself then in the darkness of his dazzled

mind is so strange, so inhuman, that he can't describe it to himself except by the feelings of awe and terror it evokes and leaves behind . . . along with the certain knowledge that, had the connection been maintained a heartbeat longer, his own mind—either from a failure to comprehend such strangeness or from comprehending it all too well—would have fallen into madness. Small wonder that he has no love of netspace.

But the boggles of the College of the Virtual Mind are drawn to these depths and what dwells there. Though no single boggle can dive so deeply, boggle gestalts can and do descend to the lowest levels of netspace. And, Kestrel thinks, which among the other mute races can know what contacts have been made on those missions, what secret understandings reached? Kestrel knows it's wrong of him, disloyal, but he can't help feeling that boggles are just as alien as membrains. They're too comfortable with the unnatural ways of the norms, their psionic abilities all too compatible with the antech infrastructure of the medianet put in place long before the Viral Wars, when the very first Orbital was launched. That Orbital, called Cronos, was destroyed a few years later . . . not by any Earthbound weaponry, however, but by the next generation of membrains, the twelve surviving Orbitals.

Kestrel sighs. It's late, nearly time for Fenix's watch. He returns to the ground and walks the perimeter of the camp again. Everything's quiet. Cutting past the termant mounds, he wanders down to the stream, avoiding the totem trees, which look more nightmarish than usual by moonlight, like bodies stacked for burning yet still possessing a faint remnant of life. The noises of insects and peepers cease; the only sounds are the gurgling of the stream at his feet and the rattle of the wind through a nearby stand of bladeweeds, each stiff and straight as a spear. A mothquito emerges from the blade-weeds and approaches on translucent, palm-sized wings that look glazed with sugar; he waits until he can smell the insect's sickeningly cloying odor before deflecting it with a breeze. Then he takes a long piss into the stream. Polaris's words return to him as clearly as if she's insinuating them into his mind: *She's going to throw you over*

one day as suddenly and inexplicably as she chose you, that's what. She'll get tired of you and choose one of us instead. Maybe even me. And then what, Kes? How will you deal with that?

How indeed?

He turns back to camp and heads for the mander's solitary tent.



So," Jilly asks in a breathless whisper as they walk up the beach, "how long do you think it's been going on?"

Jack goes weak all over with relief; he's not alone after all. Jilly believes, remembers. Once again, it's the two of them against the world, the Doone twins more united than ever by this latest—and strangest—in a long line of secret sharings. "I don't know," he says, eager to compare notes. "Maybe yesterday was the first time."

"No way," she says. "You heard them."

Only now does Jack realize that she's talking about Uncle Jimmy and Ellen, not his newfound ability to alter history with a thought. Feeling like an idiot, he brings the Coke to his mouth to mask his embarrassment and confusion . . . only to add to both as the cold liquid goes fizzing down the wrong pipe. He bends over, coughing and gasping as Jilly's laughter rings in his ears.

"Drink much?"

"Shut up," he finally gets out.

"It came out your nose," she gleefully informs him.

"Thanks for the update." But in the end he can't resist her laughter, joining in as they continue walking. The beach has grown more crowded since their morning stroll. Families have planted beach umbrellas like flags to claim stretches of sand. Footballs and Frisbees are zipping back and forth. Sphinxlike in mirror shades, teenage lifeguards perch upon their white wooden thrones, radios playing softly beside them.

"I think they've been doing it for a while," Jilly confides. "Not just since Uncle Jimmy got here this summer, but last summer, too. Maybe even the summer before that."

"And nobody caught them at it or suspected anything?"

"It's not the kind of thing you suspect," Jilly says. "If we hadn't been in that classroom last night, we wouldn't suspect either."

He shrugs, sips his Coke successfully. "Well, no matter when it started, we know now."

"It's amazing what you can get away with right under people's noses," Jilly says. "Makes me wonder what else is going on around here."

"Do you think we should tell?"

"Why the hell would we do that?"

Jack scuffs at the sand as he walks. "I don't know. It's wrong, what they're doing." Sensing annoyance and condescension from Jilly, he amends, "I mean, it's supposed to be."

She rolls her eyes. "Lots of things aren't how they're *supposed* to be. It would be different if he was, you know, forcing her or something. Of course we'd tell then. But that's not what was going on last night."

Jack laughs, remembering Ellen's insistence. "More like the other way around!"

"El can be so bossy. Uncle Jimmy's probably wishing he never got messed up with her. You know what kills me about the whole thing? He's supposed to be making sure she doesn't screw around with any of the boys down here! Mom and Dad are paranoid she's going to disgrace them by sleeping with some lifeguard and getting knocked up or something. Well, he's making sure that doesn't happen, all right!"

"Sex is weird," Jack agrees.

"It makes people do weird things," Jilly says. "Look at these people: all these perfect, happy families. Moms and dads and kids all putting on their perfect little shows to convince everybody else how normal they are. To convince themselves. But if we could look behind the curtains of their lives, like boggles, who knows what kind of bizarre shit we'd see. Stuff that would make what Uncle Jimmy and Ellen are up to seem like a game of spin the bottle, I'll bet."

"It makes people stupid."

Jilly snorts. "Most of 'em start out that way. Hey, I know what it's like. Those smart viruses in Mutes & Norms? The savvees? Well, that's what sex is. A virus. Only it's not a smart virus; it's a *stupid* one. It makes people even stupider than they already are."

"What if there really *were* smart viruses that turned people into mutes?"

"Infect me now!" she cries, throwing her arms wide and spinning across the sand. "Know what I'd like to be? A boggle! That way nobody could hide anything from me; I could just read their minds. I'd know all their secrets. And I could make 'em do whatever I wanted."

"Seems like you do a pretty good job of that already."

"Shut *up*." Driving her shoulder into his.

"Ow; watch the arm!"

She takes a swig of Coke, unconcerned. "How about you, Jack?"

"It'd be cool to fly," he says. "So I guess I'd want to be an airie. But I didn't mean like in the game. Other kinds of mutes."

"What other kinds?"

"Well, like us."

She laughs.

"No, listen! We can do stuff other people can't, right? We know what the other one is feeling or thinking; at least, a lot of the time. Sometimes we even have the same dreams!"

"That's cause we're twins, not mutes."

"How do you know we're not both?"

"I just do."

"But you've got to admit there are people who can do things like read minds and see into the future . . ."

"There's always people who can do things other people can't. Most people are average. A few are above average. Then there's the ones who blow everybody else out of the water. But just 'cause some kid can run faster than me, or draw better, or figure out fractions in his head, doesn't make him a mute. I mean, was Einstein a mute?"

"Maybe he was. Anyway, there's a difference between being good at math and being a mind reader."

"I never said there wasn't. But not that big a difference. Human beings don't even use half their brains, Jack. Think about that. Imagine all the things we could do if we used one hundred percent. Maybe people who have mental powers are using more of their

brains, or different parts of their brains, than the rest of us. But we could learn to use them, too. That's what I think, anyway."

"Learn how?"

"I don't know. I wish I did! I'm just saying it's possible, is all."

"So you don't believe there's such things as mutes in real life?"

"I believe there's other, better explanations for how people read minds and stuff like that. The ones who aren't fakes, I mean. 'Cause most of 'em are."

"Yesterday you said Mutes & Norms was real."

"I said it was a *metaphor*. That's not the same thing. I think if you're trying to explain something, you should find the simplest way to do it. Actually, yesterday's a good example."

Jack stops and looks at her; he feels like she's reading his mind, only without any awareness that she's doing it. Which isn't unusual between the two of them, but under the circumstances it's pretty spooky. "What about yesterday?"

Jilly finishes her Coke before replying. "You say you remember riding a humongous wave, then getting smashed down and swept out to sea. But I didn't see any of that, and I was right there the whole time. What I saw was you wading in up to your waist and getting steamrolled by the first wave to come along. Now, how is it that we have such different memories of what happened? Is it because, I don't know, aliens abducted you, then messed with my memory to cover their tracks? Or could it be that you hit your head when the wave knocked you over, and what you think is a memory is actually a dream?"

Jack hesitates, unsure how to answer. He doesn't want to draw her ridicule or scorn. "Sometimes the weirdest explanation is the right one," he ventures at last.

"Oh, so you *were* abducted by aliens?"

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

"What then? I'm listening."

"No, you're not. Your mind is already made up. Forget it. I'm heading back." He turns to go, but Jilly grabs his arm, the hurt one, above the elbow. He can't help crying out; it's like she's hit a pres-

sure point he never knew existed. The can of Coke drops from nerveless fingers. It hits the sand and rolls toward the water, trailing caramel fizz. He wrenches free at the same time Jilly releases him, a stricken look on her face.

"Jeez, I'm sorry, Jack! Are you okay?"

The pain in his arm is like the tolling of a bell, clear and piercing. Could the bone be broken after all? His eyes are filling with tears, but he'd sooner die than shed a single one.

"I forgot about your arm," she says. "I'm really sorry!"

"Just leave me alone." The quaver in his voice adds to his rage. He pushes past her to pick up the now-empty can with his good arm. He keeps walking, not noticing which way he's going, just away from her.

"C'mon, Jack," she persists, dogging his steps. "Don't be a baby. It was an accident. I said I was sorry."

"I'm warning you, Jilly."

"Look, you can hit me, okay? Go on. I won't hit you back, I promise."

"I don't wanna hit you."

"Yes, you do."

"I don't! Now shut up!"

"I know what you're feeling. I can feel it, too. So don't bother lying."

"All right, maybe I do. But I'm not stupid. Even if you didn't hit me back, everybody would see. I'm the one who'd get in trouble, not you."

They continue in silence for a while. Jack can move his fingers again; the pain in his arm is receding. Jilly says: "We'll go into the ocean."

"What?"

"Nobody can see what's going on under the water. You can pinch me. As hard as you want. As long as you want. I won't move or make a sound. Then we'll be even."

That stops him. He looks into his sister's swimming-pool blue, deadly serious eyes; she meets his stare without a word. He knows she means it. He can feel her honesty and determination, a force as

powerful and potentially destructive as the winds of Hurricane Belle, and just as immune to outside influence. It frightens him, not only in its relentless purity, which admits of no obstacle and knows neither doubt nor hesitation, but because there's a challenge in it as well, just like yesterday, when she'd dared him to enter the water. *In or else*. He looks away. "There'd still be a bruise."

"We'll squat down so the water comes up to our necks." Jilly's eyes are still on him, unblinking. She has an answer for everything. "You can pinch me through my bathing suit. That way nobody'll see the bruise."

Jack feels sick to his stomach. How did things reach this point? Was there a moment when something he'd done or said, even something seemingly unrelated, had set in motion a chain reaction of cause and effect leading to the here and now? If he could just identify that moment, hold it in his mind, and summon sufficient will and desire—or desperation—could he change it . . . and, in so doing, change history? Is that what had happened yesterday, not once but twice? At *least* twice; for all he knows, it may have happened more times than that, the changes so small that he had failed to notice them. Perhaps it was happening continually, the process of revision going on second by second beneath the surface of his conscious mind, the results detectable by him, if at all, in a fleeting sense of *déjà vu*.

Jilly prizes the can from his grasp and sets it down on the beach, placing her own beside it. Then she takes him by the hand of his unhurt arm and leads him down to the water's edge. A small group of sandpipers scurries away in a scissoring blur of black pipe-cleaner legs. Jack feels estranged from everything, like he's both experiencing life and recording over it at the same time, a half beat ahead of—or is it behind? At any rate, out of sync with—reality.

The ocean stretches to the horizon. Lying supine beneath the sun, its surface is disturbed by the splashings of swimmers and, farther out, the gleaming fiberglass shells and white sails of small pleasure craft and other boats. Some ride at anchor or drift with the current, while others are moving faster and under their own power parallel to shore, the noise of their engines like time purring in the heat. Wide-flung in the distance, a couple of huge ships can be seen,

tankers cruising to and from ports along the Atlantic seaboard. To Jack they look imperious and ponderous as icebergs yet appear no more solid than the smoke rising from their engines to smudge the clear blue sky. The sight of them fills him with an obscure unease, and he looks away, reeling in the line of his sight to a point some twenty yards or so offshore, where seagulls float like painted wooden decoys upon the water. Other gulls patrol the skies, and every so often one drops like a stone, entering the water with barely a splash to disappear beneath the surface.

How many, Jack wonders, do not emerge again, caught unawares by something their sharp eyes had missed from above? He shudders at the memory of his own close call. Does he want to go back in there? Suppose something is waiting, whatever it was that he'd sensed yesterday stirring in the depths now fully awake and ready for his return?

"Look how calm it is," Jilly says, feeling him hesitate. "There's nothing to be scared of."

"I'm not," he says, though he knows she knows it's a lie.

"Then come on. In or else."

It's funny, he thinks; those are the same words she'd used to get him into the water yesterday. Once, back when their parents were still together, they'd done something to infuriate Bill (the offense long forgotten) and had fled from his wrath into their bedroom (back then they'd still shared a bedroom), locking the door behind them. He'd rattled the knob and pounded at the door as they'd cowered on Jack's bed, clutching each other and trembling. "Open this door," he'd shouted like some avatar of the Big Bad Wolf. "Let me in or else!" He hadn't had to elaborate; the implicit threat was all the more terrible for its vagueness, and at last they'd unlocked the door and faced him hand in hand, cowards to their cause, traitors to each other's trust. The punishment, like the crime, was forgotten, but Bill's words had persisted in their memory, becoming a call to arms: a reminder of their failure of nerve and a challenge to do better. One hand clutched by Jilly, the other balled into a fist at his side, Jack lets her lead him into the water; at least, he thinks, she's coming along this time.

They wade steadily deeper, the shivery kiss of the water climbing

his hot and sweaty skin, past his knees, his waist, until he feels dizzy with the contrast between his submerged self and his still-exposed upper body. He shuts his eyes against the dazzle of sun off the surface like a spilled bag of silver coins; the resulting dark throbs with blobs of color like distorted echoes of sight that pulse in rhythm with the twinges of his arm. The day seems noisier: the laughter and splashing of a group of teenagers a few yards away; the sounds of repair work from the houses at his back; the Dopplered drone of a prop plane passing overhead; the keening of the gulls as though grieving some ancient, imperishable loss. Sensing Jilly's intent, Jack draws a breath before she ducks under, pulling him along behind her.

He comes up sputtering, Jilly laughing at his side. As he brushes the water from his eyes with his free hand, Jack has a vivid memory of surfacing half-drowned in stormy seas, the sanctuaries of shore and sister lost to sight, the sun gone from the sky as though clawed down by a wave. He remembers how those waves had slapped at him like cats toying with a mouse, how he'd fought to stay afloat, how, with every breath, water had forced itself down his throat. And how, finally, limbs turned to lead by the alchemy of exhaustion, he'd stopped struggling and let himself go under, only to see, as if by the diluted light of a submerged sun, dark shapes rising out of the deeper yet less substantial darkness into which he was sinking, shapes reaching for him like the fingers of a gigantic hand. Are they reaching for him still? What will they do if they catch him?

Jilly tightens her grip. "Whoa, Jack. Take it easy. Everything's okay."

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea." He tugs at her hand as his anxious eyes look past her, searching the sea beyond for any sign of disturbance: a shadow gliding below the surface; the churning of water as in an old Godzilla movie; the bobbing gulls rising en masse in a flurry of squawks and frantic wings as something huge moves beneath them.

"What are you gonna do, stay out of the ocean for the rest of your life?"

"I'm not thinking that far ahead. Let go!"

She doesn't. "Look at me, Jack. I said, look at me."

He does. Her expression is the one he remembers from the night before, fierce and predatory. Except those hard, gemlike eyes are fixed on him, excited yet cold, lasering him with all the pinpoint force of her considerable will, just as earlier yesterday, in a reality no one else remembers, she'd challenged him to enter the storm-racked surf and watched him ride the killer wave of all killer waves.

"Take a deep breath, okay? And another. That's it. Keep looking at me. Now listen. You can't be afraid of the ocean because of yesterday. I'm not going to let you. I mean, imagine if you'd given up learning to ride a bike after falling off for the first time."

"I almost drowned."

"What do you want, a medal?"

"I think I broke my arm."

"I wouldn't let any of that keep *me* out of the water. I'd make myself go back in no matter how scared or hurt I was. The important thing is not to be a wimp."

Which stirs him up all the more because he knows it's true . . . although it's not the water he's afraid of; it's what lies beneath it. But if he tells her that, she won't understand. She'll think he's talking about *Jaws* or something. He can't describe to himself what it is that he fears, so how is he supposed to explain it to her? Yet he can't deny that he's afraid, either. Their senses are too finely attuned. She's feeling his fear right at this very moment, just as he's feeling her scornful impatience with that fear, her determination to reject it in herself and purge it from him as well. "Screw you," he says.

"No, screw *you*." With her free hand, she splashes him.

He splashes back. "No, you!"

"You!"

The water fight goes on for some time before Jack realizes that Jilly is using both hands. Which isn't quite fair, considering his hurt arm is tucked to his side like a broken wing. But the point is, she's released him. He's free to try and make it back to shore. Only he doesn't. He's not afraid anymore; at least, not *that* afraid. Which, he also realizes, was Jilly's intent all along. They stop splashing. He's breathing hard, as is she. "You did that on purpose," he says.

She can't keep herself from smirking. "It worked, didn't it?"

The ease with which she manipulated him is infuriating. More than anything, he wants to wipe that smirk off her face. “We came in here for a reason,” he says. “It’s time to take your medicine. Unless you’re chicken.”

Her eyes don’t leave him, nor does the smirk fade from her lips as she lowers her body until only her head and shoulders remain above the rocking plane of water.

It comes to him that he’s still being manipulated. But he doesn’t dare hesitate. He closes the distance between them with a step, lowering himself so that their eyes are on a level. He reaches with his good arm.

Jilly gives a start when he touches her side. “Not there,” she says. She brings his hand to where her bikini top covers a chest nearly as flat as his own.

Jilly’s expression grows more defiant as Jack gathers fabric and skin between his thumb and the knuckle of his index finger. When he begins to squeeze, he hears a quick, indrawn breath, a sip of air between parted lips, but whether it came from his sister or himself, he can’t tell.

“What are you waiting for,” Jilly taunts. “An invitation?”

He squeezes harder.

“That tickles.”

But he can hear the effort it’s costing her to keep her tone and inflection flat. He feels the iron wall of her willpower and the pain pressing against it like floodwaters against a dam, feels the tension between them not only in her but, more distant, in himself, an irritation eating away at the edges of his self-control.

“A little minnow is nibbling at me,” she says.

“Here comes a big crab.”

Tears glisten in her eyes. She’s biting her lower lip as if to banish one pain through the agency of another. Her face is pale, nostrils flaring as she breathes. Both of them are trembling.

But it’s not cold that’s making Jack’s skin tingle. He feels drunk with a mix of power and helplessness. It’s how it had felt to ride that wave, hooked into a larger-than-life force whose favor—as he’d sensed at the time, though it had seemed too remote a chance to

worry about—could be withdrawn as suddenly as it had been granted, yanking itself out from under him without warning like a magic carpet at twenty thousand feet. Knowing better than he had then, a part of him wants to stop, to pull back while he still can. But no way is he going to be the one to quit. He won't give Jilly the satisfaction. "Say uncle," he says.

"Uncle Jimmy."

"Not Uncle Jimmy. Just uncle."

"Uncle . . ." Gasp. "Jimmy."

"Okay; you asked for it. Here comes a *lobster*." He twists her nipple through the bikini top. This elicits a satisfying moan, and Jack thinks for a second that he's won, that Jilly's going to give up and it will all be over, everything back to normal between them, the old equilibrium restored.

Instead, her eyes glaze over. A flush spreads across her face, which had been so pale. "Oh," she says. And again, "Oh," as though at a revelation that should have been obvious long before now. She seems to be simultaneously looking a thousand miles away and gazing deep into herself, gone beyond him to some place he cannot follow, seeing things he cannot see. It's like he's given her a boost up and over a high garden wall, and now he's standing alone on the outside, listening to her gasps of wonderment from within.

And then the garden wall comes tumbling down. Not all of it; not all the way; but enough to allow him a glimpse through fallen bricks of the flowers and fountains inside. What he sees is a flash of beauty so intense that it overwhelms his senses, obliterating time and self. He's riding it like a wave of pure white light; no, he *is* the wave, and Jilly, too, flesh and bones and blood dissolved, atoms mingling, dispersing through the water and the air. But this sensation is like the slow roll of thunder following on the winged heels of a lightning flash; however brief the interval between them, the thunder is always playing catch-up. Jack's already falling out of the wave; it's moving beyond him, leaving the two of them behind, and though he holds on with all his heart and will, it's too late. It always has been. But he holds on anyway, if not to the thing itself, then to the memory of it, ebbing almost as swiftly.

He blinks, or the world does. His fingers are pinching water; Jilly is gone. He hadn't felt her pull away. He stands and turns, looking in vain for some sight of his sister among the nearby swimmers or farther out where seagulls float unperturbed. He feels dizzy, the sparkle of the ocean like dancing diamonds: the shattered remnants of that wave of light. Fear grips his heart, and for a second he's sure she really *is* gone, that he's changed things without intending to and in the most awful way imaginable. Or perhaps whatever he'd sensed reaching for him out of the cold and lightless places of the sea has snatched her instead. But then she breaks the surface some five or six yards closer in to shore.

"Remember, Jack," she calls. "No telling!" The note of triumph in her voice is a bit confusing, as is the admonishment not to tell. He feels like he's missing something. But she dives before he can ask, gliding mermlike beneath the water.

As though measuring the distance of a retreating storm by the time between the flash of lightning and its attendant thunder, Jack begins to count the seconds until she emerges again. "One hippopotamus, two hippopotamus, three hip—" Something not water drips into the water. His nose is bleeding.

Hypnotized, horrified, he watches as another drop falls and explodes in a tiny crimson cloud that dissipates immediately. He wipes his nose with the back of his hand, stares in shock at the vivid smear against his skin. He plunges his arm into the water, afraid the stain will settle, marking him forever. Then dunks himself.

When he comes up again, he sees Jilly wading onto the beach, sloughing water like a second skin. He checks his nose: it's no longer bleeding, thank God. He begins to swim toward shore as if he can leave bloody noses behind him forever. Then splashes to a stop, amazed. He'd used both arms, and there had been no pain. Gingerly, half-believing, Jack lifts his left arm—the arm he'd hurt, perhaps broken, the day before—and flexes it, takes it through its whole range of motion without so much as a twinge.

He explodes into giddy laughter, splashing about him with both arms as he hadn't been able to do in the water fight. Nearby swimmers stare at him like he's crazy, but he doesn't care. This is it, the

proof he's been searching for all morning, trying so hard to manufacture. He's not imagining things; he really *has* switched one reality for another. How, he doesn't know, except that he didn't do it consciously. It must have been the force of his desire, his anger, his pain . . . But he'll sort out the specifics later. He's sure that the secret to these miracles, whatever it may be, lies within his grasp.

"Jilly!" He shouts her name, wading in to shore.

She turns, reclaimed can of Coke in one hand, and, shading her eyes with the other, watches as he drags himself from the sea.

He falls once in his eagerness, belly-flopping in the shallows. Then he's up again and out of the water, laughing harder than ever. "My arm," he calls, pinwheeling it as he runs to her. "Look at my arm!"

"Quit splashing." She draws back as if from the approach of a drenched, hyperfriendly sheepdog.

"Sorry." He stops, panting. "But look!" He does the pinwheel thing again, more slowly. "My arm's better!"

"Congratulations." Her expression one of utter incomprehension. "Um, when did you hurt it?"

"Very funny. I—" But of course she doesn't remember. As far as she's concerned, that injury—that reality—never happened.

"You what, Jack?"

"Never mind." This is more complicated than he'd thought. And a whole lot less fun, too. Even if he tells her everything, she won't believe him. Why should she? Would he believe her if she came to him with the same story? Not in a million years. He'd think she was kidding. Or nuts. But what does she remember? Is the condition of his arm the only thing that's changed, or, in changing that, has he introduced new hairline fractures into the history of the world? He feels a sudden vertigo, as if the atoms of which all things are made have lost whatever glue or faith keeps them clinging together and hold their accustomed shapes out of inertia, like sand castles at the mercy of every wind and wave. A movement from him, a breath, might prove more destructive, and less reparable, than the damage inflicted by Belle.

"Jack? Are you okay?"

He forces himself to answer. "I hurt it yesterday. You know, when that wave knocked me over."

"Oh," she says, satisfied.

"It's fine now," he continues, relieved; so she remembers the wave, at least. Perhaps things aren't as fragile as he'd feared. No, of course they're not. How could they be? He's just one boy, after all. No one important. "I was afraid it was broken, but I guess I just bruised a muscle or something."

"You should have told me." She sips her Coke. Then looks at him with narrowed eyes. "You didn't seem hurt at the time."

"It didn't start bothering me until later." He shrugs, remembering with perfect clarity how the wave had knocked him down for an instant only. In this new-forged reality, which doesn't replace the others but exists alongside them in his memory, he hadn't lost consciousness, and Jilly hadn't had to drag him out of the surf; he'd sprung right back up, laughing through his fear as he'd splashed back to the safety of the beach.

"It's weird I didn't feel anything," Jilly persists. "Usually I do, when you get hurt."

"There was nothing to feel." It's like she suspects he's lying. Which, he realizes, she probably does on some level; as sensitive as they are to each other, some of what he's experiencing must be getting through. But no lie ever wove as tangled a web as this series of incompatible truths, each of which is equally real to him . . . and to him alone. It's already confusing enough. What will he do, he wonders, if the changes continue? How will he keep his stories straight as realities multiply in his mind?

"Are you sure you didn't bonk your head?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've been acting weird since yesterday. You had that bloody nose in the shower stall. And you thought I'd switched those Scrabble tiles around."

"Somebody did," he says with a secret smile as he bends to retrieve his Coke; the can is half-full; here, his arm unhurt, he'd never dropped it. He laughs.

"What's so funny?"

Yet if he hadn't dropped the Coke, if his arm is fine, then what were he and Jilly up to in the water? And why, when he can remem-

ber the moment this new reality diverged from the old, can't he remember something that took place mere moments ago?

"Jack? Hello?"

He remembers being in the water, remembers pinching Jilly through her bikini top. What he doesn't remember is why. Or, rather, he remembers the old reasons, from the old, superseded reality. But not the new ones, not the causes that led to these particular effects. "What did you mean a minute ago when you said not to tell?"

"See? That's what I'm talking about. You keep spacing out, asking all sorts of dumb-ass questions."

"Don't be a jerk. Just help me out, okay?"

"Are you serious?" She searches his eyes. "You really don't remember?"

"I swear."

She rolls her eyes, sighs: put upon. "You wanted to tell Dad about El and Uncle Jimmy. I didn't. So I challenged you to a pinching contest. Now do you remember?"

"Right." That's all it takes to trigger the memory of arguing with Jilly as they walked down the beach. He realizes that his own nipple is sore and flashes on the two of them submerged up to their necks, their expressionless faces inches apart above the surface, eyes locked, unblinking, while their fingers pinched and twisted below. It's as though his mind is protecting him from the full flood of altered causes and effects, letting him grow acclimated to the new reality a little bit at a time. "A pinching contest. And you won."

"Don't I always?" There's that smirk again. "So don't even think about telling."

"Not *always*," he says.

"Huh," she says. "You wish, little brother."

"God damn it, I'm not—"

"Last one back's a rotten egg!" And she's off, tearing down the beach in a spray of sand and laughter.

Jack stands watching, taken by surprise. Then he begins to run, knowing that he'll never catch her.

At least, not in this reality.

FALLING DOWN

Jack unscrews the Oreo, passing the half with the filling to Jilly and keeping the plain half for himself. He stuffs the wafer into his mouth, chews, washes it down with a gulp of Coke from the ice-cold can beside him. Then repeats the process with a fresh cookie. Jilly waits until she's got two halves; these she twists together to make a double-stuffed Oreo that she proceeds to eat in the manner of an ice-cream sandwich, squeezing out a thin ring of white filling which she nibbles and licks away before polishing off the rest in four bites. They've been known to run through a package of Oreos in fifteen minutes, Jack taking apart, Jilly putting back together, with the robotic efficiency of workers on an assembly line.

Right now they're eating at a more leisurely pace, dinner recent enough to taste and their attention focused on the diverse paraphernalia spread over the picnic table on the screened-in porch where they sit side by side waiting for tonight's game to begin. Among other things, there's a wooden ruler whose metal edge is black with graphite; a scattered handful of freshly sharpened yellow No. 2 pencils (Uncle Jimmy is a stickler for sharpened yellow No. 2 pencils); a

yellow four-sided die, five red six-sided dice (scavenged from a Yahtzee game), a green eight-sided die, a blue twelve-sided die, and two clear plastic twenty-sided dice that glitter like a pair of outlandish diamonds amid pasty fake-gemstone geometries in the light of the sixty-watt bulb overhead. And, of course, the thick, much-thumbed *Player's Guide* and the even thicker *Gamemaster's Book of the Odds* (taboo to everyone but Uncle Jimmy during play, though Jack and Jilly have spent hours perusing its pages, dreaming of becoming Gamemasters themselves one day). The grungy guitar of Bowie's *Diamond Dogs* issues from Uncle Jimmy's portable tape player, growling and snarling below the muggy surface of the night.

Uncle Jimmy sits hunched and shirtless across the table, methodically rolling dice behind a makeshift screen that consists of two cereal boxes, Lucky Charms and Count Chocula, with the cover of the game itself propped upright between them: a colorful, comic-booky design depicting an airie alighting on a ruin-bestrewn beach while a buxom merm babe basks seductively in the shallows. Only the glossy black hair of Uncle Jimmy's head is visible above this rampart; that, and a rising trail of cigarette smoke. What Jack wouldn't give for a peek at the maps and notes hidden back there!

Instead, he and Jilly must wander blindly through a world of Uncle Jimmy's devising, stumbling upon its wonders and dangers with little or no warning and, if they (or their characters, rather) survive, recording them on sheets of graph paper and three-by-five index cards. It's as if that future legend lies half-created already, shrouded in mists that lift with their passing . . . or not *lift*, but solidify right before their eyes, potential existence made real by the actualizing power of their stare and the fateful fall of dice from their hands. The night beyond the porch screens, held at bay by the single bulb, seems filled with insubstantial, half-formed things: the skeletal shapes of tree branches glimpsed through a fog of foliage; the moths and other insects which, drawn to the light like spirits seeking incarnation, strike the screens with a noise suggesting a faint ectoplasmic rain. The sounds of traffic on Route 1—like winds blowing in other worlds, powerless as yet to stir a leaf in this one—and the crashing of waves upon the shore—which they can hear

above the music and also feel in their bones, as though the tides are driven by a submerged engine whose tireless vibrations squirm through the sand, climb the pilings to the house, and wriggle into their bodies—add tangibly and intangibly to the sense that the porch is a raft afloat on a sea of dreaming darkness.

Jack is reviewing the gray-smudged and much-erased index cards on which he and Jilly have recorded the names and qualities of their characters: strength, intelligence, intuition, constitution, agility, psionic aptitude, mutagenic potential, willpower, and life points, each determined at the outset of the game by a separate roll of from two to five (depending on the race of the character) six-sided dice. In the course of play, the base numbers of the nine qualities can be adjusted up or down in two ways. First, by experience, which characters gain by interacting with (i.e., killing, usually) other characters encountered in the game; when enough experience points have been amassed, a character advances to the next level, whereupon its player rolls another six-sided die, the result indicating the number of additional points to be divided among the nine qualities. And second, by the properties of weapons, armor, and other artifacts that come into the characters' possession; for example, donning a pair of antech gloves might increase (or diminish!) a character's strength, while exposure to a savvee might temporarily or permanently affect a character's psionic aptitude.

Because Ellen's hypersensitive nerd alarm is triggered by anything involving dice and graph paper, and a party of five is the minimum number for a decent game of *Mutes & Norms*, Jack is playing three characters; Jilly, two. Jack is Kestrel, an airie, Chalcedon, a delph, and Fenix, a mander. Jilly is Polaris, a boggle, and Namora, a merm. Despite appearances, Jilly's share is actually more than Jack's because of the psionic abilities of boggles. Polaris can project her virt, and the virts of her fellow mutes, into netspace, and since the virtuality of netspace offers possibilities for action distinct from anything in the physical world, possibilities limited only by a character's willpower (at base, for mutes and norms alike, the sum of three six-sided dice), Jack and Jilly are also playing (and must maintain additional index cards for) the virts of their characters. Each

character has control of his or her own virt—again with the exception of Polaris, who can take temporary control of up to four other mute characters and their virts in addition to projecting her own.

Thus, at this particular moment, in this particular game, Jack can be playing a total of six characters: three in reality and three in net-space; while Jilly might be juggling as many as ten . . . but only briefly, for Polaris hasn't yet gained enough experience to raise her level—and with it, her psionic aptitude (at base, for all mute classes, the sum of five six-sided dice; for norms, it's two)—high enough to take control of both the physical and virtual bodies of five subjects, even willing ones. The strain is enormous; each mute she invirts into netspace increases the rate at which she burns through her accumulation of psionic aptitude points, and when she knits all the virts of the pentad into a gestalt, the drain is greater still. As her psionic points drop, her link to netspace frays, becoming more difficult and dangerous to maintain. Once a third of Polaris's psionic points are gone, Jilly must decide at the beginning of every turn whether or not to break the boggle's connection. With each turn that she chooses to keep Polaris linked, she must roll progressively higher saving throws with a twenty-sided die, and if she fails to make one of those saving throws, the link is severed automatically, with Polaris suffering both physical and psionic damage; that is, her life points also take a hit, possibly a mortal one, for the mental might of boggles is offset by physical weakness (boggles roll two six-sided dice to determine the base numbers for the qualities of strength and constitution, and three dice for life points, compared to the four, and sometimes five, dice rolled for these qualities by characters of the other races). Higher-level boggles can maintain greater numbers of willing or unwilling subjects in netspace for longer periods and at lesser cost, in addition to taking psionic control of physical bodies and subvirting virtual ones. But Polaris has only reached the fourth level, and beyond the basic telepathic abilities possessed by all her race, she's pretty much restricted to invirting the other members of her pentad and, having done so, forming and maintaining a mute gestalt, as well as—if the dice smile upon her (which, Jack has to admit, they often do)—pulling off the occasional subvirting.

What Jack finds most strange and wonderful about Mutes & Norms is that despite its complexity—the frequent rolling of different-sided dice and the almost occult tables of figures consulted to determine not just the outcome of events but whether or not those events take place at all; the sheer number and variety of situations that can arise between player and nonplayer characters in this invented world whose deepest secrets are known to no one, not even its creator; the laborious work of drawing reliable maps based on nothing more than the Gamemaster’s verbal description of what their characters can see at any given moment; and the added difficulty of keeping track of *virt*s engaged in quasi-independent lines of play in *net*space—despite these things, and others, which can make any description of the game come across as overwhelmingly arcane, tedious, and confusing to the uninitiated (Bill had listened to Jack and Jilly’s explanation for five minutes before declaring that “doing my income taxes with an abacus in the waiting room of a dentist’s office sounds like more fun,” sentiments echoed with less eloquence but equal vehemence by Ellen) . . . despite all this, Mutes & Norms is without question the most absorbing game he’s ever played. No other game has seduced his imagination as thoroughly or come to seem so magical and yet so real.

When Jack holds the card for Kestrel or Fenix or Chalcedon in his hand, whether to consult what’s written there or to add to or amend it, his imagination finds its way through the thicket of penciled numbers and words, past the fence of thin blue lines, to the lives on the other side. Not that he *sees* the three mutes as in some freaky extradimensional vision . . . though of course he can picture them perfectly, and not only because of the illustrations on the game box and in the rule books: Kestrel tall and, by norm standards, lean to the point of emaciation, with a blue jay’s plumage and a feathered crest flaring atop his head like the Mohawk of a punk rocker whenever he grows excited, which is often; Fenix hairless, his ebony skin shot through with cracks that glow with heat like veins of magma; and Chalcedon a living statue hacked from a slab of granite, his weak eyes sunk deep in craggy features and protected from above-ground glare by a pair of dark lenses such as Stevie Wonder might

wear. But Jack can picture Superman and Sherlock Holmes, too. That doesn't mean they exist independently of his ability to imagine them. This is different. What he senses within or behind or through the cards is something more. Something he's imagining without precisely making it up.

Even Jilly, usually the more skeptical of the two, admits to the game's oddly convincing quality. Because the twins are so often conscious of existing at an oblique angle to what they half-jokingly term the Land of the Singletons, the idea of other worlds lying side by side isn't such a stretch. Some nights, as they lie in the parallel universes of their bunk beds, the smell of pot and the blurry jumble of low voices and laughter wafting through the open window from the upstairs deck where Uncle Jimmy and Ellen share their (until yesterday, unsuspected) secrets, Jack and Jilly hash out a host of abstruse questions like college freshmen debating philosophy; it's all very earnest and yet so speculative that they can't take it seriously. For instance, assuming that Kestrel and the rest exist somewhere, in some form, are their destinies in that place determined by the jitterbug dance of dice across the Doones' picnic table? Or, on the contrary, do their thoughts or actions or desires somehow dictate the fall of dice here in this world? Did mutes and norms exist before the game existed, or did the game, like some magic ritual, call them into being? If the former, did they plant the idea for Mutes & Norms in Uncle Jimmy's brain in the same way that Polaris might insinuate a thought into the mind of a norm? And, if so, for what purpose? Or were they instead drawn to the game—or, rather, to the idea of the game, that lightbulb flickering on in Uncle Jimmy's head—by an instinct as irresistible as that which draws the moths and other night insects beyond the porch screens to the light shining above the table where Uncle Jimmy looks up from behind the screen of cereal boxes, his eyes hidden behind dark shades (to disguise the telltale redness of the pot he likes to smoke before playing, a habit Jack and Jilly pretend not to notice, just as Uncle Jimmy pretends not to notice the cigarettes they swipe from him), and announces that he's ready to start?

“OKAY,” he says, and sips from a bottle of Budweiser, his first of the evening; generally, these gaming sessions last a couple of hours, or as long as it takes him to drink his way through a six-pack; in that time, mere moments or entire months can go by in the world of the game. “If I recall, before we were so rudely interrupted by Belle, you guys had decided to hole up for the night inside an old building. Is that right?”

The question is rhetorical; despite the pot and beer, they’ve never known Uncle Jimmy to forget a single detail from a gaming session. At least, whenever they attempt to slip something past him, he catches it. Which doesn’t mean they don’t try to do so at every opportunity. In this, at least, they take after their father. More to the point, there’s always the chance that Uncle Jimmy’s testing their memories, trying to slip something past *them*—he is Bill’s brother, after all. Well, half brother.

“Right,” Jilly confirms. “Down in the basement we found a secret door that wouldn’t open for us at first, remember? The virt standing guard was really old, and nobody had tried to get past it, or even talked to it, for ages. It had gone a little crazy, or maybe just senile, on account of being alone for so long. It wasn’t very smart; I mean, it didn’t even have a name.”

“The best warding virts aren’t smart,” says Uncle Jimmy. “Make them intelligent, and they get too clever for their own good, start deciding for themselves whether or not to open. Smart virts can be intimidated or bribed, just like people and their virts. But dumb programs are stubborn and stay loyal no matter what.”

“Yes, but programming can be changed. Boggles do it with their psionics, and norms use psibertronic netaccessories.” As usual, Jilly can’t resist being a know-it-all. “And that’s just what we did. I had Polaris subvirt the program so that it would let us in and keep anybody and everybody else out.” She pumps her fist in the air. “Boggles rule!”

Another quality of *Mutes & Norms*, one shared with certain books and dreams, is its ability to impose a sovereign framework of time. No matter how long an interval between gaming sessions, once Jack and Jilly resume play, as if returning eagerly to a dog-eared page

or sleep-warmed pillow, real time recedes into the background and game time comes to the fore, picking up where it left off as though never interrupted at all. The events Jilly is describing had taken place three days ago, on Thursday evening, before the arrival of Bill or Belle, but in the currency of game time they are just moments past.

"Polaris even gave the ugly old thing a name," she continues with a smirk that turns into a guffaw: "Barnyard." The name refers to Mrs. Barnard, a local widow of indeterminate though surely considerable age. Barnyard, as Jack and Jilly are by no means the first to have christened her, owns Barnard's Bait & Tackle, a small, ramshackle establishment on Little Bay, a bicycle ride away across Route 1, where the Doones berth the family yacht: a battered but still-bayworthy aluminum canoe. She's a small, round, wrinkled butterball of a woman known for the overwhelming scent of lavender she exudes, a tan so deep it verges on orange, and Flossie, a mangy and malevolent toy poodle that she carries around with her everywhere, crushed to her fragrant bosom like a witch's familiar.

"Don't get cocky," Uncle Jimmy growls, gesturing with a cigarette that's taken the place of the beer bottle. "For a fourth-level boggle like Polaris to reprogram a virt, even a stupid one, is pretty unlikely. You made a lucky roll."

Jilly shrugs with the nonchalance of the habitually lucky. "Anyhow, now it's morning, and we've got norms to kill—right, Jack? Death to norms!"

"Not so fast, my pretty," Uncle Jimmy interrupts with a smile. "There are nasties roaming in the night."

Her own smile is a smug combination of sugar and sweet poison. "But we already stood watch, Uncle Jimmy! It was the last thing we did before quitting."

"Not that I remember."

"It's all the beer you drink, Uncle Jimmy. It makes you forget things."

Uncle Jimmy lifts his bottle in mocking salute. "Here's to forgetting!" He takes a swig, then says, "Now, who who wants the first watch?"

"But we did this *last* time!" Jilly whines. "Ask Jack!"

"Why, so he can lie about it, too?"

"Jack doesn't lie!"

"Puh-leeze." The glare of the lightbulb sparks off Uncle Jimmy's shades as he looks to the heavens. "Jack does whatever you tell him."

Jack can't let this aspersion pass unchallenged. "Do not, Uncle Jimmy!"

Uncle Jimmy takes a slow drag on his cigarette. "All right," he says through a swirl of smoke. "Prove it."

"Go on," Jilly says, nudging Jack's left arm with her elbow in a way that would've made him wince in the world that was. "Tell him."

How do these things happen? "The truth is . . ."

They're staring at him like they know what he's going to say. Is he that predictable? Does he really do whatever Jilly tells him? If he can change the rest of the world, surely he can change himself. "The truth is, we never did stand watch. We still have to get through the night."

"Traitor!" Jilly hisses.

Uncle Jimmy snorts with laughter. "Better luck next time, Jilly."

She shrugs, tucking her bare legs beneath her on the bench as if she's already put the incident behind her. Meanwhile, under the table, she pinches Jack as hard as she can.

"Ow!" he cries, jerking away. "Quit it!"

She bats her eyelashes at him above an innocent smile.

"None of that!" says Uncle Jimmy before Jack can retaliate. "Save it for the norms, okay? Now, assuming you still want to play tonight, who's going to take the first watch?"

"Namora," Jilly volunteers.

"You're mighty eager all of a sudden."

She shrugs.

"Go ahead and roll a twenty-sided."

"What for?"

"That's for me to know, and you to find out . . . maybe."

Jilly picks up the clear twenty-sided die and sends it sparkling across the surface of the table to bounce off the box of Lucky

Charms. "Seventeen," she announces when it comes to rest, her tone daring him to do his worst.

Uncle Jimmy, meanwhile, has been rolling some dice of his own on the other side of the screen. He answers without looking up: "Namora doesn't see or hear anything."

"What about Barnyard?"

"Barnyard either." He takes another swallow of beer and belches. "'Scuse me," he says as Jilly giggles. "Okay, who's next? Jack, you're being awfully quiet."

"I guess," he says, shrugging.

"Everything okay?"

"Sure." Jilly flashes him a warning look, and Jack realizes that she thinks he's still upset about Ellen and Uncle Jimmy. But that's not what's bothering him. The fact is, Jack's off his game. Literally. Once again, he's experiencing the living paradox of holding parallel but divergent realities simultaneously in his mind. The thing is, until today he and Jilly had always played *norm* characters, not mutes: five aspiring knights, young nobles all, who'd set forth from the court of Pluribus Unum in quest of fame and fortune in the wilds of the Waste. He knows them as well as he does Chalcedon, Kestrel, Polaris, Namora, and Fenix. He knows their names, their qualities, their histories, their virtues; knows what they look like in the flesh and in netspace; knows what kind of psibertronic armor they wear, what weapons and netaccessories they carry. He knows how many experience points they've got and remembers earning each one of them by hunting down and killing mutes. He remembers maps of the Waste both like and unlike the ones set down with pencil and ruler on the sheets of graph paper lying on the picnic table before him. All of that's gone now, not just superseded but, for everyone else but him, erased by this new world he's brought into being by wishing his arm had never been hurt. From that one small change, ripples have spread farther than he'd intended or could have imagined possible. Not only (relatively speaking) into the future of that event (or nonevent), but into its past as well.

Now Jack remembers two versions of the nearly three weeks since Uncle Jimmy's arrival at the beach house, bearing the gift of

his game, and the two are identical in every respect but one: in one version, he and Jilly have always played norms; in the other, they've always been mutes. Not only that, but those norms had killed these mutes, and these mutes had killed those norms. And what's more, they'd done so in exactly the same circumstances: a confrontation that had taken place right here, in the ruins of a nameless pre-War town somewhere in the Waste, early in the previous gaming session. Both versions are real to Jack, though only the latter, more recent reality—if (as he's by no means convinced) such temporal distinctions retain any meaning—is, so to speak, physically manifest. The question is, will the ripples continue to spread backward, and, if so, how much farther? Jack wonders how many competing versions of reality he'll have to keep straight. No wonder he feels queasy. That, and too many Oreos . . .

"I'll take the next watch," he says. "I mean, Chalcedon will."

"Roll the twenty."

He does so. "Twelve."

Uncle Jimmy peers over the tops of the cereal boxes. "Chalcedon hears something outside the door."

"What is it?"

"You can't tell."

"I put my ear up to the door and listen."

"You hear some snuffling sounds."

"Any voices?"

"No."

"What about the virt?" Jilly demands. "What does Barnyard see out there?"

Before replying to each of Jack's questions, Uncle Jimmy has consulted the dice behind his screen (or made a show of doing so, a habit that renders it impossible for Jack and Jilly to know for certain whether a particular event is taking place at random, with no significance beyond itself, or, on the contrary, belongs to a larger scheme orchestrated by Uncle Jimmy in his guise of godlike Gamemaster), but this time he doesn't bother. "If Polaris wasn't asleep, she could ask Barnyard herself and find out," he says. "Unfortunately, Jilly, as you know perfectly well, Chalcedon is a delph,

not a boggle. He can't directly communicate with virts or anything else in netspace. Maybe you should've ordered the virt to wake Polaris up if anything came sniffing around the door."

"But I did, Uncle Jimmy!"

"Let's not start that again."

"No, really. When I subvirted Barnyard, part of the reprogramming was to let us in and keep everybody else out. It's obvious that includes warning us about any possible danger."

"I'm not a boggle, Jilly. I don't read minds. You've got to tell me exactly what your characters are going to do before they do it."

Jilly frowns, then tries a different tack. "Chalcedon can wake Polaris up. Then she can talk to Barnyard."

"Is that what you want to do, Jack?" Uncle Jimmy asks.

"Come on, Jack! It could be norms out there!"

"I don't know," he says. "From what Uncle Jimmy said, it doesn't sound like norms. Probably just some dogs wandering around."

"Sometimes norms use dogs to hunt mutes," Jilly says.

"Does it sound like dogs, Uncle Jimmy?"

Dice rattle behind the cereal boxes. "Like I said before, you hear sniffing."

"You said snuffling before," Jilly points out.

"Sniffing, snuffling: what's the difference?" He sucks at his cigarette, then jets the smoke out through his nostrils like an aggravated mander. "Come on, Jack. Are you gonna wake up Polaris or not? We don't have all night."

"Wake me up! Wake me up!"

Jack considers. If it was him listening at that door, he'd rouse Polaris in a heartbeat. But it's not him. He's playing Chalcedon, not Jack Doone; he's got to act like Chalcedon would act. As Uncle Jimmy has commented on more than one occasion, "It's not called a 'role-playing game' for nothing." Delves are proud and stubborn creatures who hate to rely on other mutes, and on boggles most of all, suspecting them (not without reason) of considering delves to be an inferior race. Not only that, but—like manders, merms, and airies—delves mistrust the boggles' mastery of netspace . . . to say nothing of their ability to read minds and influence actions. So it

doesn't seem too likely that Chalcedon would turn to Polaris now; at least, not without a more compelling reason. "Chalcedon decides to wait and see if whatever's out there goes away," he says.

"Stupid delph," says Jilly, and elbows him again.

He elbows her back. "Polaris is the stupid one."

"At least she doesn't look like a rock."

"Better than looking like a norm."

"Whatever was out there is gone," Uncle Jimmy interrupts. "If anybody cares. There's one more watch to go before morning. Who wants it?"

"Kestrel," says Jack.

"Namora," says Jilly at the same instant.

Uncle Jimmy sighs as they glower at each other. "Roll a six-sided, each of you. High roll takes it."

As though the quickest roll, rather than the highest, will decide who stands watch, Jack and Jilly grab for the dice like two gun-fighters racing to get off the first shot.



P pausing outside the front of the two-story building revealed by Kestrel's aerial reconnaissance to be the only structure in town still possessing a roof, the pentad shelters behind the tumbled remains of an outlying edifice overgrown with vegetation. Tangled strands of silver-green ivy writhe like dazed serpents in the rain; along the vines, clusters of tiny purple-and-yellow flowers open and close their petals soundlessly, reminding Kestrel of the gasping mouths of fish. The whole day has passed in a drenched and dreary twilight under an oppressive, slate gray sky; now, with the setting of the sun, even that poor illumination is ebbing. The rain is growing worse as well; growls of thunder and flashes of lightning announce the onset of the storm that's been brewing all day . . . a storm beyond Kestrel's abilities to disperse, though he did manage to delay its arrival. They've come here, to this town their maps name Dagsboro, in search of shelter.

The windows and doors facing them from the building's time-

battered exterior are gaping, irregular holes that spill shadows into the world. Even so, Kestrel's sharp eyes discern the large black letters affixed to the wall above a cavernous opening he guesses once served as the main entrance—ORD BA T M E MID E OOL—as well as the graffiti covering the rest of the rust redbrick facade: a palimpsest of faded murals, crude sketches of sexual acts, stylized names and dates, scrawled obscenities and slogans. Repeated over and over are the lemniscus and the norm holy symbol of superimposed Star, Cross, and Crescent, the Starcrossed Crescent, along with such exhortations as DEATH TO NORMS! and DEATH TO MUTES! All vivid reminders, thinks Kestrel, that Dagsboro isn't always as deserted as they chanced to find it today . . . or, rather, as deserted as it had appeared during his overflight and Polaris's simultaneous netspatial investigation, neither of which he trusts completely. There are plenty of places to hide in the ruined town, and he doesn't suppose that norms—or, for that matter, grizzlers—enjoy being rained on any more than he does.

“Well, that looks inviting,” says Fenix. The mander has raised his body temperature so that the rain is sizzling on his black skin like drops of water on a hot griddle. Steam wafts from the surface of his asbestic backpack.

Chalcedon shrugs his massive shoulders, causing a cascade of pooled rainwater to rush down the outside of his hooded cloak. “Beats another night in the open.”

“After you, Chalce,” invites Namora. She's taken off her drysuit and is wearing only shorts; to her, this weather is as perfect as it ever gets on land.

No one moves. The only sounds are the grumbling of thunder, the moaning of the wind, the steady hiss and sizzle of the rain.

At last Polaris stands, shifting the backpack beneath her cloak. “This is ridiculous. Are you planning to stay out here all night?”

“I don't like the idea of waltzing in the front door,” Chalcedon grumbles. “Isn't there a back entrance or something?”

Polaris sighs, plainly feeling that her competence is being questioned. “There's a back way in,” she grants. “But it's not necessary.

Back, front: with a wreck like this, it's all the same. Aside from a few feral cats and dogs, the ruins are empty. The whole Oddsdamn town is deserted, okay? If you guys weren't so scared of netspace, you'd let me invirt you, and you could see for yourselves."

"We're not scared," Chalcedon objects. "It's just that netspace is a norm thing."

"And what does that make me?" Polaris demands.

No one answers.

Finally Fenix ventures, "It can't hurt to be cautious, Pol."

Polaris rolls her eyes. "Thanks for the advice, False-Alarm."

"I told you to stop calling me that!"

"Look, let's put it to a vote," Kestrel suggests quickly, before things can get any worse. "Everybody who wants to go in the back way, raise your hand."

Four hands shoot up.

"Fine," snaps Polaris. "Let's go, then."

They circle the building, Polaris in the lead. She walks along brazenly, as if out for an evening stroll along one of the boulevards of the Many-sided City. Kestrel and the others hurry to keep up while availing themselves of what little cover is provided by a ragged ring of trees and brush. There's no sound, no movement, no sign of life whatsoever from within the dilapidated building—not that Kestrel had expected there to be. He thinks Polaris is probably right. But so is Fenix. This is the Waste. It pays to be paranoid.

The back of the building is so much like the front that for a second Kestrel thinks they've gone too far in the rain and encroaching darkness, circling back around to their starting point. He begins to feel that it's all too much trouble; they might easily find a better place to take shelter from the storm. But then he notes the absence of lettering above the gaping mouth of the doorway, and his confusion passes, leaving behind a vague sense of ticklish discomfort, like he's blundered through cobwebs in the gloaming. He waves his hand before his face as though to brush them away.

"Can we go in now, Kes," comes Polaris's voice, heavy with sarcasm, "or do you want to take another vote first?"

“Screw you, Pol.”

Laughing, she turns and walks toward the entrance. The others follow in sullen silence. Then, just before entering the building, Polaris stops short. Simultaneously, Kestrel feels the cool, intrusive thrust of her mind entering his mind, her thoughts penetrating his thoughts. The psionic invasion is swift and seductive . . . yet, in its naked exercise of power, brutal—impossible to resist, though not to resent, even though Kestrel knows very well that only in emergencies are boggles permitted to exercise their powers upon their fellow mutes without first obtaining consent.

Norms! Polaris’s voice rings out in his mind. *A trap!*

At the same instant, before he has time to so much as gasp in surprise or register the first glimmerings of fear, Kestrel feels the dizzying sensation of mental division, compression, and movement that accompanies every invirting. It’s like a portion of his mind, his self, has been split off, folded up infinitesimally small, then snatched away . . . all the while remaining tethered to him by a psychic umbilicus that stretches and stretches, never breaking.

Polaris, he knows, has warned the others as well; she’s pulling them all into netspace, where she’ll first unfold them into their waiting virts, then knit their invirted minds into a mute gestalt; such gestalts are able to act with preternatural coordination on the three interpenetrating planes of reality: the physical, the psionic, and the virtual. The whole process takes slightly more than three seconds as time is measured in the physical world, yet it seems much longer to Kestrel. It’s like becoming a passenger in his own body, a spectator in his own mind. He’s always found the experience disorienting and distasteful, even before the emergence of the visceral, irrational fear of netspace that’s gripped him since he passed through Pilgrim’s Gate and left the Many-sided City behind.

The formation of a mute gestalt is a diminishment that’s also an augmentation, for just as the gestalt functions as a single body, so, too, is it controlled by a single mind, one born of the fusion of individual invirted minds that make up its composite parts: an overmind held together by the will of the boggle who forged it. Yet it’s this ability of the boggles—submission to which one of Kestrel’s

flight instructors in Wafting had described as “an intolerable necessity”—that gives mutes their greatest advantage over norms. In large battles, hundreds of boggles knit thousands or tens of thousands of mute soldiers into integrated gestalt formations that attack with uncanny precision, blinding speed, and deadly efficiency. The armor and weaponry of the norms can’t keep up. But the norms possess an offsetting advantage: sheer numbers. Even a mute gestalt can’t prevail against an enemy three or four times its size. Which is why the mute breeding program is of such vital importance; without it, the armies of *Pluribus Unum* will triumph through a strategy of sheer attrition.

Kestrel’s physical senses continue to function normally in the first second of translation, taking in information and converting it into electrochemical impulses that speed to his brain. His brain processes that information, neurons firing to send their commands racing back down his nerves, and his body obeys: his wings snap open, and he rises from the ground. At the same time, he calls up a wind to whisk *Polaris* out of danger. All of this is on the level of gut instinct.

Then, in the next second, as if a secret door has swung open at the back of his skull, Kestrel feels an expansion of awareness, at once exhilarating and terrifying, as his *virt* awakens . . . or, rather, as he awakens within his *virt*: a winged being of pure, shining white energy armed with a sword of lightning that bucks and twists and sizzles in his grasp, impatient to strike. His consciousness of himself doubles; he possesses two bodies now: one real, the other virtual, but both indisputably *him*.

He wakes as well to the *virt*s of his comrades: the gigantic whirlwind of flame that is *Fenix*; the impenetrable, delph-shaped darkness of *Chalcedon*; *Namora*, who, like most merm, appears in net-space just as she does in the physical world; *Polaris*’s distinctive (if, in Kestrel’s opinion, predictably jejune) self-representation: a glowing gold brain that pulses as it hovers—headless, halolike—above a body of cartoonish femininity clad in a skintight, light blue costume with a lemniscus traced in a flickering pretzel of fire above the swell of impossibly ballooned breasts that do not so much as quiver when she moves.

Now—as they enter the third second since translation—the gestalt kicks in, and Kestrel’s sense of identity bleeds over into the others until there are no clear boundaries between them, just a blurry overlapping of egos. In that polymorphous union, their most private selves stand exposed: ancient guilts, furtive desires, secret fears, hurts that will never heal, the famished, infantile face of unrestrained egotism. They can look away from none of it: neither in the others nor in themselves. Yet there’s no shame, no judgment. Later, when the link is severed and they fall back into their separate selves, the memory of this moment, and what it revealed, will be left behind, and they’ll feel a diffuse and transient embarrassment, as though at an indiscretion committed in a dream already forgotten. Kestrel’s resentments and doubts and fears will resurface, and he’ll swear, as he’s sworn before, to hold some greater part of himself back in the next inverting by an exercise of will, so that it will be his hand, so to speak, and not Polaris’s, holding on to the leash that links his physical self to its virtual projection. In that way, it seems to him, he might learn to control his fear of netspace, perhaps overcome it. But always, when the time comes, he finds that no resistance is possible. Always, as now, he can only surrender to a will stronger (in this, at least) than his own.

Out of the fusion of separate identities, an overarching mind is born. Its constituent consciousnesses remain intact but subordinate. Kestrel’s ability to process information virtually, through the gestalt, far outstrips the speed at which his flesh-and-blood body can provide it, let alone react to it, and—as the encounter advances toward its fourth second—he begins to perceive the actions taking place in the physical world as if they’ve slowed to a crawl. He sees Polaris diving to one side of the doorway as the first gusts of the wind he summoned reach her; the boggle appears to be swimming through a medium thicker than air or water, as if each droplet of rain were a particle of condensed time. Mud is billowing like a thick plume of smoke from the ground where Chalcedon, his figure obscured, has begun to dig. Namora is shaping the falling rain into a hard, dense, shimmering shield; it surrounds her, ballooning outward like a prismatic bubble of blown glass in whose multifaceted surface a host of

tiny Namoras dance like bees about their queen. And, shining amid a burgeoning cloud of steam like a newborn sun wrapped in a nebula's fuzzy blanket, Fenix glows with blue-white incandescence as he focuses his power, his thermodynamic control so finely calibrated that Kestrel, hovering twenty feet away from and above the mander, feels only a moderate increase in the temperature of the air . . . an invisible staircase spiraling up into the wind-and-lightning-lashed heart of the storm. Already his skin and feathers are tingling with the electrical energies building in the clouds, denied a natural discharge by his power. The wind howls around him; his ears hum with a ceaseless crackling, and the stink of ozone curls harsh and intimate in his nostrils. Soon he'll harness the frustrated energies of the storm with his mind, hammer them into thunderbolts, and hurl them down upon his enemies.

Meanwhile, Kestrel's other body—that of his virt, the electronic vessel into which Polaris had diverted one branch of his streaming consciousness—is also in motion . . . but motion of a different sort. Everything in netspace takes place much, much more quickly, relative to the physical world. There, in the three-plus seconds since Polaris's warning, the pentad has just begun to react, and the norms haven't yet shown themselves. But here in netspace, a pitched battle is raging.

The power of the gestalt overmind has long since revealed the precise location of the norms whose presence Polaris detected, penetrating the stealth defenses of their psibertronic armor. There are five of them concealed within the building. Through the angelic eyes of his virt, Kestrel perceives the structure as a transparent three-dimensional schematic (just one of many visual modes available to him) within which the figures of the norms—or, rather, their virts—appear as hybrids of monster and machine. Their bodies are sheathed in red-and-gold armor that bristles with obscure antech: weapons and sensors and the Odds know what else, much of it roving over and about the armor as if possessing a will and purpose of its own, like swarms of scuttling and flying insects (in this, the virts resemble their real-world counterparts: norm knights are attended by clouds of tiny, deadly devices, as well as by semiautonomous

combots that provide round-the-clock coverage of their adventures in the Waste, broadcasting the sounds and images into netspace, where millions of norms watch breathlessly, cheering on their favorites). From their armored shoulders sprout the animate heads of inhuman creatures, some of which are real or once were real, while others never existed in the flesh, but only in myth. There's a roaring, golden-maned lion; a snarling trogodice with horns like saw-toothed steel blades; a yellow rabbitlike creature with long black-tipped ears, rosy red cheeks, and a smile of insufferable sweetness; a black penguin with a bristling headcrest and a sneering yellow beak; and a purple-eyed vampire with skin like sculpted ice and hair like moonlit drifts of snow. Some of these masks are rendered realistically, as though the images, however fantastic, were recorded by a combot somewhere in the physical world, while others have the surreal or hyperreal intensity of cartoons sprung to life.

Floating before the virts of the norms like translucent pennants waving in electronic breezes are their heraldic battle standards: three-dimensional iconic projections that not only serve as shields against netspatial attack, but display—sheltered behind transparent overlays of the Starcrossed Crescent—their sponsors' coats of arms: the animated signs, sigils, trademarks, mascots, slogans, and symbols of the great and minor houses of the Trumen Empire to which these knights are bound by blood and honor, and which financed their expeditions into the Waste in return for various promotional and exploitative rights. The tangled skein of relationships and rivalries between the Empire's noble houses—all of which trace their histories back to a handful of corporate and governmental entities that survived the Viral Wars—is also expressed in anthems that play continuously in the background, clashing sound tracks stitched together out of the vast repertoire of pre-War music maintained by the norms: tens of millions of recordings salvaged from different times and cultures—symphony orchestras, Western and Chinese operas, Broadway show tunes, TV theme songs and laugh tracks, punk and prog rock performances, string quartets, movie sound tracks from Hollywood and Bollywood, Japanese Noh plays, commercial jingles, rap and hip-hop tracks, electronica, Gregorian chants, Mongolian

throat singers, Appalachian bluegrass, early jazz from New Orleans and Chicago, tribal rituals captured by anthropologists in remote jungles, trance, spasm, the songs of birds, of whales—all of which the norms loot to make their patchwork music . . . a music pointedly derivative and, to the ears of mutes, ugly.

Once the process of translation is complete, and the mute gestalt has been generated—a little more than three seconds after Polaris stopped in surprise outside the building—the newborn overmind cuts the virtues of mutes and norms alike out of the schematic representation of the building’s interior and exterior and pastes them into an idealized combat arena packed with cheering crowds of mute spectators: a scenario based—in what Kestrel, who knows something of pre-War history, considers a nice touch of irony—on gladiatorial contests held in the Colosseum of ancient Rome . . . though whether the norms appreciate the irony or perceive it (or the arena) at all is another matter, one which Kestrel isn’t wasting any time wondering about. Instead, with the traditional cry of “Death to norms!” he attacks, as do the others. The overmind has already selected their virtual opponents on the basis of data gathered and analyzed via netspatial links to the College. These adversaries are not necessarily the virtues each of them can defeat most easily, but, rather, in a balancing of relative strengths and weaknesses, as well as strategic and tactical objectives, those it best serves the interests of the pentad as a whole for them to engage at this particular time; depending on the vicissitudes of combat, they’ll trade off more than once as the battle progresses on its intersecting planes of the virtual, the physical, and the psionic, exchanging partners in a quickstepping dance to the death choreographed with cold violence and logical rigor.

“Death to mutes!” comes the answering cry of Kestrel’s chosen opponent, the vampire, as Kestrel lashes out with his sword of lightning. The flickering edge of the blade strikes the Starcrossed Crescent overlay of the virtue’s heraldic shielding in a shrieking explosion of crimson-and-gold sparks that causes its anthem, blaring in the background, to stutter and fall silent. This elicits such roars of approval and encouragement from the audience of mutes—that is, of

virtus with the appearance of mutes, most if not all of which are hollow shells, puppets created and manipulated by the overmind (although there's always a chance that among them are inverted observers from the College of the Virtual Mind or even one or more Orbitals looking on in fulfillment of some inscrutable whim or purpose)—that it's as if Kestrel has delivered a mortal blow. The anthropomorphic mascots on the norm's shield react in a variety of ways: the toothy grin of a black mouse with bulbous ears transforms into the openmouthed oval of a soundless scream; a smirking paper clip waggles bristling black eyebrows derisively; a fat purple tyrannosaurus cowers blubbering behind a pair of golden arches; a boy with pale skin and spiky yellow hair turns, drops his trousers, and moons Kestrel's virt while blatting a tremendous fart through the bugle of his backside. These mascots are virtlings, autonomous programs designed to represent the interests, and advertise the influence, of the noble houses that are the knights' main sponsors. Each is in continuous private communication with the others and with the norm whose virt bears them upon its shield, offering up a ceaseless stream of slogans, commentary, analysis, and advice; apt quotations from pre-War plays, movies, poems, books, sermons, and songs; product placements for the viewing audience back home; even jokes . . . not that Kestrel's heard any of it for himself. But Polaris, like all boggles, is able to eavesdrop psionically on this insane infield chatter, and she's filled him in. Is it any wonder, he thinks, that so many boggles wind up more than half-crazy, infected by norm madness? The grotesque image of Mizar, his scarred head and torso strapped like a block of charred wood to the blemishless body of St. Christopher, returns to him on a shiver of memory.

As though reading his mind, the vampire parts its bloodless blue lips in a sardonic smile to reveal teeth as white as bleached bone and as wickedly barbed as thorns; behind them furls a tongue like the circinate tongue of a mothquito, as lushly red as the velveteen petals of a new-blown rose. "Was that a breeze I felt fluttering across my shield?" The voice is mocking in its cultured unconcern.

"Ha! Hear that, mutie thcum?" lisps the dinosaur virtling, peek-

ing out from between the chortling golden arches, which quiver as though made of jelly. "You tell 'im, both!"

"Yeah," chimes the yellow-haired kid as the mouse nods vigorously in agreement. "Give it to him, boss!"

The vampire ignores its virtlings. "I would know your name, airie."

Don't answer, whispers the overmind, unnecessarily; Kestrel knows better than to reveal his true name in netspace, where any piece of information, however innocuous it might appear, could provide the key to a subvirting or worse. Instead he replies, "Why don't you tell me yours first . . . unless you're chicken!"

"Who's the one with feathers around here?" demands the mouse.

"Thir Draculot ain't thcared of you!" the dinosaur adds, then blanches, turning white as a lily. "Ooph! Thorry, both!"

The virtling's ruse is as transparent as the heraldic shield upon which it appears. The dangers of sharing information in netspace go both ways; Kestrel would no more trust anything the norm or its virtlings reveal than he would consciously reveal any true thing about himself. He laughs scornfully. "Are you going to let your virtlings do your fighting as well as your talking?"

"Prepare to be plucked, airie," responds Sir Draculot. At that, the vampire's anthem resumes louder than ever. Raising a golden bow, it fires arrows of poisonous green fire that sink painlessly into the shining silver skin of Kestrel's virt . . . which, rippling like a pool of mercury, absorbs, then dissipates the venomous coding.

The two adversaries are well matched; they draw back, circling warily, looking for an opening as the virtlings continue to hurl taunts and insults, which Kestrel ignores. Fenix, Chalcedon, and Namora are holding their own against their opponents, but Polaris is being pressed hard by her foe, the penguin-headed virt. Wielding a shimmering, neon red light saber, Penguin Head is attacking like a drunken berserker, with wild, incautious ferocity, as if the norm behind it is holding nothing back, throwing everything into its onslaught, anthem thundering, each of its virtlings belting out a different fight song. Even in netspace (perhaps, thinks Kestrel, espe-

cially here), the dice of the Odds roll on, and the rest of them, mutes and norms alike, tumble after. Anxious to come to Polaris's aid, he redoubles his efforts.

Meanwhile, Kestrel—or, rather, that splinter of Kestrel's consciousness that remains outside the gestalt, watching as if from behind an impenetrable glass window—is struggling to master his fear of netspace. If he gives in to it, lets his phobia swell into the blind and unreasoning panic already tickling at his guts, he'll doom them all. The strength of the gestalt is also its weakness: emotions can be shared among the members of the pentad as swiftly as other information; his panic could infect the others like wildfire. Calmness, confidence, control: these are the qualities required of him now. But Kestrel can't forget that everything he's seeing and experiencing is nothing more (or less) than the virtual representation of clashing computational algorithms: a far-from-reassuring reflection. Netspace might be a universe of digitally encoded information expressed metaphorically, but that doesn't mean it's not as real as anything in the physical world. As real . . . and far more dangerous. Here, not only do sticks and stones break bones, but names really *can* kill.

Anything and everything, however innocuous (a gesture, a gaze, a word, a color), can be, and likely is, an attack, and every attack, whether overt or veiled, takes place on multiple levels. The fight songs of the virtlings, for instance, are threaded with malicious programming that seeks to subvert or disintegrate the gestalt and sever the boggle-forged links that maintain its members in netspace; they also carry coded instructions for the manufacture of savvees that, once infiltrated back along the psionic tether connecting virtual and physical bodies, will seek to turn the biology of the mutes against them. Of course, even as the gestalt overmind is defending Kestrel and the others against these attacks, subvirtings, and infiltrations, it's launching a dizzying and equally deadly array of its own.

And yet, terrifying and terrible as all this is, it's no more than business as usual in netspace. Kestrel should be used to it by now. And he *was* used to it. He's never been afraid of netspace before, not like this. Never in all the years of his training or during the difficult tests of his Proving has sheer unreasoning terror threatened to over-

whelm him. What's the matter with him? It has nothing to do with Sir Draculot; his dread is deeper and more diffuse, as if the entire medium of netspace has become saturated with a presence hostile to him . . . as if he's somehow angered the Orbitals, and the membrains are reaching for him from out of the abyssal zones of densely compacted information where their invirted consciousnesses dwell.

Kestrel realizes that it was a mistake to hide his affliction, denying the seriousness of it to himself and, ashamed, keeping it secret from the others, even Namora. He has to tell them. But not now. Not while the five of them are linked in gestalt, fighting for their lives. No, he's got to hold out until the larger battle is won and the norms defeated. Gestalt or no gestalt, in this he's on his own. If there was ever a time he needed to make his saving throw, this is it. The dice are already in motion; he can only pray that when they stop rolling, the Odds will turn out to be on his side.

BACK IN THE PHYSICAL WORLD, five seconds have passed since Polaris initiated the invirting. In that time, Kestrel has flown to a height of one hundred feet. The winds of the storm are howling around him, wet and fierce as flood-swollen rivers. Here, just as in netspace, he's an appendage of the gestalt, his fears—so far—successfully repressed. Floating in the focused eye of his power, his wings spread to their full extension, he draws the pent-up electricity of the storm to himself like a living battery, an angel crucified to the sky by bolts of lightning.

Below, Fenix's fires are burning back the edges of the night, advancing against the wind and rain to circle the building in a ring of rosy flames that spins faster and faster, sending sparks whirling high into the air and giddy shadows reeling across the ground like figures in a crazed ballet. As Kestrel watches, the ring begins to constrict, sucking oxygen from the building to fuel its own festive implosion. Dancing through—or no, thinks Kestrel, *with*—the flames is Fenix. Aglow with white-hot incandescence, he twirls and leaps in the raw pyromaniac ecstasy kindled in manders by the unleashing of their power. With manders there's always the temptation to

embrace the fire without restraint, to give up the timid satisfactions of self-denial and control for the primal joys of surrender and self-immolation. Manders seldom die of old age; sooner or later, most become their own funeral pyres, consumed in a coupling whose only issue is heat and ashes.

Namora, meanwhile, has merged billions of raindrops into a mountainous wave that shines like a sheet of burnished bronze behind the tightening noose of Fenix's fires. Concealed within (though visible to Kestrel's invirted eye), she floats lazily, a jewel adrift in a sea of honey. The same rivers of rain he's channeled around himself are plunging down out of the sky in answer to the merm's psionic summons, swelling the wave so that it spreads outward and upward in defiance of gravity, a tsunami gathering itself far from any sea like some lone island of water whose cliffs are cataracts plunging straight uphill, sheer as the glass sides of ancient skyscrapers. The whitecaps of that ascending wave rush toward Kestrel like an eruption of flowers.

Of Chalcedon there's no sign. The delph has tunneled out of sight, making for the building's foundations; despite the gestalt, Kestrel has only a vague idea of his present location; the speed and violence with which he propels himself through the earth disrupt the lines of communication between the cellcoms infesting the environment and the membrains that draw upon cellcom data to map the world in netspace, where boggles tap into it with their psionics just as norms do with psibertronic netaccessories.

Speaking of boggles, the wind that Kestrel sent to carry Polaris away from her exposed position is doing its job, lofting her above the reach of Fenix's greedy flames; in another moment, it will set her safely down behind the shield of Namora's wave. Then four elemental hammerblows will fall in swift succession, beginning with Chalcedon, who'll undermine the building's foundations from below. Fire will follow, then water, and Kestrel will administer the coup de grâce with a lightning barrage.

And, he thinks, none too soon. Back in netspace, Polaris is all but beaten, her defenses crumbling before the sustained fury of Penguin Head's onslaught, and neither Kestrel nor any of the others has

been able to finish off or disengage from their own stubbornly resisting opponents to come to her aid. If Polaris's connection to her virt is severed, the gestalt will fracture, disintegrating, and the battlefield of netspace will be lost. But if she can just hold on a while longer . . .

A crash of thunder louder than anything the storm has yet produced shatters the night. It takes Kestrel a second to realize that it didn't come from the sky at all, but from the ground. *Chalcedon!* he thinks, heart soaring.

But then, below him, he sees a glittering cloud of fragmented brick, glass, and twisted metal rise and balloon outward in all directions from where there's no longer a building, and he knows it's got nothing to do with Chalcedon. This is the work of the norms. He watches in a state of sick, half-disbelieving horror as Fenix's flames are snuffed out like candles on a birthday cake. The mander is slammed to the ground, and does not rise (in netspace, the fiery pillar of his virt trembles once, flares up brightly, and collapses into ash). Behind the fallen mander, the leading edge of Namora's wave vanishes, vaporized; the rest is flattened, pounded into a choppy swell whose integrity she somehow manages to preserve, dodging pieces of hot shrapnel that trace sizzling trajectories through the envelope of psionically hardened water. Then the shock wave reaches Kestrel, forcing him to focus all his power on dispersing the debris that threatens to knock him from the sky. Without his control, the wind that had been wafting Polaris to safety loses its cohesion; before he can react, she tumbles to the ground. It's a distance of no more than seven or eight feet, but she lands badly, striking her head.

The gestalt disintegrates, robbed of its unifying will. Kestrel's link to the others, along with his panicky awareness of the depth and breadth of netspace, is severed; the experience, while not painful, is disorienting, like waking with a start from one dream to find himself inside another. For a subjective instant, he's looking through the electronic eyes of his virt at a grinning Sir Draculot . . . whose crimson-and-gold armor has begun to crumble randomly, bits and pieces decaying into rusty static as though Kestrel's virt can no longer translate the algorithms of netspace into their correspon-

ding visual metaphors. Then, as if a rubber band has snapped, his invirted self is yanked out of netspace and thrown back into his physical body.

The storm is raging, its winds blowing more fiercely than ever above the crater that holds the smoking wreckage of the building. Kestrel had dispersed the initial wave front of debris from the explosion, but now a swarm of hailstone-sized cambots and other, smaller, weapons and devices is streaking toward him. Though dazed from the blast and the shock of being flung out of netspace (which means, he knows, that Polaris is unconscious or worse; but he can't afford to think about that now . . .), Kestrel focuses his power, taking hold of the concentrated electrical energies he'd gathered, and, with a precise flick of the mind, casts a net of lightning into the air. Night turns to day with the stark and terrible beauty of a nuclear flash as streaks of blue-white fire arc between the small metal bodies, melting and frying their circuitry, halting them in midflight. Then, in the swift return of a deeper darkness, the air raw with smells of ozone and scorched metal, Kestrel bends the winds to his will and scatters the inert devices like the empty husks of insects.

Only then does the coppery taste of blood alert him to the fact that he's injured. He spits, ears ringing. Blood is dripping from his nose and leaking from various cuts and abrasions on his body, but nothing seems to be seriously wrong with him. Below, his keen eyes see Namora bending over the motionless form of Polaris; Fenix is nearby, also unmoving. Fighting down the urge to fly to her side, Kestrel sets about searching for the norms. Lacking evidence to the contrary, he has to assume they're still alive, still dangerous. The air crackles as he readies more lightning, hoping to finish them off or at least flush them out before they can strike again.

Then he remembers Chalcedon. He doesn't know if the delph has been hurt in the blast or not, but he can't take the chance of having him pop out of the ground right into the middle of a lightning barrage. Chalce is tough . . . but not that tough. Kestrel holds his fire. Wrapping himself in a whirling shield of hurricane-force winds, he descends into the crater. Fires are still burning amid the wreckage despite the wind and lashing rain.

He finds the norms immediately. Five battered and bloody figures lie still as death in the heart of the pit, at the epicenter of the blast. The flickering light of nearby fires reveals their bodies in postures as twisted as the pipes and girders that have fallen around and, in some cases, through them, piercing their crimson-and-gold armor like tissue paper. Two of the bodies are missing limbs; a third is headless. Four wear open-visored helmets whose ornate, now-battered shapes Kestrel recognizes from netspace: penguin, lion, trogodice, and vampire. The torn flesh-and-blood faces show expressions of surprise and agony . . . save for one. Sir Draculot's face is streaked with grime and blood but otherwise unmarked, the features composed and peaceful; he doesn't look a day older than Kestrel. His body is propped against the low remains of a wall; his glazed eyes, as blue as Kestrel's, seem to contemplate with distant interest the jagged steel beam rising from the ruins of his chest.

Kestrel hovers some ten feet above, alert for any sign of life, unlikely though it appears. He's wary of approaching any closer; he's heard too many horror stories of victorious pentads decimated by the booby-trapped psibertronic armor of apparently defeated foes. He'd dreamed of facing norms in combat, yearned to spill their blood so badly he could taste it. Now he feels sickened, elated, terrified—all at once. His heart is pounding. Everything happened so fast; the whole fight couldn't have lasted more than ten seconds. It's hard to believe it's over, the battle won. He struggles to understand. The norms took them by surprise, launching a swift attack in netspace that came within a feather's edge of succeeding . . . almost certainly would have succeeded if not for the explosion that wreaked the awful carnage below. That explosion had disintegrated the gestalt and knocked Kestrel and the others out of netspace, and its effect in the physical world was greater still, blunting the pentad's imminent counterattack and incapacitating, if not seriously injuring, Polaris and Fenix . . . even, perhaps, Chalcedon, of whom there's still no sign. Yet the norms had borne the brunt of the blast; indeed, to all appearances it killed them.

He clenches his fists, feeling robbed of a rightful victory . . . or, worse, handed a victory he doesn't deserve but is helpless to give

back. The norms were far from beaten, yet they had unleashed this final, desperate attack, killing themselves in the process. Why? To gain that martyrdom, death in combat, which is the highest honor a follower of the Starcrossed Crescent can achieve? Are the norms really so fanatical, so careless of their own lives? Despite feeling an undiminished hatred and a revulsion that has, if anything, increased, Kestrel almost pities his ancient enemies.

Don't waste your pity on such as these.

Kestrel starts at the psionic intrusion. He pulls himself higher, searching for its source. "Pol?" he calls. "Is that you?" Despite the rain, he feels sweat oozing from his skin like oil, smells the stench of his own fear. All the dread he thought he'd left behind in netspace is boiling up inside him, an inner storm as fierce as the one raging around him, only utterly beyond his control.



Jack lies in bed, listening to the lazy drift of voices from the upstairs deck, where Uncle Jimmy and Ellen are sharing a joint. He can't make out a word of what they're saying, but the murmurous back-and-forth rhythms are rocking him to sleep like a lullaby.

At last the voices fade, and the warped boards of the outside staircase creak in confirmation of a creeping descent. Jack does not so much follow the two of them down with his senses, ears straining after each furtive footfall, as feel himself pulled along irresistibly in their wake . . .

Something lands beside him with a thump. He jerks upright, crying out, eyes snapping open only to squeeze shut again as a flash-light blazes out of the dark.

"Shh!" It's Jilly, of course. "Quick, let's follow 'em!"

"Okay, okay . . ." He rolls out of bed, groping on the floor for his cutoffs and drawing them on over his underwear. Jilly's wearing a large light blue Middlesex Beach T-shirt as a nightgown. They creep to the bedroom door and listen. Nothing. Jilly thumbs off the flash-light and pulls open the door. It seems to Jack, not yet fully awake,

that they're still playing Mutes & Norms, or some variation of it, as they slip across the threshold and into the deeper darkness of the house, which, like the vaulted spaces of a church, feels anything but empty, watched over by some invisible, brooding presence, a powerful virt that may or may not mean them harm. Jack trembles, brushed by a tentacle of memory: how, thrown down by the wave and tumbled head over heels across the ocean floor, he'd sensed the yawning of an abyss beneath him and a disturbance, a purposeful upwelling, as if something as ancient and large as leviathan had taken notice of him and bestirred itself. Is it reaching for him still? Or did he leave it behind with the other details of that discarded reality?

They pause, letting their eyes adjust to the illumination of moon and streetlights slanting through curtained windows to turn the interior of the house into a junkyard of shadows. To their right, through the screen door, the deck and chairs vacated by Uncle Jimmy and Ellen are like grainy images in a black-and-white photograph. Beyond the railing of the deck, the indistinct shapes of tree branches make motions of mysterious significance in breezes rich with the smell of the sea. The sound of leaves rustling together rises out of, then subsides back into, the underlying susurrus of surf raking over sand on the far side of the dunes.

"C'mon." Jilly turns from the screen door and crosses the landing to the spiral staircase that winds down to the first floor. There she halts, Jack close behind her. Though presumably the inner jangle of their early-warning system would provide sufficient notice of discovery for them to hide or get away (as in the classroom the night before), it only makes sense to be cautious. They can hear, as well as feel beneath their feet, the steady laboring of the water pump at the base of the house. A car heading south on Route 1 passes by like a long, drawn-out sigh. The rest is silence.

Jilly descends the conch-shell spiral of the stairs, footsteps pattering like raindrops on the iron steps. Jack follows. Beneath his palm, the rail curls ever inward, conveying the sense of descending into a progressively smaller space. He feels as if the pair of them are

shrinking with each tight revolution, folding into themselves somehow like origami puzzles.

"Now what?" he whispers when they reach the bottom.

"*Shhh*," Jilly says. "Listen."

Jack hears the ocean's tireless importuning of the shore, the rustling of branches stirred in fretful breezes, the muffled rhythm of the pump, regular as a heartbeat. The chirping of crickets and the plangent calls of other night insects come drifting through the open sliding door to his right, while a Morse code of pings and knocks issues from the floor, walls, and ceiling of the forever-settling house.

"I don't hear 'em," he says.

Jilly's hand clenches around his wrist. "Keep it down, willya?"

"Maybe they went up to the beach."

She shakes her head. The porch light on the Baxter place next door is shining through the kitchen window as it does each night; in its pasty wash, thin as skim milk, Jack sees certainty settle over his sister's features. "Not the beach," she says. "Someplace more private." She clicks on the flashlight, projecting the beam onto the pine boards of the floor.

Jack knows at once that she's right. Of course, they're under the house. Where else would they go for privacy around here?

Jilly's already tiptoeing across the floor. Jack follows, wondering if the creaking of the boards beneath their feet will give them away. But perhaps the insulation is absorbing any sound. Or, more likely, Uncle Jimmy and Ellen are too busy to notice.

Jilly stops before the narrow alcove holding the washer and dryer. She sinks to her knees in front of the latter, standing the flashlight facedown beside her onto the shrinking circle of its own illumination. Jack joins her, unsure just what she's up to, though he can feel the rasp of her excitement like a cat's tongue licking along his nerves.

"We're pretty much on top of the pump room," Jilly explains softly. "I bet that's where they went."

"So?"

"The air vent for the dryer goes down there. We might be able to hear them through it."

Jack's seen the vent a million times: a tube of silky white fiberglass spun around thin wire ribbing, it dangles from the insulation-packed underside of the floor like the sloughed-off skin of a humongous snake hanging from the rafters of a barn. Yet not once in all the times he's passed by or beneath it has the idea of using it to eavesdrop on anyone in or around the pump room occurred to him.

But so what? Big deal if Jilly's smarter than he is. He has a power she doesn't have. A power nobody else in the whole wide world has. If he can only figure out how it works.

And how to control it.

Jilly, meanwhile, swings open the door of the dryer. Both of them flinch as a lone white sock comes tumbling out as though desperate to escape from the laundry piled inside. The smells of fabric softener and lint waft over their faces, and Jack pinches his nostrils shut to stifle a sneeze, then another, eardrums ballooning at each explosion. Beside him, Jilly's doing the same. Their eyes meet, and all at once they're giggling, hands clenched over their mouths. At last, when they've calmed down, Jilly picks up the sock and flings it back. "Into the garbage chute, flyboy!"

The line from *Star Wars* sets them off again, elbowing and shushing each other until Jilly knocks the flashlight over with a noise that seems as loud as a thunderclap. Light spills across the floor.

"Quiet, Jilly," hisses Jack.

"You be quiet," she says right back at him.

Their voices echo in the drum of the dryer, causing Jack to wonder if this eavesdropping business works both ways. Are their amplified words being projected through the vent? Better not to talk at all. He glances at Jilly, who, hooded in shadow, nods. What they share isn't telepathy, he thinks, but it'll do until the real thing comes along.

They shimmy closer to the door, facing each other, Jilly's left ear and his right one oriented toward the opening like radar dishes. At first, Jack hears nothing. Or, rather, nothing new, just the same sounds that had been present from the start, though in some cases grown louder: the working of the pump, for instance, almost di-

rectly below. They draw closer, straining to pierce the weave of white noise, until their foreheads touch. Jack feels the feathery tickle of Jilly's breath, smells the unbrushed-away sugar-sweetness of Coca-Cola and Oreos. He sees the dark glitter of her eyes, the incline of her cheekbones like sand dunes in moonlight. It's a face he knows as well as or better than his own. She's his mirror . . . or he's hers; what's important is that they reflect each other. Every sound has its secret source in the two of them. It's not the pump he's hearing, but the twinned beating of their hearts. Not breezes but the hissing of blood in their veins. The pop and sizzle of neurons firing; the creaking of bones. The memory flashes into his mind of the last time they were this close, squatting up to their necks in the ocean while, hidden below the surface, busy fingers pinched and twisted. Dizzy, he shuts his eyes. He's falling into himself, or into her . . . he can't tell which—and what's the difference, anyway? He clutches Jilly by the arm, feels her hand clasp his arm in return. Outside on Route 1, the sounds of Frampton coming alive Doppler by in the direction of Ocean City.

Do you

You

Feel like I do . . .

Jack latches on to the comet's tail of fuzzy guitar and voice, lets it pull him along until there's nothing left of it to hear. When he opens his eyes, he's still looking into Jilly's eyes, only they seem closer. Closer . . . yet farther away. He's seen this gaze of hers before, at once piercing and distant: last night under the teacher's desk, in the illumination of another fallen flashlight, and before that, as she stood on the windswept beach and watched him catch the killer wave in a past that no longer exists . . . a past that, now, had never existed for anyone but him. He swallows, mouth gone dry, feeling as though the whole world has come grinding to a halt, its spinning stilled, the planet hanging suspended in the vault of space like the drum of the dryer in its casing or his heart in his chest. Is it happening again? he wonders. Is the stalled world going to pick up

smoothly where it left off, only changed, made anew in the interim like a merry-go-round whose painted horses have assumed new poses or been replaced altogether, its calliope playing a different tune, the mechanism refashioned by the obscure operation of his wish or will, with no other witness but himself? He's never felt so lonely, so powerless despite the power that is his to wield, though evidently not, or not yet, to command. He's got to tell Jilly. Even if she laughs or calls him crazy, he's got to share this with her. Or else he *will* go crazy.

But when he opens his mouth, she presses salty fingers to his lips before he can get a word out. Then, in the depths of the dryer, he hears voices.

Ellen's windy moan seems to express pain as well as desire. Uncle Jimmy says something impossible to make out, then laughs once, sharply, like the yap of a dog. Only when Jack licks his lips does he realize that Jilly's hand is gone. These are the same kinds of sounds he'd heard last night, except fainter, muted by distance and masked by the noise of the pump . . . which, he realizes, is the reason they chose this spot: not just for its solitude, the windowless room buried at the base of the house, safe from prying eyes (he and Jilly keep their stash of stolen cigarettes there—and often smoke them there, too—for that reason), but because the sounds of their love-making would be covered up. Or would have been, if not for Jilly's brainstorm.

"Just listen to 'em," she whispers. "Now I get why they call it the pump room!"

The blush that comes to Jack's cheeks is as reflexive as the nervous giggle that spills from his lips.

"They're fucking down there," Jilly goes on, pronouncing the word with exaggerated care, trying it on for size. Her voice is calm, controlled, but he can feel the underlying excitement. "He's putting his cock into her cunt."

Although Jack's seen these words in books and has heard them spoken by other kids, has even plugged them more or less at random into his own speech to make himself feel cooler in schoolyard confabulations and confrontations than, deep down, he knows him-

self to be, hearing them now, on Jilly's lips, is a revelation. Until this moment, they'd glowed in his mind with a dark aura of trespass and power, like words from some old magic spell that had lost their meanings yet retained their potency and were all the more dangerous for it. But now, as if by a still-greater act of magic, those archaic meanings have been returned. The words have become real, precise, physical, describing things and actions just like any other nouns and verbs. Yet their dark aura doesn't disperse; on the contrary, the charge of trespass and power clinging to the words is, if anything, enhanced. It's like Jilly's simultaneously describing events and orchestrating them. Jack feels a stirring in his stomach, a diffuse and anticipatory quickening throughout his body as though the dawn has decided to come early today, the sun trembling just below the midnight horizon, eager to spring its surprise.

"What's the matter, Jack? Can't say it?"

"Say what?" he croaks.

"Fuck," she challenges. "Go on, say it."

It's not enough for Jilly to be first, he thinks then, not for the first time: she needs him to be second. Her primacy means nothing if he doesn't follow her across the violated border. It's been that way from the start, when she led the way into the world, and he's been following ever since. Until now. Now he's first, though she doesn't suspect it and won't believe him when he tells her. But he'll find a way to make her believe. He has to.

"Cock," she says. "Cunt. He's fucking her cunt with his cock."

He can't help laughing; it's absurd, like some preschool pornography primer.

"What's so funny?"

"See Dick." Gasping out the words. "See Dick's dick. See Dick put his dick in Jane's cunt. Fuck, Dick, fuck. Fuck Jane's cunt."

"Asshole," she growls.

"Fuck Jane's asshole."

That gets her. They collapse against the dryer, once again stifling laughter behind their hands, then roll onto the floor and lie there helpless as turtles tipped onto their shells, shaking so hard that Jack's afraid he's going to piss his pants.

"Oh, man," Jilly gasps, sharing his need. "I gotta pee. Stay and keep watch; I'll be right back."

"Hey, I gotta go, too!"

But she's up already, the flashlight in her hands; she shines it into his eyes; he flings up a hand, blinded. Then the light is gone, and so is Jilly. Around the corner, the bathroom door clicks shut.

Jack's bladder is burning. He considers deserting his post for the bathroom in the master bedroom but decides against it. He can wait. He pulls himself back to the dryer. Uncle Jimmy and Ellen are going at it more energetically than ever. Jack finds it amusing but also disturbing to think that these sounds are issuing from human throats. They're as gross as they are engrossing.

Meanwhile, he feels the waves of warm and shivery release coursing through Jilly's body as she pees. But her relief makes his own need greater, more urgent. He tries to think of other things. But the sounds that chase themselves around the inside of the dryer keep his thoughts fixed in the same decaying orbit. Where the hell is she? What can be taking so long? He's at the end of his rope here!

Then Jack realizes that he's no longer hearing Uncle Jimmy and Ellen. The dryer has gone silent as a tomb. The possibility that they're already headed back upstairs is the last straw. He scrambles up the spiral staircase and into the bathroom. He shuts the door, flicks on the light, flings himself toward the toilet, yanking down his cutoffs and underwear. Shuddering in blissful release, he pisses into the bowl.

When at last he's done, he flushes the toilet, then steps cautiously out. The door to Ellen's room is shut, with no light spilling out from beneath it. Downstairs remains dark and silent.

But there's a bar of light under his own bedroom door. Inside, Jilly's sitting on the top bunk, hands behind her back. She's dangling her legs over the edge and swinging her heels back and forth. "What happened to you?" she demands.

"Me? What about you?" he asks in turn, keeping his voice lowered as he eases the door shut behind him.

"Don't worry," she says. "They went up to the beach; I saw 'em go."

"Guess we made our saving throw on that one."

"Yeah, but what if we hadn't? You were supposed to keep watch."

"I had to pee. What took you so long?"

"This." She draws her left hand out from behind her back with a flourish. "One for you." Followed by her right hand. "And one for me."

She opens her fists, revealing two needle-thin joints.

Jack's jaw drops. "Where'd you find those?"

"Where d'you think? Uncle Jimmy's room." That's the bedroom next to the downstairs bathroom: normally Ellen's room. During Uncle Jimmy's visits, Ellen's shifted upstairs, into Jilly's room, and Jilly bunks with Jack. "There was a bag lying right out on his bed with a whole bunch inside. I figured he wouldn't miss two. Even if he does, what's he gonna do? Tell Mom and Dad?"

Jack reaches for his joint, and Jilly passes it down to him. He marvels at its tightly rolled compactness, the slim white cylinder tapering at both ends to tips that look sharp enough to pierce the skin. It occurs to him that cigarettes, with their flat ends, are just for practice: this is the real thing. He brings it to his nose and sniffs. Cigarettes are a pile of raked leaves ready for burning in the fall. This is like being in the woods after a heavy summer rain. "Got any matches?" Just once, he wants to be the reckless one.

"Don't be stupid," she says. "We'll smoke 'em tomorrow. I've got it all figured out. We'll take the canoe out into the bay."

"I'm stupid? No way Uncle Jimmy's gonna let us take the canoe out by ourselves!"

Jilly winks. "Wanna bet?"



You will not drop out, young pilgrim; but then, you already knew that, did you not?" St. Christopher is saying, giving voice to the words of Mizar. "Tomorrow afternoon you will step through this gate with your pentad and make your way with them toward Hunger City. But not all who set out will arrive. You do not trust your pentad; in this, your instinct is sure. There will be betrayal;

faith will be broken. Tears will be shed, and blood. Yet despair not, for I see—”

“Hold on,” Kestrel interrupts. “What do you mean, *betrayal*?”

“That I cannot tell.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

Mizar and St. Christopher smile in eerie unison. As they do, Kestrel feels the boggle’s psionic touch for the first time. It comes swiftly and powerfully, like the expert thrust of an assassin’s blade. Before he can say a word or react in any way, the inverting is accomplished. Kestrel is held fast in Mizar’s mental grip, his body frozen where it stands, his mind invaded and dragged into netspace, that nightmare realm where all mutes but boggles hate and fear to go.

Kestrel’s never undergone an inverting like this. The power behind it is greater and more skillfully wielded than anything he’s ever known . . . which is all the more amazing considering that it’s taking place within the psionic dampening field that blankets the Many-sided City. Mizar, he realizes, struggling uselessly against the boggle’s iron control, is indeed more than he appears. Much more. There’s no dizzying and disconcerting translation into the virtuality of netspace, such as all of Kestrel’s past experience has taught him to expect. Instead, Mizar unfolds netspace into the physical world . . . or, rather, unfolds Kestrel’s awareness of the physical world like an origami rose until it encompasses what had been there all along, hidden in the folds and creases. Rather than inhabiting his familiar avenging angel, Kestrel has the uncomfortable conviction that *it* is inhabiting him, gazing out through his eyes as he might look out through a window.

Wherever he looks in the square, Kestrel sees flickering movements, blurs of color, shapes he can’t quite process . . . doesn’t *want* to process, as if even attempting to do so will reduce him to madness. Yet Mizar gives him no choice, directing his gaze from one horror to the next. Helpless, Kestrel realizes with a thrum of awe that he’s seeing the infrastructure of the medianet. Is this chaos of interpenetrating, clashing realities the way that boggles perceive the world?

The air is swarming with an infinite variety of translucent mon-

sters big and small, some clear as water, others delicately glazed with color. They fill the space between the ground and the sky like maggots in a corpse, extending to the upper limits of Kestrel's sight and, he suddenly knows, beyond, all the way to where the Orbitals tirelessly cogitate in their biotronic satellites. Some seem to swim in and against netspatial winds or currents, propelling themselves by fierce or languid lashings of tentacles and tails. Others, winged, fly with the heavy ponderousness of beetles or the dazzling agility of dragonflies. Still others drift and dance like particles of dust in Brownian motion. He tries to avoid them, but Mizar's got him locked in place. Yet he isn't struck; the netspatial entities pass right through him, some swiftly, others taking their time, perhaps tasting him on the way, though he doesn't feel so much as a wriggle or a twinge, only his own squirming sense of horror.

His hand comes up of its own accord, and Kestrel gasps at the revelation, through skin like glass, of muscle, tendon, and bone. Then, in the next instant, in a stark magnification of vision, he shudders to see tiny ameboid creatures at work in the factory of his body: repairing, building, drawing sustenance from his substance, pumping out and absorbing savvees that resemble sleek, efficient machines—viruses self-designed for purposes beyond his ability to comprehend or imagine. He's seen cellcoms before, but never within his own body, though of course he'd known they were there; the antech symbiots are everywhere, inextricably woven into the molecular and submolecular fabric of the world. But it's one thing to know, quite another to see the truth of it with his own eyes.

Kestrel squeezes them shut, his mind reeling with a kind of metaphysical vertigo and a sense of violation that's all too physical. Mizar's control is all that keeps him from collapsing to the paving stones of the square. But the boggle isn't through with him yet. Kestrel's eyes are forced open, and he finds himself gazing through a blur of tears at the conjoined figures of Mizar and St. Christopher. Like his hand a moment before, they are transparent to his gaze. Kestrel sees vitreous muscles and bones, organs, the flow of blood through veins and arteries. He sees the cellcoms infesting flesh and blood and bone and the savvees that pass between them like lan-

guage. And other things, too: forms that flash in and out of sight like shining scarabs scuttling between dark dimensions. These appear to be feeding, though on nothing corporeal . . . Data, perhaps. Information. They are especially numerous in and around Mizar's head, dancing about his skull like a radiant swarm of bees. Streams of them are passing back and forth between the boggle and the norm, linking the pair more intimately in netspace than they are in the physical world. Other streams lick outward from the boggle and pour through the pinprick pupil of the norm's antech eye to play over and through Kestrel's physical body—and that of his virt, nestled within. It comes to him that he's seeing the virtual manifestation of Mizar's psionics, the bonds of thought and will that keep him tied to the boggle, inverted against his will, as much a slave as St. Christopher.

As nausea rises in him, Kestrel's gaze is wrenched away, and he finds himself looking down at the paving stones as though for the reassurance of something solid beneath his feet. But the Earth, too, has turned to glass, revealing all the strange and unsettling creatures of netspace that he'd seen in the air and in his body. He sees dense colonies of cellcoms as well, the symbiots thriving in the soil like bacteria evolved over billions of years. He watches as great migrations of savvees ebb and flow, and it comes to him that he's seeing the workings of a single nervous system that connects the Earth and everything on and in it—mutes and norms, even the lesser membrains—to the Orbitals. Kestrel, for whom heights hold no terrors, knows terror now at the thought that the stones of the square might crack like a crust of ice and send him sinking into this haunted ocean of dirt and stone. Far below, at the limits of his enhanced vision, at a depth beyond which even delves couldn't dig, the interior of the planet turns opaque, a diamond of darkness hugging its ultimate secrets to itself. Yet he thinks he can make out movement there, shapes more monstrous in half-glimpsed outline than anything he's yet seen, like living shadows cast by the Orbitals . . . or perhaps a single shape, too great to take in all at once, a many-limbed leviathan coiled dragonlike and writhing about the jeweled pit of the world. Kestrel cries out in fear: not with his voice, which no longer obeys him, but in his mind.

At once, his vision and the world return to what they had been. Feelings of relief and reassurance grip his heart, but he fights against them, knowing they are false, not to be trusted, just as his external perceptions can no longer be trusted. The orderly world of distinct objects and solid shapes, so amenable to his senses and comforting to his reason, is, he knows now, an incomplete and misleading facade, if not an outright lie. He's seen the truth, hasn't he? The memory of it throbs within him, a wound beyond the reach of healing.

Then St. Christopher's voice trills, "And how can you be sure that what you've seen is the whole truth or even a portion of it? Perhaps I showed you a lie, and what you are seeing now is and always has been the simple truth of things. Or perhaps there is no truth, but only infinite varieties of falsehood."

"Why are you doing this?" Kestrel demands in turn, made furious as much by his own helplessness and fear as by the taunting words of the boggle transmitted by his slave.

"Because I can," says St. Christopher as Mizar grins, displaying the stump of his tongue.

"You have no right! The College of the Virtual Mind will—"

Do nothing, an amused voice deeper than St. Christopher's finishes in his mind. And suddenly Mizar and St. Christopher are gone. In their place stands a slim, dark-haired boggle with flashing black eyes. His face bears an elaborate jigsaw tracery of incision patterns.

Kestrel knows at once that he's seeing Mizar as he had been before his maiming: Mizar made whole again in netspace. Not a boggle, but the virt of a boggle. Only now does he realize that he's still invirted. "Y-you're one of them," he stammers. "An Invisible . . ."

Mizar snaps his fingers, and the square and everything in it aside from the two of them freeze as if stuck in time. Passersby stand paralyzed in midstride like wax figures in a tableau. Pigeons hang like ornaments in the air. *Bravo, Kestrel*. The boggle's mocking voice curls in Kestrel's cranium.

You know my name, he thinks stupidly, for there is nothing about him that an Invisible can't know if he wishes it. "Is that why you showed me what you did?" he asks aloud. "To prove who you are?"

Mizar, too, returns to audible speech . . . though of course it's not, not really: just another trick of the invirting. Yet to Kestrel's ears it's indistinguishable from the real thing. "I showed you because it pleased me to do so, just as it pleases me sometimes to allow St. Christopher to remember his former life of easeful privilege in the court of *Pluribus Unum*." He flicks one hand in a dismissive gesture. "You airies are so proud of your wings; you think yourselves above all other mutes because you may rise to greater heights than we of the—what is that delightful euphemism? Oh yes—the 'lower races.' But that is no more than an accident of mutation. The whim of the Odds, not the worth of airies, is responsible. And there are other measures of height, of greatness. I enjoy reminding airies of that from time to time."

The spiteful cruelty of Mizar's words stings Kestrel like a slap in the face. The boggle's injuries, he realizes, have left him crippled in spirit as well as in body, turning him bitter and vengeful.

"Young airie," says Mizar, "you understand little of hatred and even less of boggles. But I will teach you something of both, before we are through. More, perhaps, than you care to know."

"What do you want with me? I've committed no crime . . ."

Mizar laughs. "In my faculty we have a saying: 'The guilty are always the quickest to protest their innocence.' We know your thoughts. We know your dreams of glory and sacrifice. They are what drew me to you."

"Is it a crime to dream?"

"That depends on the dream . . . and the dreamer." Again Mizar snaps his fingers. This time, Kestrel finds himself soaring high above massed formations of thousands of norm knights and foot soldiers marching toward a pitched battle taking place more than a mile behind him. His body aches with the pain of a dozen wounds. In his mind, the strident psionic summons of a boggle sounds, commanding him to retreat; the integrated gestalt network has been subverted, broken, and the troops are pulling back as the norms press their advantage. But Kestrel ignores the order, flying deeper behind enemy lines. Far below, on a hill, he sees a group of norms mounted

and afoot amid colorful war pennants and the diamondlike glitter of psibertronic armor. The central figure, astride a white charger, is unmistakable. Without hesitation, Kestrel launches into a dive . . .

Only to find himself back in Pilgrim Square. Of course, he'd never left it; nor is he there now . . . at least not in the square as he perceives it, for this Pilgrim Square is merely a construct of net-space. And the other? The square in which his physical body stands as this invirting unfolds in less than the blink of an eye? Will he ever be able to take the reality of that world for granted again?

The black eyes of Mizar's virt glitter with amusement, and Kestrel reminds himself that the boggle is surely privy to his thoughts. "All hail the conquering hero," Mizar says with a mocking bow.

"A harmless fantasy," Kestrel mutters, embarrassed.

"Do you call it harmless to disobey a direct order from a superior officer?"

Kestrel is too surprised to reply.

"Insubordination is a serious crime."

"But . . . it wasn't real!"

"The feeling behind it was."

"So I'm to be punished for a feeling?"

"To boggles, feelings and thoughts are as real as actions, or can be." Mizar smiles, his teeth as white and perfect as ever. "You see, I am teaching you already! And here is another lesson: I am not your enemy."

"You have a strange way of showing it. First you pretend to be a fortune-teller, and you lie to me about my future. Then you invirt me against my will. Now you threaten me because of a daydream. Are these the actions of a friend?"

"My guises and voices are many, but I am a fortune-teller in truth . . . though no ordinary one. Everything I told you will come to pass in one future or another. The betrayal, the blood, the tears. All of it. The question is: which future will prevail?"

Kestrel no longer feels angry or afraid. More of Mizar's psionic manipulation, no doubt. He can't even be sure that his thoughts are his own. Yet he presses on. "The future is for the Odds to decide; it's

not up to me—or you. ‘Who can diminish the great and powerful Odds? Let them try; it is they who are diminished.’”

Mizar’s laughter barks again. “You would quote the *Book of the Odds* to me? There’s a bit of the Holy Roller in you, young Kestrel! But let me do the same and take my reply from Suture Six, *Tumbling After*: ‘Action brings good fortune. To choose is to reveal.’ That is basic probability theology.” As Mizar quotes the suture, the appropriate incision pattern—the lemniscus, sign of the Odds—appears out of the welter of scars on his face, shining with a silvery glow like a spiderweb in moonlight.

“You were a Holy Roller,” Kestrel says. “Your face proclaims it.”

“Why should I disguise it? I belonged to the Stochastic order in my youth.”

Stochastics, the smallest and most severe sect of Holy Rollers, submit themselves entirely to the whim of the Odds, letting the dice determine their every action, no matter how significant or trivial. Living lives of pure devotion and chance, they grow wise in the obscure mysteries of probability theology. “But you left the order,” Kestrel says. “You became a soldier. Did you lose your faith in the dice?”

“On the contrary, I followed the dice. As I do now.”

“Then you must not have seen your future very clearly.”

“I saw the possibilities. As long as the dice of the Odds are in motion, that is all any of us can see. Yet some of those possibilities, those potential futures, are more likely than others. The choices we make in the meantime help determine which future ultimately prevails.”

“You mean you *chose* this for yourself?”

A trace of anger rings in Mizar’s voice. “Would anyone *choose* to live as I do, Kestrel? A cripple dependent upon the body and senses of a norm, able to be whole only in netspace? No, I didn’t choose this future. But neither did I flinch from it when it came time to make my saving throw. Will you be able to say as much?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just as some futures are more likely than others, so, too, do the choices and actions of some people play a greater role in determining which possible future comes to pass. You are such a person. You have

the power to influence not just your own future, but the future of the Commonwealth itself. The Holy Rollers saw this in the dice rolled at your birth, and the College has confirmed their calculations."

"You've got the wrong airie." Kestrel feels weak with relief; this is all a mistake; the nightmare will soon be over. "I'm nobody special. I'm breederborn, for Odds' sake!"

"Perhaps it's that which makes you special. What matters, or all that should matter to a patriot, is that the Commonwealth has need of you."

"The College, you mean."

"They are the same."

"By the Odds," Kestrel says as understanding dawns. "You're recruiting me! You want me to join the Faculty Invisible."

"You presume too much," Mizar answers coldly. "Only boggles may become Invisibles. But all mutes can be of service if they choose."

"And if I don't choose? You'll force me, I suppose."

"No," says Mizar. "You're free to refuse."

"And free to be punished for it."

"Not by us."

"The Holy Rollers then."

"You misunderstand. We leave punishment to the Odds."

Kestrel's not buying it. "First you say the Commonwealth needs me. Now you say it doesn't matter if I decide to help or not. Both can't be true."

"Yet they are; such are the mysteries of probability theology. Regardless of your choice, you will continue to exert an influence over the future. The dice have revealed as much, and they never lie."

"Then why bother to tell me any of this?"

"Because the dice demand it. And because I believe there is more honor in rolling the dice than in waiting for them to fall from the hand of the Odds, even if the result is the same. But don't flatter yourself, Kestrel. Don't imagine for a second that you're the only mute whose choices have the power to change the world. How like an airie! The College employs agents of every race in its efforts to bring about the best of all possible futures. The question of whether

our kind will win this war or lose it—and, in losing, fade from history as if we never existed—is too complex and important for one mute to decide.”

“What do you want me to do?”

Mizar wags a finger. “Not so fast. With all due respect to the philosophy of the lovely Namora—yes, I know everything that happened back at the Pigeon’s Roost—this is a test of faith, not an exercise in self-interest. You must give me your answer first. And I warn you: once the choice is made, there can be no going back. Accept, and you may live to regret it. Refuse, and it will be as though we never met. The memory will be expunged from your mind. Yet should you decide to help us, you will not find us ungrateful. Cooperation has its rewards, as well as its dangers.”

At that, Kestrel’s anger comes surging back. “If I decide to help, it won’t be because of any Oddsdamn reward!”

“Of course not,” Mizar smoothly demurs.

“Helping the Commonwealth will be reward enough!”

“I never meant to suggest otherwise. Then . . . you accept?”

“I’ve dreamed since boyhood of making a difference, Mizar. I may not trust you, or the College, but I am a patriot. I have faith in the Odds. You don’t have to trick me into doing my duty. Of course I accept . . . as you knew I would.”

Mizar flashes his perfect smile. “Few things are certain in this world, Kestrel. But I’m glad, very glad, that you’ve decided to join us.” He extends his hand, and Kestrel clasps it to seal the bargain.

At the touch of their hands, the virtual representation of Pilgrim Square dissolves, and Kestrel finds himself shaking hands with St. Christopher. He flinches in surprise. But is he really back in the physical world? He glances at Mizar; the boggle is as before: a dismembered torso strapped to the muscular upper body of the norm. He seems to be staring at Kestrel despite the strip of black rag covering his eyes.

“Is this real?” Kestrel blurts.

“Does it seem like an invirting?” asks St. Christopher in turn, his antech eye flashing like ice in the sun.

People are moving normally about the square. But what does that

prove? Kestrel has no sense of being connected to his virt, yet neither does he feel that the link has been severed. "I . . . I can't tell anymore."

Then you have learned another valuable lesson. Mizar's voice chimes in his mind. Now listen carefully. In the Becoming, the first of our kind sprang fully formed from the cocoons of savvee-infected norms. Ever since, we have lived in hope and expectation of the Second Becoming, when a new savvee strain will raise us as far above our present selves as those selves are above the norms. The Holy Rollers have foreseen the Second Becoming in the rolling of their dice . . . but not when it is to take place. Understandably, the Faculty Invisible has not been content to wait for it to arrive. We cannot afford to wait—the norms do not permit us the luxury. And so, for centuries now, the Holy Rollers have labored day and night in their inseminaries to create the prophesied savvee . . . so far, I regret to say, without success. But that has not been their only task, as you know. They have shaped other savvees into potent weapons against our enemies. And defended us against savvees bred by the norms. But all this time, they have been working toward a second, secret goal—to re-create the original savvee responsible for the Becoming.

Think of it, Kestrel! If we could infect the norms with that savvee, the majority of them would die, just as occurred in the Becoming, and the survivors would be mutated into our own kind. We could win the war, eradicate our enemies, and solve our population problem, all at a stroke! But the savvee that caused the Becoming did not survive it; like our ancestors, it, too, was changed, although into something lesser. It lost its efficacy, became benign to mutes and norms alike. Both groups carry it now, or the virus that is its harmless descendant, in their blood. Nor, for all their efforts, have the Holy Rollers been able to reverse-engineer a potent strain. Over the centuries, they have experimented on countless norm prisoners. In all that time, not a single norm has been successfully transformed into a mute.

Until now.

Kestrel's heart thumps against his chest. "Then the war is won!"

You celebrate too soon. Mizar shakes his scrofulous head while St. Christopher, putting a finger to his lips, motions Kestrel to silence. *It*

is not the Rollers who have succeeded. The norms have engineered a savvee that triggers the mutations of the Becoming.

But . . . isn't that good news? Kestrel thinks in turn. I mean, the more of us there are, the better, right?

I'm afraid it's not that simple. The norms who survived the original Becoming were transformed in body and mind. They woke with an instinctive hatred of all they had been, and with a consciousness of belonging to a new and higher order of being. It was that which knit the five races together and enabled us to survive those difficult early years, when our numbers were trivial, our powers unmastered. But while the norms who survive exposure to the new savvee—as with the original, a minority of those infected—gain the appearance and psionic powers of mutes, in their minds, in their hearts, they remain loyal to Pluribus Unum.

Kestrel shudders, grasping the danger at once. *Spies. Assassins.*

Yes, Mizar affirms. St. Christopher takes hold of Kestrel's arm and begins to walk with him across Pilgrim Square, which, Kestrel notices, is deserted now. Even the pigeons are gone.

As you know, Mizar continues meanwhile, for centuries now, my faculty has dispatched spies of our own among the norms; it was through one such spy that we learned of their breakthrough, thanks to which, as you realized, the norms can infiltrate the Commonwealth: something they've never been able to do before. According to our best intelligence, there are already spies among us.

But can't you—the College—ferret them out psionically? Kestrel asks. Even if they look like us and have our powers, surely you boggles can see the truth of what's in their minds.

The new savvee differs from the original in one other crucial respect. It bestows the powers of a boggle on every norm it mutates. Regardless of whether the survivors end up as airies, merms, manders, or delves, they possess in addition all the psionic abilities of my race. And not only that. They are stronger than we are.

Kestrel stops short. *Then . . . the war is lost!*

Now you are too quick to despair. St. Christopher pulls Kestrel forward again, across the deserted square. Have you forgotten that nothing is certain as long as the dice are in motion? The Odds may be against us, but there is always the chance of a saving throw!

But . . . we are the children of the Odds. How can the Odds turn against us?

“The Odds does not play favorites,” Mizar quotes. “Neither is it impartial.” You know the words of the suture as well as I do, Kestrel. Yet like so many mutes, you have never truly understood them.

Perhaps I’m beginning to, thinks Kestrel.

I hope so, for all our sakes. According to our agents, Pluribus Unum has sent a group of spies among us to test their abilities and our defenses as a precursor to a larger invasion. These spies, their psionic powers honed in netspatial simulations, are undetectable by the strongest and most experienced boggles. Only the full might of the College, with all its boggles linked in gestalt, is sufficient to unmask them. But that process destroys as it exposes. To break the resistance of such powerful minds is to shatter them beyond salvaging. Indeed, they destroy themselves before we can break them: the norms are fond of suicidal gestures—their three-faced god keeps a special place in heaven for martyrs, or so they believe.

Kestrel doesn’t see the problem. Let them kill themselves then, and save us the trouble.

Such deaths are useless to us. We need to do more than just destroy these interlopers. We need to make their knowledge our own. We need to subvert them if possible and send them back among their own kind to gather information for us. More than anything, we need to get a sample of that savvee to the Holy Rollers, so that they can study it and learn to eliminate whatever it is that keeps these new mutes loyal to the norms.

But you must have samples already—from the spies you’ve caught, Kestrel thinks.

Spies? We’ve caught exactly one. A difficult operation that nearly failed despite every precaution. Information about a certain mander reached us from one of our most highly placed agents. We knew we had to act swiftly; we couldn’t give the mander a chance to get word back to her masters. We arranged an accident, a seemingly random but unremarkable bit of bad luck here on the streets of the Many-sided City; at the same time, the integrated gestalt network of the College struck with all its psionic might. What little we know of the psionic abilities of these norms in mutes’ clothing we learned then, in the instant before her

invirted mind, unable to escape or subvert our control, destroyed itself. Yet, incredibly, what she failed to do in life, she almost accomplished in death. As her mind shattered into a million fragments, the shards, like some protean swarm of virtlings, took on a variety of shapes and led us on a dizzying chase through netspace. A handful nearly escaped us and alerted her superiors. If the norms suspect we're on to them, they could hit us with a wave of suicide attacks. Even accelerate their invasion plans. Frankly, we don't dare take the chance. In any case, the Holy Rollers were able to thoroughly examine the dead mander. What they found was that, in the course of mutating its hosts, the savvee undergoes mutation itself, changing into a form identical to the harmless descendant of the original savvee carried by all norms and mutes. So if we want a sample, we have to find another way to get it.

But another worry has occurred to Kestrel. *If these spies are so Oddsdamn powerful, Mizar, how can you be sure they're not listening to us now?*

They are powerful, true, answers the boggle. Never forget that. But don't think of them as omnipotent, either. They're not gods, Kestrel. Individually, they may be stronger than we are, but they are still relatively few. Even in gestalt, they can't match the full might of the College. But what is true today may not be true tomorrow. We must act now, before our advantage in numbers is gone.

What can I do?

You can help us determine which of the members of your pentad is a spy.

No . . . Again Kestrel stops short. It's not possible!

Mizar smiles. Didn't I say that you would meet with betrayal on your pilgrimage?

Yes, but—

This much we know: prior to your Proving, a number of aspirants were kidnapped, probably killed, on their way to Mutatis Mutandis, their places taken by norm spies. We also know that you are not one of them. How? Because the blood of the breederborn is unique: only those born of the union of mute and norm possess its telltale genetic markers. When you gave me your bloodied handkerchief, I verified the presence of those markers with the help of St. Christopher's antech eye.

"Wait," Kestrel says aloud, resisting as St. Christopher tugs at his arm. His mind is reeling, but he's beginning to put things together at last. *What you said about arranging an accident . . . This morning, when Polaris knocked me down and gave me a bloody nose—that was arranged, too, wasn't it? She's an Invisible!*

An Invisible? Mizar looks offended. *Hardly. But all boggles serve the College.*

Then the spy must be Chalcedon, Namora, or Fenix.

Polaris remains as much a suspect as the others, Mizar responds. She performed the task we required of her, but any boggle would do as much without question or hesitation. It would have been suspicious had she refused. We confided nothing of our purpose to her . . . nor, indeed, anything at all of what I've told you. And don't make the mistake of assuming there is only a single spy in your pentad, Kestrel. It's true, the information coming from our agents suggests that such is the case. But agents have been fed false or misleading information before.

So there could be more than one, he thinks.

All things are possible by the whim of the Odds.

Kestrel considers for a moment. *But why my pentad? What makes us so special?*

There you go again! I never said your pentad was special. We believe the norms have infiltrated all the newly established pentads.

But the pentads are chosen by the Holy Rollers! Kestrel objects. *Are you saying . . .*

That there are spies among the Rollers, too? We haven't ruled it out. But all pentads have the same composition: one member from each of the five races. The norms simply had to supply a sufficiently broad racial sampling of aspirants for the Proving, using agents likely to pass our testing process; after that, simple probability dictates that the dice will distribute the spies randomly throughout the pentads. Some pentads may have one; some more than one; some may be free of spies altogether. Given these facts, surely you can see that the most prudent course is to assume every pentad has been infiltrated.

Yes, of course, Kestrel agrees; meanwhile, he's once again following St. Christopher across the square. *But I don't understand why*

you've let this go on for so long. The pilgrimages begin tomorrow morning; when are you going to move against the spies?

We're not. We don't want to alert the norms that we're on to them. Not yet. Besides, it would only sow panic throughout the Many-sided City. The spies would kill themselves before we learned anything of value. Better to let things unfold normally and keep careful watch from a distance, waiting for the spy or spies to unmask themselves. Better that any bloodshed take place in the Waste than here in Mutatis Mutandis. Each pentad has at least one breederborn, one mute we can trust; we made sure of that, at least. The breederborn are to be our eyes and ears. And, when necessary, our agents. Ah, here we are!

They are standing before a gate that Kestrel's never seen before. That in itself isn't unusual; the Many-sided City is crowded with gates; not even lifelong residents know them all. But this particular gate is situated at the opposite end of Pilgrim Square, across from Pilgrim's Gate, in a spot where Kestrel knows very well there is no gate . . . at least, not in the physical world. But then, he reminds himself, this isn't the physical world, however lifelike everything seems. He's still invirted, still under Mizar's influence.

The gate has the appearance of the head of a merm. It towers over Kestrel, awash in lazy flows and swirls of color, the chin resting upon the ground, thin lips pressed together at the level of his knees. The forehead looms perhaps twenty feet above, curvaceous as the swell of the waxing moon. Kestrel shudders, drawing back from what, thanks to the chromatic display, seems no statue but a living merm, a giant immured in the stones of the square, the rest of its body trapped below the surface. The huge eyes are black as pits of tar but give no impression of blindness; on the contrary, he feels somehow that nothing escapes their sticky gaze; certainly not him. For as St. Christopher, still gripping him by the arm, leads him forward, the immense forehead furrows, the cavular nostrils flare, as if scenting him, and the play of colors across the face—which could be either male or female—grows as dark and violent as a storm-racked sky.

"Every gate in the city has its guardian virt," says Mizar through St. Christopher. "Don't be afraid."

Kestrel is not reassured; nevertheless, screwing up his courage, he asks, "What gate is this?"

"One you will not find marked on any city map nor pass by or through in wandering the streets. A private gate for the use of my faculty."

"Where does it lead?"

"You are about to find out." With that, the scowling face opens its mouth as though to swallow them whole. Again Kestrel draws back; again St. Christopher pulls him forward. *Don't be afraid*, Mizar repeats psionically. *I'm coming with you*.

This, too, Kestrel finds less than reassuring. "Wait, Mizar . . ."

Once you pass through this gate, you will forget everything, Mizar continues. *When you pass through it a second time, you will remember*.

"I don't understand . . ."

You will go on with your pilgrimage as though none of this ever happened. But all the while, you will be invirted. An invirting so deep, so subtle, no spy will be able to detect it. I will be there with you, riding you like I ride St. Christopher, only from the inside. I will hear what you hear, see what you see, feel what you feel. But neither you nor any of your comrades will suspect my presence; not even when Polaris invirts you and forms a gestalt will my invirting be exposed.

In the gloomy depths of the virt's open mouth, Kestrel sees livid glimmers of fire and refulgent flashes of what looks like lightning. He smells melted plastic and the raw, acrid fumes of scorched circuitry. The fatty reek of burned flesh. Terrified, he shuts his eyes as St. Christopher shoves him roughly forward.

When he opens them again, he's hanging high in the stormy air. How much time has passed? A second? Less? Below him, in the smoldering wreckage, Kestrel sees the virts of the dead norms superimposed over their physical remains, encasing them like ghostly technicolored sarcophagi. He sees past the battered shells of the norms' psibertronic armor and into the bodies beneath, or what's left of them, where cellcoms are swarming within the flesh, devouring their hosts from the inside out, unmaking them molecule by molecule. Soon there will be nothing left, and the cellcoms will turn against each other in a cannibalistic orgy whose survivors will dis-

perse into the air, the ground, going on to serve the medianet, and the Orbitals, in some other fashion. The physical forms of mutes undergo the same swift molecular deconstruction after death, consumed by the cellcoms that sustain them in life, only dead mutes—unlike the zombified virts of dead norms—do not awaken in a virtual afterlife of blissful paradise or tormenting hell. Instead, the living memory of each unique mute existence is preserved in perfect DNA sequencings and deep neuronal mappings obtained by the cellcoms, whose voracious devouring is simultaneously a profound remembering, and these data become part of the integrated gestalt network available to the faculties of the College of the Virtual Mind, as well as to the Holy Rollers hard at work in their inseminaries.

But all Kestrel can think about at the moment is his encounter with Mizar in Pilgrim Square and the boggle's convoluted tale of spies, plots, and counterplots . . . the most unsettling aspect of which is the revelation that he's been invirted from that moment, months ago, until this one. Which explains the creeping horror of netspace that had come increasingly to afflict him . . . What's more, he's *still* invirted, as is demonstrated all too clearly by his penetrating view of the corpses below.

Mizar! he cries out angrily in his mind. Answer me, damn you!

Calm yourself, Kestrel, comes the boggle's psionic reply. I'm here.

Is this real? he demands. Or just another invirting?

You fought the norms; you see their corpses below you.

That proves nothing. For all I know, I'm still in Pilgrim Square.

You are too suspicious. True, you've been invirted since our meeting. But only so that we could monitor the progress of your pentad through the Waste and keep watch for evidence of spies.

And you call airies an arrogant race? You boggles are the arrogant ones! You think you have the right to invirt the rest of us simply because you can . . .

You agreed to help us.

But not to be invirted for months on end! Not to have my memory erased, my will taken from me as if I were a norm slave and—

Silence, ungrateful airie! Mizar's voice thunders in Kestrel's head with a fury that throws a blanket of terror over the fires of his in-

dignation. *Do not presume to question the Faculty Invisible! What we do, we do for the Commonwealth. Our reasons are sufficient and need not be shared with such as you. Your memory has been restored. As for your will . . . You have the temerity to compare yourself to a slave like St. Christopher?*

Out of nowhere, Kestrel feels a flood of deep, overwhelming gratitude. He knows it's false, that his emotions are being manipulated by the boggle, but the knowledge is irrelevant to what he's feeling. Then, as quickly as the emotion had possessed him, it disappears, leaving him empty, drained of all feeling.

You see how it could be? says Mizar, his voice calm again, regretful, as if the display of naked power—or the need for it—had saddened him. *Do you think we could not be tyrants if we wished? But that is not the boggle way. The faculties of the College, visible and invisible, serve the Commonwealth and its citizens. We do not seek to rule. Put aside your prejudices, Kestrel. Put aside your anger. These are difficult times. We must all make sacrifices. You've seen what I have given in the struggle. I ask no more—and hopefully considerably less—of you.*

Is the remorse he feels now genuine? There's no way to tell. *I-I'll try.*

Brave lad! With such as you in our ranks, who can doubt that the Odds will grant us victory? But there is no time to lose. Your encounter with these norms may have seemed accidental, but I assure you, it was not. This was a rendezvous. You were led here.

Then . . . you've unmasked the spy? Who—? But then it comes to him. *It's Polaris, isn't it? It's got to be. She told us the building was clear.*

Don't let your personal feelings lead you astray. The psibertronic armor of the norms is quite capable of concealing a party of this size from a boggle of Polaris's relatively low level of experience.

Chalcedon, then. He was the one who suggested that we circle around the building and go in by the back . . .

Yes, but it was you who located the building and suggested taking shelter there in the first place. Will you accuse yourself?

Except it wasn't me, Mizar. You've been pulling my strings the whole time. Maybe the norms could hide from Polaris, but not from an Invisible with the full power of the College behind him. Not from you.

Mizar's laughter flares. Still don't trust me, Kestrel? Well, perhaps you shouldn't. Perhaps it's safest to trust no one. But no, I didn't detect these norms. I didn't try. To do so would have exposed my presence to the spy. I may have been your rider, but I never took the reins.

Then who is it? Kestrel's blood runs cold. Not Namora!

And if it is? What then? Could you act?

I—I don't know . . . Yet it's not the possibility of Namora's being the spy, or of his having to capture or kill her with the help of Mizar and the College, that's uppermost in Kestrel's mind. It's the realization that Mizar was there with the two of them in their most intimate moments like some obscene parasite of the heart: seeing what he saw, hearing what he heard, feeling . . . The sense of violation is unbearable.

A boggle in my condition doesn't often have the chance to enjoy the incomparable charms of a merm, comes Mizar's voice. Would you begrudge me that?

Yes, I do begrudge it! You had no right!

You never knew. Nothing was changed; no one was harmed. But didn't it occur to you to wonder why a merm like Namora would chose an airie like you to be the exclusive recipient of her favors? And after only a single time together?

At that, all the anger drains out of Kestrel. In its place, dread comes slithering in, heavy and dense and cold, a serpent sluggish with sleep, but waking, flexing its coils, preparing a venomous bite. What are you saying?

Didn't I tell you in Pilgrim Square that you would be rewarded for your help?

Kestrel groans as the fangs sink deep. He'd forgotten how spiteful and cruel the boggle could be. You're lying . . .

Poor Kestrel! So innocent; so naive.

Not naive enough to believe that you'd risk exposing yourself by using your powers on Namora. For all you know, she could be the spy.

Perhaps not . . . but you'll never know for sure, will you? From now on, whenever you look at her, there will always be doubt in your mind, poison in your heart.

Why do you hate me, Mizar?

I don't hate you. On the contrary, I have your welfare at heart.

You have a strange way of showing it.

There are times when one must be cruel to be kind. Someday you'll understand that.

I hope not. It would mean that I had become like you.

Better to become like me than to become like those corpses down there.

I'm not afraid of dying.

Aren't you? Then it won't bother you to learn that you and your pentad are infected with an unknown savvee—very possibly, considering its source, a deadly one.

Terror grips Kestrel's heart afresh. Infected? How . . . ?

The spy. It's likely that he or she—or they, for we're not still not sure how many we're dealing with—passed the virus on through sexual contact. Since then, it's lain dormant inside each of you, waiting for a signal. That signal came just now, during your battle with the norms. We detected it and decoded it.

That's why the norms blew themselves up! thinks Kestrel. They realized you had intercepted their signal.

The explosion was the signal. Coded within it was a command activating the savvee.

Then . . . they weren't trying to kill us.

Obviously not. They could have killed every last one of you if that's what they'd wanted, and without sacrificing themselves. No, the explosion was a diversion to conceal the real attack.

It sounds like you admire them . . .

I admire their cunning, their ruthlessness, their fanatical devotion to an ideal. Those are qualities we must possess in greater abundance than our enemies if we are to win this war.

Just now, Kestrel's more worried about surviving the war than winning it. What's going to happen to us, Mizar? How does this savvee work? What does it do? I don't feel sick . . .

We don't know its purpose or what its mortality rate may be. Until a few moments ago, we didn't even know it existed. But we can be fairly sure that it's not meant to kill . . . at least, not outright. The explosion itself could have accomplished that, had they desired it. For now, the important thing is not to panic.

Easy for you to say.

I'm afraid your Pilgrimage is over, young airie.

But we're not even halfway to Hunger City—

You may not feel sick yet, Kestrel, but you are. The symptoms are bound to surface soon. But your pentad won't have to face them alone. We're dispatching a team to collect you and bring you to an insemnary for treatment.

In Kestrel's experience, those who enter insemnaries have a tendency not to leave them again. But if Mizar picks up on his concern, he doesn't respond to it. *The fact that the savvee was triggered here in the isolation of the Waste makes it likely that the norms are conducting an experiment of some kind. A trial run of a new weapon. That makes you valuable to them. No doubt Pluribus Unum has also dispatched a team to collect you. Needless to say, your capture by the norms would be a disaster for the Commonwealth.*

I don't think it would be too great for us, either.

This new savvee could be more dangerous to us than the other, the boggle continues. It's imperative that we have live samples to study.

Is that all we are to you, Mizar? Kestrel thinks bitterly. *Live samples?*

Would you prefer to be a dead sample?

I don't want to be a sample at all.

Want? What do the wants of mutes or norms matter against the whims of the Odds?

At that, Kestrel feels a flood of shame. *What do you need me to do?*

For now, just remember that any one of the others, including your precious Namora, could be a spy, a norm in mute's clothing. Keep your guard up, but avoid arousing suspicion: that could provoke another attack against you . . . which, indeed, might come in any case. If it does, hopefully I'll be able to give you some warning.

In other words, I'm on my own.

I'll still be with you, whispering in your mind, ready to take control if necessary. And don't forget: help is on the way.

How long till it gets here?

Less than an hour. But the norms could show up sooner than that. If they do, you'll have another fight on your hands.

Good. I feel like killing something.

Hold on to that anger, but hide it well. We're depending on you, Kestrel. We can't trust any of the others. Only you.

Kestrel feels the reins of volition pass back into his hands. He fans his wings, holding himself steady against the buffeting winds of the storm. Embers are rising from the wreckage: orange cinders that wink and gyrate, dodging through the pelting rain. Has he really been invirted since Pilgrim Square? And is he really infected with a savvee that's already beginning to attack him though he doesn't feel the least bit sick? A savvee whose secret source is one or more of the mutes he's come, over the last weeks, to trust with his life . . . even, in the case of Namora, to love with all his heart?

He still loves her; nothing Mizar revealed has changed that. Yet neither does he doubt the essential truth of the boggle's words, however malicious his manner. Kestrel supposes that he should be terrified, but he feels more disoriented than anything. Of course, it's always disorienting to return from an invirting to find that little or no time has passed in the physical world, but the experience of this invirting-within-an-invirting has left Kestrel with more than the usual sense of unreality.

The norms lie sprawled beneath him in grotesque postures, their blood mixing in the rain that splashes the remains of their psibertronic armor; much to his relief, Kestrel no longer perceives their virtues or the voracious activity of cellcoms and savvees going on inside their bodies. Turning his head, he sees Namora tending to Polaris in the weak light of a guttering fire. Fenix lies motionless and steaming where he had fallen. There's still no sign of Chalcedon. How long had Mizar held him in his psionic grasp?

The boggle's answer falls soft as a feather in his mind: *Less than a second.*

I'd better check on Feen, thinks Kestrel, but before he can do so, a geyser of mud and debris erupts from below, ten feet or so to his left. With a cry of surprise, he lofts himself higher while weaving the winds into a shield and readying a blast of lightning. *The norms! They got here first . . .*

Hold your fire! comes Mizar's voice as Chalcedon bursts out of the ground. Massive fists raised above his head, the delph takes a thunderous step toward Kestrel before recognizing him and stopping short. His arms fall to his sides as he registers the extent of the devastation.

"By the Odds," he growls. "Looks like I missed all the fun."

"About time you showed up, Chalce," Kestrel calls out as he lands nearby. "Did you get lost down there?"

Or, whispers Mizar, *did he know what was coming and simply stay out of the way?*

Quiet, Mizar!

He can't hear us.

Maybe not, but it's damn confusing to carry on two conversations at once!

"Very funny," Chalcedon rumbles meanwhile. The delph's dark glasses are still in place, though one of the lenses is starred with a crack; like a fractured mirror, it holds multiple reflections of the surrounding fires. Multiple Kestrels, too. Rain-washed runnels of brown mud and reddish clay are running down the delph's rough-hewn body as if he might melt away to nothing. "The blast triggered a cave-in. Took me a while to dig myself out. Getting tossed out of netspace so sudden-like didn't help much, either. Is Pol okay?"

"Namora's seeing to her. Feen got walloped pretty good, though."

"The mander's tough. He'll be okay. Which is more than I can say for these norms. Wish you'd saved one for me, Kes."

"I can't claim credit. They took themselves out."

Chalcedon grunts, shaking his head. "Crazy fucks. If they're so Oddsdamn eager to die, why not just off themselves back home, save us the trouble?"

"When I understand norms, I'll let you know."

“Sure they’re not playing possum?”

Kestrel smiles grimly, remembering his netspatial glimpse of their insides. “They’re dead, all right.”

“Those fuckers tried to bury me. Seems only fair to return the favor.”

Before Kestrel can respond, Chalcedon stamps one foot into the mud. The ground begins to tremble; a crack appears at his feet. Kestrel spreads his wings, watching as the crack shoots toward the norms, widening as it goes. Torrents of mud and debris pour into the gap. Then the earth beneath the norms tears itself apart, swallowing their bodies. In another second, it’s zipped back up again. No trace of the norms—or the crevice that consumed them—remains.

And, Mizar points out, any incriminating clues are gone along with them.

“Odds, Chalce,” Kestrel says, headcrest flaring. “Why’d you want to go and do that?”

“If they weren’t dead before, they are now.”

“Yeah, but now Pol can’t check their stuff!”

Chalcedon’s smile evaporates. “Guess I got carried away. Sorry.”

It’s standard operating procedure during pilgrimages for boggles to conduct netspatial inspections of the psibertronic armor, netaccessories, and antech of dead norms before the cellcoms and savvees complete their matter-dissolving work. The plunder can be used by boggles or traded to other pentads or exiles for food and equipment . . . or even sold for a hefty profit to the College or wealthy private collectors upon their return to the Commonwealth. Of course, such concerns are moot, Kestrel remembers. Their pilgrimage is over. But Chalcedon doesn’t know that.

Or does he?

I suspect we’ll find out soon enough, comes Mizar’s voice.

Kestrel shakes his head as though to eject the boggle. Oddsdamn it, he *likes* Chalcedon! He doesn’t want the delph to be a spy. Or any of the others, either. But as Mizar had reminded him, it’s not about what he wants. “Forget it, Chalce,” he says now. “None of us covered ourselves in glory. Walked into an ambush with our eyes wide shut!”

“We survived, Kes.” The delph slaps him on the back, sending him sprawling. “Made our saving throws, didn’t we? More than you can say for that lot! And we learned some good lessons. We won’t make the same mistakes next time.”

“Right.” He gives Chalcedon a glare. “We’ll make new ones.” *If, he thinks, there is a next time.*

Mizar, for once, keeps silent.

“That’s what I like about you, Kes: always looking on the bright side.” Chalcedon laughs. “Come on, my gloomy friend. I’ll check on Fenix while you see how Polaris and Namora are doing.”

POLARIS LIES STRETCHED ON THE GROUND in the semishelter of a toppled wall, a bloodstained bandage wrapped about her forehead. Her face, or the half of it not sunk in shadow, gleams shockingly pale in the light of a lumen stuck into the muddy ground. Namora, squatting beside her, has used her psionics to shield them from the rain, creating a bubble of dry space, which Kestrel enters. She looks up at him, dark eyes shining, bands of springtime green and blushing pink rippling across her bare neck and shoulders, and brings a finger to her lips for silence. He kneels quickly, clumsily, and embraces her, his body trembling with the release of emotion. She hugs him back with a fierceness usually reserved for their private moments. Odds, if anything should happen to her, he’d . . .

But something *has* happened. An unknown savvee is at work inside her, inside all of them . . .

All at once he’s crying, ashamed of the tears but unable to stop, knowing but not caring that Mizar is experiencing it all through him. Namora holds him tighter, pressing his face into the warm hollow of her neck and shoulder, her voice a soothing whisper in his ear: “Shhh, my airie. What is this? I’m fine, and Pol is not badly hurt.”

Did Mizar really force her to join tents with him? Did he use his psionics to lay a compulsion on her heart as light as the kiss of a butterfly, yet irresistible, unbreakable? Is she his reward for cooperating with the College? He wants to believe that Mizar was lying, that

the risks of psionically coercing Namora would have been too great, but he can't be sure. He can't dismiss the doubts so skillfully and maliciously planted. Because Kestrel knows deep down that he is nothing special. He doesn't *deserve* Namora. Why, then, did she choose him above all the others? He feels sick, soiled. But worse—far, far worse—is the injury Mizar's done to her, no less grave because she's unaware of it. And his own guilt, no less severe because, until now, he's been equally unaware. He wrenches himself away, swiping at his tears. "Sorry. Don't mind me."

"You airies are an emotional race," Namora observes, not for the first time.

"Are those tears on my account, Kes?" comes Polaris's weak voice. "I didn't know you cared."

He turns to her. What he'd taken at first for a shadow covering the left side of her face is, he sees as she struggles to sit up, a purple bruise. "Ouch," he says. "That's gotta hurt."

"What doesn't? My ears are still ringing. Bit of a concussion, I think. How are you?"

"Some scrapes and bruises. I was lucky."

"What about Chalce and Feen?"

"Chalce is indestructible. He's checking on Fenix now. Can't you—"

"Use my power to check on them myself? Already tried. No psionics." She shrugs, wincing in pain. "But we boggles heal fast, don't worry. I'll be my old self again soon. I can feel those little cell-coms hard at work. Until then, though, I'm afraid I'm helpless as a norm."

"We won't let anything happen to you," says Namora.

"That's right." But Kestrel isn't convinced by Polaris's claim. Oh, it's plausible enough. Neurological damage can disrupt the psionic powers of all the mute races, not just boggles. Sometimes the damage is temporary, sometimes permanent; it depends on the nature and severity of the injury. But Kestrel can't help wondering whether she's feigning the loss of her powers.

No, whispers Mizar. As far as I can determine without revealing my presence, she's telling the truth. And I believe her.

Why?

Because there's no need for her to lie. If Polaris wanted to use her powers against you, you couldn't stop her in any case. What worries me isn't if she's lost them . . . it's how. This could be an early effect of the savvee. Perhaps it targets psionics.

"Are you all right, Kes?" Namora reaches out to steady him. "You've gone all pale."

"I—" he begins, but gets no further before Chalcedon bursts into the bubble, cradling the mander in his arms.

"Something's wrong with Feen!" he cries, a shrill edge of panic in his voice. "He's sick—burning up!"

BROKEN CROWN

Whoa, slow down," says Uncle Jimmy from across the picnic table as Jack and Jilly shovel forkfuls of blueberry pancakes into their mouths. His white-on-black T-shirt proclaims a desire to be someone's dog. His eyes are hidden behind mirror shades. "What's the rush?"

"We want to get an early start," Jilly says. No trace of last night's gaming session remains on the table save the fleshy pink leavings of erasers.

"An early start doing what?"

Jilly gulps orange juice before answering. It's just past eight on an all-but-breezeless Monday morning. The sun sizzles in a vacant blue sky. Another scorcher is plainly in store.

"Me and Jack are gonna ride over to the Bait & Tackle and take out the canoe," she states, as though daring Uncle Jimmy to say otherwise. They're already dressed for it: Jilly in faded cutoffs and her I ♥ NY T-shirt over her bright green bikini, Jack in his swimming trunks and a maroon T-shirt featuring the Indian-head logo of the Redskins.

"Are you now?" Uncle Jimmy sips his coffee. Jack's been trying to figure out if he's noticed the missing joints yet, but it doesn't appear like he's noticed much of anything this morning. Flecks of toilet paper stubble his chin where he's cut himself shaving; he still hasn't gotten the knack of that straight razor. Bill says it's a miracle he hasn't cut his own throat yet. "First I've heard of it. Did you plan on just taking off after breakfast, or were you going to ask permission first?"

"I *am* asking."

"Sounds like *telling* to me."

Ellen, beside Uncle Jimmy, contributes a smirk to the discussion.

"Shut up, El," Jack warns.

"I didn't say anything!"

"Yeah, well, you were *thinking* of saying something."

That earns a scornful laugh and accompanying toss of bleached blond curls, a one-two punch honed to knockout perfection in front of countless mirrors. "Who do you think you are, Jack, one of those mind readers from that stupid game? What are they called, buggles?"

"Boggles," comes a three-way chorus of correction.

"Whatever." Smiling sweetly, Ellen leans forward to stare Jack in the eye. "Read this. Am I coming through loud and clear?"

"Uncle Jimmy . . ."

"Cut it out, both of you." Uncle Jimmy withdraws a cigarette from a pack of Marlboros lying on the table and lights up. He blows the smoke to his left, away from Ellen. "It's too early for this bullshit."

"She started it!"

"And I'm ending it."

"So, can we go, Uncle Jimmy?" Jilly asks after a moment.

"I don't know if your folks want you out on the bay by yourselves."

"We've gone lots of times, haven't we, El?"

This is a blatant lie, as Ellen knows full well. Yet now, though lacking the abilities of a boggle, Jack can see the gears spinning in her head. With Jack and Jilly gone, she and Uncle Jimmy will have the house to themselves. For a few hours anyway, they won't have

to worry about being caught. They can do it in a *bed* for once. "As long as the weather's nice, like today, Mom and Dad let 'em go," she affirms.

If Uncle Jimmy suspects anything, there's no sign of it in his shrug. "I guess it's okay then. Just be back home by five-thirty. And promise me you'll wear your life jackets."

"We promise!" chirp Jack and Jilly in perfect synchrony.

Ellen snorts with laughter.

"What's so funny?" Jilly demands, glaring.

"You," Ellen says. "Tweedledumb and Tweedledumber, the Oddsy Twins."

"You're just jealous," Jilly says. "'Cause you're a *singleton*."

"Dream on, freak."

"Don't start," Uncle Jimmy warns. "Besides, I wouldn't be too sure who is and is not a singleton."

Ellen rises to the bait. "I don't have a twin."

Uncle Jimmy grinds out the stub of his cigarette in the ashtray of an upside-down clamshell. "Oh, sure, not *now*."

"Not ever." Ellen shakes her head. "I think I'd know!"

"Would you? Twins are more common than most people realize. As many as half of all pregnancies start out that way; some scientists believe the percentage is even higher."

"So what?"

"Think about it. What happens to all those twins? Why aren't that many born?"

"I don't know. Miscarriages, I guess."

"That's part of it, sure. But mostly it's because the same thing goes on inside the womb as outside it. Competition for resources. The fetuses fight for food, space, everything. Even blood. Sometimes there's not enough to go around. What happens then is, the stronger fetus absorbs the weaker one. It literally *eats* it."

"Ewwwww!" Jack and Jilly chorus.

"No way," Ellen says. "You're making this up."

"Cross my heart," Uncle Jimmy insists, straight-faced. "Haven't you ever heard of survival of the fetus?"

Ellen groans. "Uncle *Jimmy*!"

"No, I swear; it's a jungle in there." He lights another cig, warming to his subject. "How they know is, occasionally, when somebody donates blood, they find that the person has two different blood types. The only way that's possible is if two fraternal twins, like Jack and Jilly, merged in the womb, one absorbed by the other. With me so far?"

Nods all around.

"But see, there's no way to tell if *identical* twins have merged, because their genes and blood types are the same. That means you could be carrying what's left of your identical twin sister inside you, El, and you'd never even know it."

"I wouldn't *want* to know. It makes me sick just to think about it!"

"This next part is cool, though," Uncle Jimmy continues. "See, sometimes they find *more* than just different blood types. Sometimes they find bits of bone or teeth or even calcified organs."

"Gross!"

"In the absence of a different blood type or genetic material, the only explanation is a partially unabsorbed identical twin." He blows a stream of smoke away from the table. "Once, after an old man died of a heart attack, the doctors heard a second heartbeat, so faint that it had been drowned out by the first. When they cut open the body, they found a wizened little man curled up inside the rib cage like a gnome inside an acorn shell. He was old, too, with a beard and everything, but completely normal except for being so small. And having no eyes. Didn't need 'em in there. Had a mouth, though. And a tiny voice that kept crying, '*Help meeeee.*' One twin was dead; the other was buried alive inside its brother's corpse. Of course, there was nothing anybody could do. It died, too. But here's where things get weird. When they did an autopsy, they found that the big twin's brain had never fully developed. He should've been a vegetable, not a successful businessman like he was. But the little twin's brain was perfect. Turns out he'd been pulling the strings the whole time, controlling his brother's body from within."

"Wow," Jack says.

"Oh, come on, Jack!" Ellen rolls her eyes. "Even you can't be dumb enough to believe that bullshit story!"

"Truth is stranger than fiction," he says. "Anyway, at least I didn't eat my own twin sister."

"I didn't—"

"Cannibal!"

"Maybe you didn't absorb her all the way, El," Uncle Jimmy muses. "Maybe she's still alive in there."

"*Help meeeeeee,*" Jilly chimes in with a quavering voice. Then cracks up, joined by Jack and Uncle Jimmy.

Ellen pushes herself up from the table. "I wish you'd both absorbed each other. Then I'd be an only child!" She picks up her plate and stalks into the house.

"Maybe not quite *only,*" Uncle Jimmy calls to her back.

AFTER WASHING AND DRYING THE BREAKFAST DISHES, a task set them by Uncle Jimmy before they can leave for the bay, Jack and Jilly stand at the kitchen counter fitting apples, bananas, granola bars, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and bottles of water into backpacks already bulging with beach towels, suntan lotion, insect repellent, Swiss Army knives, rolled-up plastic parkas (blue skies are no guarantee against thunderstorms: not in August), a handful of the small fireworks known as Jumping Jacks (leftovers from the Fourth of July saved for a special occasion, which this most definitely is), and, hidden in locations each has kept secret from the other in case of capture, the joints stolen by Jilly the night before.

"Man, I bet we could survive out there for a week with all this stuff," Jack says, jamming an extra apple into his pack. He feels like he's setting out into the Waste. Next stop, Hunger City.

"All right," comes Ellen's voice from behind them. "What are you freaks up to?"

Startled, Jack and Jilly turn as one. Ellen and Uncle Jimmy had gone up to the beach right after breakfast, so it's a bit unexpected to see her leaning against the edge of the open sliding door with her arms crossed over her chest. Her blond hair is pulled back in a ponytail, but a loose strand blows over her forehead, just above a pair of dark sunglasses. Normally the bang of the screen door slam-

ming would have alerted them to her return; she must've eased the door shut behind her in order to creep up undetected. Who knew how long she'd been listening? Jack doesn't think they've said anything too incriminating, but, believing themselves alone, they hadn't been watching their tongues, either. On the other hand, neither of them had felt the telltale tingle that a lifetime of narrow escapes has taught them to expect and depend on when in danger of being discovered in a compromising situation, so there's probably nothing to worry about.

"You shouldn't spy on people, El," Jilly says. "How would you like it?"

Ellen ignores the question. "You know damn well that Mom and Dad don't let you take the canoe out by yourselves."

"Then why didn't you say so to Uncle Jimmy?" asks Jilly with a smirk.

"You should be more thankful. I did you a favor."

"Okay, thanks." Jilly swings her backpack onto her shoulders. "C'mon, Jack. Let's blow this Popsicle stand."

But Ellen steps up to block their exit. "I asked what you're up to."

"We're not up to anything," Jack says.

"Even if we were," says Jilly, "why should you care?"

"I'm your big sister, that's why."

This earns a scornful laugh from Jack.

"Good one, El," says Jilly.

Ellen tries a different tack. "Look, we've got a good thing going here, right? I mean, having Uncle Jimmy for a babysitter is pretty much the same as having no babysitter at all. I just don't want you two lousing it up."

"We're not gonna louse anything up," Jack protests.

"I'm not saying you'd do it on purpose. But all it would take is for you guys to get caught doing something stupid, something you shouldn't be doing, and that would be the end of it. We'd wind up spending the rest of the summer back home with Mom or Dad, and you know how much fun *that* would be."

Jilly's unimpressed. "So?"

"So I'm not going to let you do it."

"Do what?"

"Steal the canoe."

"You're crazy!" Jack exclaims. "We're not gonna steal the canoe!"

"Yeah? You're just gonna turn around and come home after Barnyard says you can't have it? 'Cause that's what's gonna happen. She won't let you take it out any more than Mom or Dad would."

Jack shoots Jilly a worried glance; he hadn't thought of it, but Ellen's right.

"So that's why you told Uncle Jimmy it was okay," Jilly says. "You figured it didn't matter if he gave us permission, 'cause Barnyard would send us home anyway. You wanted us to bike all the way over to the Bait & Tackle for nothing."

"Yeah," Ellen admits. "But once I got up to the beach, I realized you dumb shits probably wouldn't take no for an answer. I figured you were stupid enough to actually try and steal the canoe. So I came back to tell you to forget it. Don't even bother riding over there."

"Did you tell Uncle Jimmy?" Jilly asks.

"No. Not yet. But I will if I have to."

"Well, you won't have to. We're not gonna steal anything. Look." She pulls a folded-up piece of paper from the back pocket of her cut-offs and hands it to Ellen as Jack watches, mystified.

Ellen opens the paper and reads: "'Dear Mrs. Barnard. I give my permission for Jack and Jilly to use the canoe. Signed, Bill Doone.'" She looks up with a laugh. "Not bad."

Jilly takes it back. "I can do Mom's, too."

Jack's a little slow on the uptake this morning. "You forged a note from Dad? Jeez, Jilly. You could've told me!"

"Don't have a cow; I was gonna tell you on the ride over." She slides the paper back into her pocket. "See, El? Nothing to worry about."

"I admit it's a good fake, but suppose Barnyard checks with Dad? What then?"

"She won't."

"You don't know that." She shakes her head. "Sorry, but I'm not going to let you guys mess up the rest of my summer, so you might as well take off those backpacks. You're not going anywhere."

"Like you can stop us," Jilly sneers.

"I can tell Uncle Jimmy. Or call Barnyard."

"Yeah, but you won't."

"Try me."

"You won't, because if you do, I'll tell Dad what you and Uncle Jimmy are up to."

Ellen flinches. Her face goes suddenly pale. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Jilly rolls her eyes. "Me and Jack have heard you. We can *smell* it."

Ellen is clenching her arms so hard they're shaking. Jack thinks for a second that she's either going to burst into tears or reach out and give Jilly a terrific slap across her face. He feels like slapping her himself. Once again, she's leaped without looking and dragged him along behind her. Then Ellen asks, in a voice as tightly clenched as her arms, "Smell what?"

"The pot you guys smoke on the deck at night. We're not idiots, you know."

Ellen exhales a shuddering breath. "You're monsters. That's what you are."

"Mom and Dad won't think so."

"Whatever you tell them, I'll deny it. You don't have any proof."

"Who needs proof? You know how much Dad hates drugs."

"If you tell," Ellen says slowly, her voice gone icy with a malice that Jack's never heard there before, "I'll get you back for it, Jilly. I swear I will."

"We won't tell if you won't. Like you said, El, we've got a good thing going. Me and Jack don't want to louse it up any more than you do."

"You promise not to tell?"

"Do you?"

"Okay." She nods, tight-lipped. "Deal."

"Deal," Jilly echoes.

"I want to hear it from you, too, Jack."

"Deal," he manages, nearly speechless with admiration. Far from leaping without looking, Jilly had been ahead of him the whole time. Ahead of Ellen, too. But along with the admiration, he feels a

bitter envy. Jilly's smarter and braver . . . It's as if she grabbed the lion's share of every cool quality just by being born first. When he came along seven minutes later, there was nothing but leftovers to pick from. Except for this one thing that makes him special . . . sometimes. It's like having a superpower that switches on and off at random: more curse than blessing. *Look, up in the sky, it's a bird, it's a stone, it's Occasionally-Super Jack!*

Oh, it *had* saved his life. That wave had sucked him out to sea. He remembers gasping for breath, fighting to stay afloat in the rough waters, then sinking beneath the surface . . . Was that what had triggered it? he wonders. The danger of drowning? He feels as though the answer is trembling on the edge of his understanding, just beyond his grasp.

Ellen, meanwhile, is staring at them from behind her dark shades. At last she says, "If Barnyard catches you, it's got nothing to do with me, right?"

"As long as it really doesn't," Jilly replies, staring back at her.

The face-off continues for a long moment. Then Ellen steps aside, unblocking the door. "Go on," she says. "Get the fuck out of here."

They waste no time doing just that, pushing past her, then racing across the deck and out the screen door into the hot brilliance of the morning sun. Jilly's laughter rings out as they pound down the rickety stairs, the door slamming behind them. "Man, did you see her face? I thought she was gonna *die!*"

Jack stops short at the bottom of the stairs, realization reverberating through him like the tolling of a bell. He hadn't *almost* drowned. There'd been no almost about it. *I died out there.* Died . . . and then brought himself back to life in the instant of his dying, creating a new reality in which not only his death but the circumstances that had made it possible were erased. He'd rewind the tape of history to a certain point—Jilly daring him to enter the water—then set it moving forward again, the same initial conditions leading to an alternate result. Instead of being swept out to sea, he'd been bowled over in the shallows. Instead of drowning, he'd only hurt his arm. And he'd erased *that* injury, that reality, the next day, creating yet another, the one he and everyone else inhabits now.

I died.

His legs go all rubbery; suddenly he's down on the sand.

"Jack!" Jilly's right there. "What's wrong?"

He can't speak. Anyway, he knows better than to try and explain it to her. He can't even explain it to himself.

"Come on," she says, hauling him up. "Let's get you out of the sun."

He lets her lead him into the shadows under the house, vaguely aware of cooperating in the process of walking. That the shock of dying had triggered his power in some automatic reflex of self-preservation makes visceral sense to him. But it's kicked in twice more since then (that he knows of, anyway). The first time had been two days ago, during the Scrabble game. The second had been just yesterday, when he and Jilly were having their underwater pinching contest. His life hadn't been in danger either time.

Or had it?

What if, each time, there had been a danger he hadn't known of? A danger he or his power had detected obscurely, unconsciously . . . just as he and Jilly are able to sense the imminence of threats to their safety even though the specific nature of those threats is never clear until they take place? Or, rather, *unless* they take place, for sometimes, despite the urgency of the warning, nothing happens, leaving them to wonder what fate they've escaped, and how, whether by something they've done or, on the contrary, failed to do . . .

He's aware that Jilly's talking to him, but instead of paying attention to her words, he's thinking about whatever it was that had reached for him from out of the depths of the sea. He hadn't seen the thing, but he'd sensed it, all right: a vast intelligence stirring, turning toward him with predatory interest. His heart beats faster at the recollection. Had it been reaching for him again both times? Had the explosion of the transformer across Route 1 been a near miss?

Is it out there now, reaching for him still?

What is it? And why is it coming after him?

"Jack!" Jilly's shaking him. "Are you sick?"

"I'm okay," he says irritably, pulling away.

"You don't *look* okay."

It strikes him that the results of the most recent manifestations—the alteration of tiles in the Scrabble game, the "healing" of his arm, all the peripheral yet-still-significant changes in the wider world—are secondary to the real purpose of his power's exercise. They're side effects. Visible signs of an activity otherwise undetectable by human senses, just as a fever indicates a war in the body between microscopic invaders and defenders. Recalling the bloody noses that have preceded, accompanied, or followed the replacement of one reality by another, Jack checks for blood, but his fingertips come back dry. Still, he thinks, what if there are other wars going on all the time? Wars not just in the body but outside it, and not too small for human senses to perceive but, on the contrary, too large for them to encompass? What if his newly awakened power has thrust him right into the middle of the biggest war of all . . . and, in a way, the smallest, too: a war fought on every scale for the right to determine what is and isn't real? All the antagonists in such a conflict would have powers like his, each one (and how many could there be?) raveling and unraveling realities with the dual purpose of preserving their own existence and erasing the existences of the others, like mad gods squabbling before a universal loom, playing some kind of fantastically complex, utterly ruthless game.

"Here, drink this."

As though obeying a boggle's mental command, Jack takes the plastic bottle of water that Jilly's produced from her backpack and drinks. How many times has he died? Does each bloody nose signal a lost battle, a wrong move, death and resurrection taking place so fast that there's no interruption in the flow of his awareness, his power kicking in just in time, every time, until, as must happen sooner or later, it does not, and reality, life, moves on without him? *I'm just a kid*, he thinks, terrified, squeezing the bottle so that water spurts from the top. *I can't play this game. I don't even know the rules.*

"Jeez." Jilly prizes the bottle from his grasp. "You're *shaking* . . ."

She's looking at him with concern and fear. More than ever, he's got to tell her. But not now. Not here. He senses invisible forces

reaching for him with malicious intent, tendrils of dark energy questing through seas of time and space and probability. It's as if the walls and ceiling, the ground itself, are closing in all around him like the petals of a Venus flytrap. It doesn't help to tell himself, as he does, that it's all in his mind. The dread is real. The cold sweat beading his forehead and trickling down the small of his back is real. As are the icy fingers squeezing into a fist around his heart. He's got to get out. Get away.

Jack pushes past Jilly to his bike, which leans next to hers along one cluttered wall.

"Hey!"

Ignoring her, he wheels the bike out from under the house and into the sun as Jilly, cursing and calling for him to wait, fumbles with her own bike behind him. He jumps onto the ten-speed and sets off without a word, pedaling up Bayberry Road past the parked cars of beachgoers from the far side of Route 1, where the private community of Middlesex extends for another half mile through what amounts to an entirely different ecosystem: marshy ground dominated by a pine forest whose high, interwoven branches provide cooling shade to airy single-level homes on quarter-acre lots that seem just barely able to hold back the tirelessly encroaching, snake-and-turtle-and-possum-filled woods. Here on the ocean side of the highway, the sandy soil is hospitable only to saw grass, scrub pines, and other hardy growths, beneath which lean rabbits dig their burrows, and the tallest things around, perched above the sand on their high stilts, are houses like his own, with nothing beyond their roofs to shelter them from the sky.

A shimmering of heat rises from the asphalt and the neatly spaced rows of parked cars on either side, rippling the air around him so that it's easy for Jack to pretend he's traveling inside a psionic shield like Kestrel might whip up: a bubble of air harnessed and hammered by his will into a transparent membrane thinner than an eggshell yet hard and impenetrable as diamond. Jilly's given up yelling for him to wait, but he feels her closing the gap behind him. He leans into the pedals as though all he's trying to get away from rides with her. The bike stutters beneath him, then lurches for-

ward as he clicks into a higher gear, hot air buffeting his face. A young woman extricating a folded-up beach chair from the back of an olive green Volvo flashes him a harried smile as he whizzes past. Two small boys tossing a Frisbee in the driveway of a house pause to appraise his ten-speed with looks of naked envy. At the intersection of Dune and Bridge Roads, an elderly security guard, seated at a round white table from whose center a red-and-white-striped umbrella rises like a mutant mushroom, looks up from his paperback with a grandfatherly grin and waves as Jack leans into the turn, tires skidding for an instant on sand and loose gravel before finding and biting into the asphalt underneath.

Jack wonders what lurks behind these faces. Are they innocent of the game being played around them? Or has he seen, without knowing it, one or more of the adversaries seeking to pierce his defenses and wipe him from the board? He recalls again how he and Jilly had played their real-life version of Mutes & Norms in the spooky halls and deserted classrooms of the Lord Baltimore Middle School as, outside, Belle had huffed and puffed through the night like the biggest, baddest wolf that ever was. That game had been realer than he knew . . . or, rather, had been a shadow cast by something realer than he knew: this game in which he finds himself playing for his life against opponents he doesn't know . . . at least one of whom, he realizes, must know or know of him, or else he wouldn't have been attacked, and his power wouldn't have responded, bringing him back to life, and the whole world with him . . . but not the same life, not the same world.

Jack feels like he's going crazy, but the thoughts won't stop coming. They fall like dominoes in his mind, one after another in a sinuous line, with a momentum impossible to resist, leading to a destination impossible to avoid. And here he is, tumbling after, caught in a slipstream of nightmare logic. Because who had invented that game of let's pretend? Who had boasted of playing it for years, seeking out the mutes in norms' clothing?

Uncle Jimmy, that's who.

Breathing hard, Jack pulls to a stop before the four lanes of

Route 1. There, as he waits for a break in the two-way traffic, Jilly catches up to him.

"What . . ." She's out of breath as well, sweat glistening on her golden skin. "What the fuck's going on, Jack?"

"Nothing," he says, and launches himself into a momentary breach, cutting short the conversation.

Jilly scoots through the gap to join him on the grassy median. A clump of cars as closely and regularly spaced as a school of fish is cruising by in the direction of Ocean City. "Come off it, Jack," she says. "You can't lie to me."

Jack's still reeling from the idea of Uncle Jimmy as his secret enemy, a murderer stalking him through a maze of multiple realities. His heart rejects it, but the thought remains rooted in his mind. He knows he's got to tell her everything. He should have told her a long time ago. "Okay," he says, feeling shaky with the enormity of it all. How will he find the words? "There is something."

"I knew it."

"You're gonna think I'm nuts."

"I do already. Now spill it."

The last of the cars has passed. Jack pushes off, pedaling across the two southbound lanes ahead of oncoming traffic. Jilly stays close, matching his speed; there will be no ditching her a second time. But he doesn't want to ditch her. He's gone it alone for too long already. Without her, he's only half his best and truest self. And that's no longer enough. It never has been. Once on the shoulder, he slows to a halt, straddling the crossbar to stand tiptoe on the ground. "I . . ." He swallows, tries again as she nods encouragement. "Uncle Jimmy . . ." He breaks off; that's not right, either.

"Well, what about him?" Jilly asks, exasperated.

He shakes his head. This is going to be harder than he thought. "Not here." He begins pedaling again, heading south; Jilly paces him to his right, on the landward side. "I'll tell you later, once we're out on the bay. It's complicated."

"C'mon, Jack," she says. "What about Uncle Jimmy? At least give me a hint."

"It's not really about him," he says as cars go by, trailing bright ribbons of music and radio voices that tangle and twist in the wind like the tails of kites. "I mean, it is, but . . ." He's getting tangled up himself. "I need to sort it out in my head first."

"Fine, be that way!" Jilly pulls away.

Jack starts to call after her, then holds his tongue. Despite the sting of her anger, he's not ready to tell her—not yet. Not here, by the side of the road. He feels exposed, vulnerable, as if his words might be overheard, snatched in the wake of passing traffic and carried to unfriendly ears, as in the myth of Midas. He wants to get farther away from the house, the ocean. Though the waters of the bay are salted with those of the sea, he thinks of the bay as being under a separate dispensation: it's neutral territory, like Free Parking in Monopoly. It'll be a sanctuary for him just as it is for the local wildlife. Once they're out in the canoe, everything will be okay . . . for a while, anyway. Or so he tries to convince himself.

Jilly's got a good lead on him; she's past the houses of South Bethany, beyond which the Delaware State Seashore resumes, a sliver of undeveloped beach- and bayfront property that ends after little more than a mile at the Maryland state line, where civilization picks up again with a vengeance. But they're not going that far.

Jilly veers right, onto the one-lane road leading to Barnard's Bait & Tackle. A moment later, Jack makes the turn himself. The sand-blown road is lined with bulrushes taller than he is, screening the marshes to either side. Soon these give way to compact, well-kept houses with trim green lawns landscaped with shrubs and white picket fences amid pine trees and such exotic transplants as cherry blossoms and weeping willows. Flowers, vegetables, and herbs thrive in tidy gardens. Bird feeders and bug zappers hang from porches and tree branches along with wind chimes whose mindless music sifts mild discord through the day. An American flag flies in every yard, and basketball hoops hang high from most garages; in one driveway, two stocky, shirtless teenagers are working their way through a game of Horse. Lawn ornaments abound: flanged anchors; statues of deer; birdbaths; sundials; billy-club-handled ship's wheels; lantern-holding jockeys whose expressionless doll faces are

as likely to be painted black as white; plastic herons and egrets; globes of glass, colored with the brilliant metallic sheen of peacock feathers, that sit on boulders or pedestals of fake marblelike shrines to pagan powers . . . crystal balls that (Jack imagines) bend time as well as light, reflecting futures as distorted as the present moments mirrored in their pregnant surfaces.

Behind the houses, where laundry hangs from clotheslines, is a network of canals as logically laid out as the streets of any suburb. Gleaming motorboats, sailboats, catamarans, and gaily tented cocktail barges bob at wooden docks on which either girls or turtles (but never both at once) sun themselves with equal immobility while, in the domesticated waters, families of ducks and geese paddle alongside slumming seagulls.

Following the road around a stand of shrubbery, Jack's surprised to find Jilly waiting for him on the other side. He brakes to a halt as she grins a challenge.

"Race you!" she cries, and is off before he can get a word out.

Jack digs in, pedaling for all he's worth. The two of them can never stay mad at each other for long; their connection runs too deep for estrangement to be anything less than physically painful. It diminishes them, disrupting the smooth flow of two-way traffic along the psychic umbilical they share. At such times, they sense each other's emotions much less clearly, like songs on the radio submerged beneath a hiss of static. And that static is not just a sound; it's a sandstorm blowing backward along nerves not meant to be traveled in that direction. The abrasive, wrong-way sting is a hurt easy to bear at first, a punishment each endures to punish the other, but it grows worse until those grains of sand metamorphose into maddened bees and all that matters is relief, even if purchased at the price of reconciliation. The longest they've been able to hold out against this fierce suasion is two days, and it had made them so ill, with fevers, chills, vomiting, the works, that a frantic Peggy had driven them to the emergency room at last. They'd been nine. Peggy and Bill had still been married, but as usual he'd been on the road, covering some story or other, and so she'd brought Ellen along as well, who sulked in the front seat, annoyed at being forced to miss

her favorite TV show. By the time they'd arrived at the hospital, Jack and Jilly were asleep in each other's arms in the backseat of the car, angelic smiles on their exhausted faces, their fevers broken; roused and brought inside, they'd endured without a word of complaint the long wait and brief examination that followed, Peggy shaking her head as much in wonder as relief when the doctor pronounced them fit as fiddles, while Ellen had been confirmed in her belief that they'd been faking the whole time, the entire episode orchestrated to make her miss *The Brady Bunch*.

Jack pours on the speed, standing to pump the pedals, but it's no use: Jilly's quick start can't be overcome by fair means or foul. Though he reaches inside himself for the handle to his power, once again he finds nothing. Does it work blindly, in response to a threat, or can he learn to wield it as a tool, a weapon?

Straddling her bike, Jilly ostentatiously stifles a yawn as he barrels into the bare front yard (also the parking lot) of Barnard's Bait & Tackle. He brakes hard, slewing his front wheel sideways to come skidding to a stop before her in a spray of sand and gravel. She doesn't flinch at this dramatic entrance, but once the dust has cleared, her smirk evaporates. "Your nose is bleeding," she says matter-of-factly.

A touch confirms it. Jack stares at the smear of blood along the back of his right hand. Had he worked his power after all? Or had it operated autonomously to fend off another attack? How is the world different now from what it had been a moment ago?

"Here, use this." Always prepared, Jilly holds out a Kleenex.

As he takes the tissue in numbed fingers, a screen door bangs behind Jilly, and Barnyard emerges from the weathered white house that is her home and place of business. The woman is barely taller than they are, though much, much wider; the sagging bronzed and wrinkled skin of her arms and chins jiggles as she walks, as do the rolls of flesh bulging beneath her canary yellow muumuu. Bright red toenails flash from the tops of pink flip-flops that kick up at the end of each scuffling step; she moves as though her ankles are hobbled by a short, invisible chain. A cloud of thinning red hair hovers above her head. Crushed to her bosom like a child's stuffed animal is her yappy toy poodle, Flossie, which commences to do just that.

“What have I told you two about racing in here?” Barnyard scolds over Flossie’s shrill malevolence. “This isn’t the Daytona Speedway.” Her beautiful blue eyes glare at them as though the yard were filled with breakables: valuable antiques, champagne glasses, babies.

Jilly wheels her bike to a bike rack situated alongside a navy blue Dumpster, wrinkling her nose at the fishy reek rising from the container, around which flies and bees buzz drunkenly. “Sorry, Mrs. Barnard.”

“Somebody’s going to get hurt someday,” she says, squeezing the dog like a bagpipe until it falls silent, pink tongue lolling over tiny white teeth, its rheumy black eyes regarding them with idiot malice. “Then you *will* be sorry.” Everyone knows the story of how Mrs. Barnard had been an emergency room nurse in Selbyville until the day, ten years ago, when paramedics had wheeled in her husband, critically injured in a car crash. That experience, as she’d confided once to Peggy, who’d mentioned it to Bill in a conversation overheard by Jack and Jilly, had made her realize that the whole world was an emergency room. Now, narrowing suspiciously, her gaze shifts to Jack, who’s dabbing at his nose with the Kleenex. “Have you two been fighting again?”

“No, ma’am,” he says. “My nose just started bleeding.”

“Did it, now. All by itself?” Perking up, Barnyard waddles closer.

There’s no escape for Jack, still straddling his bike. Taking a deep breath as her lavender perfume envelops him, he tries not to flinch when she reaches for him with her free hand (fingernails painted to match her toenails). But then Flossie lunges at him with a yip. Jack cries out and jerks away from the snapping teeth; the bike between his legs unbalances him. He topples backward.

Barnyard’s hand clamps onto his arm, hauling him upright; she’s quicker than she looks, and strong. “Hush.”

Jack wonders which of them she’s addressing. Flossie’s panting smugly in the fleshy crook of Barnyard’s elbow; oh, how he hates that dog! He knows one thing he’ll change if he ever gets control of his power.

“Now,” she says, releasing him, “let’s take a look at that nose.”

"I'm okay," he protests, but it's useless to resist; he's suffered the ministrations of Nurse Barnyard before. He tilts back his head. "See? The bleeding's stopped."

"How many fingers am I holding up?"

"One."

"Good. Hold your head still and follow my finger with your eyes." She moves her index finger to the left and back to the right of his nose as though blessing him, her eyes tracking his as Flossie pricks up her ears and swivels her head back and forth. Jilly, meanwhile, is sticking out her tongue and making faces behind Barnyard's back.

"Jilly," she warns without turning. Then: "Still seeing just the one finger, Jack?"

"Mm-hmm."

"You are getting sleepy," Jilly drones in the voice of some Transylvanian hypnotist.

"Cut it out, Jilly," he says.

"Hush, the both of you." At last Barnyard steps away, lowering her hand to stroke Flossie. "Sudden nosebleeds like that can be a sign of something more serious. Have there been others?"

He shrugs, intending to lie, but Jilly speaks right up: "He's been getting a lot of 'em lately, Mrs. Barnard. He got knocked over by a wave a few days ago and might have hit his head."

"Well, your pupils aren't abnormally dilated; there's no sign of a concussion. Extraocular eye movements are fine; no nystagmus or double vision. Has there been double vision in any of the other episodes?"

"No, ma'am," he lies; luckily, that's one symptom Jilly doesn't know about.

"Any dizzy spells?"

He shakes his head, glaring at Jilly, who remains silent.

"I don't suppose you've been to see a doctor."

"No, ma'am." This is all a waste of time; he knows what's the matter with him, and it's nothing any doctor can cure. Besides, he doesn't want to be cured. He needs a teacher, not a doctor.

"It might not be a bad idea. Do your folks know about this?"

"They're not here. Uncle Jimmy's staying with us."

"Does your uncle know?"

"Not exactly," he says, squirming.

"I want you to tell him, okay? You really should see a doctor."

"I'm not sick," he protests.

"Oh? And when did you finish medical school, Dr. Doone?"

Jilly snickers, then falls silent at a frown from Barnyard, who continues: "Kids always think they're immortal. Trust me: you're not."

But I am, thinks Jack, wheeling his bike to the rack and standing it alongside Jilly's. *Or I could be*. No miracle will be beyond him once he figures out how to subject his power to his conscious control. Sometime between the moment that Jilly challenged him to race and the moment he pulled into the parking lot behind her, his power had kicked in, but whether in response to an external attack or because he willed it himself, he doesn't know. If the latter, it sure hadn't had the desired effect: he'd lost the race. Yet it must have had *some* effect; so far, at least, it always has. Even if the primary purpose of his power is self-preservation, it does more than just restore him to life: it *changes* him. And the world with him. Always (again, so far) in ways that are beneficial to him. But it's also true that, in the past, he hasn't immediately recognized those changes; it's as if his mind marches along the track of its old impetus for a while, like a ghost that continues to believe it's still alive. And isn't that really what he is at this moment, he thinks with a shiver: the ghost of the old Jack carried forward in the body of the new?

"I'm gonna get the canoe ready, Jack," Jilly says as he turns from the bike rack. "See you around back."

She scampers behind the house before he can reply, leaving him alone with Barnyard. What's going on? Why didn't she pull out the forged note?

"You be sure and tell your uncle, Jack," Barnyard says meanwhile. "And remember: I don't want to catch the two of you racing your bikes in here again."

With that, the seal of his new memories breaks open. In this real-

ity, he and Jilly have had Bill's permission to take out the canoe by themselves all summer.

There is no note. There's no need for one.



The body in Chalcedon's massive arms shows no sign of consciousness. Ribbons of steam are drifting up from the mander's black skin, on which the thin scars of old incision patterns make an intricate web of simmering molten lines. Looking at him, Kestrel thinks of a jigsaw puzzle coming apart at the seams.

"He was like this when I got to him," Chalcedon says. "I think those norm fucks infected him with something. That could be why he's pumping out so much heat—his body is trying to burn out an invading savvee."

Polaris says, "Whatever the cause, we've got to bring his temperature down, and fast. A sudden spike could incinerate us all."

"Leave it to me." It's a simple matter for Kestrel to funnel the heat out through the bubble of water maintained by Namora and into the atmosphere beyond, where it dissipates harmlessly, dispersed by the howling winds.

Mizar, he thinks meanwhile, what's wrong with him? Is it the savvee?

That would be my guess. First Polaris. Now Fenix. It seems that this new savvee is targeting our psionic powers. Imagine the devastation that would result if a considerable number of mutes became infected—the population of the Many-sided City, for example.

Kestrel shudders. *We've got to tell the others!*

You'll say nothing, Mizar instructs sternly. I'm not ready to reveal myself. Besides, none of you has the skills to analyze an unknown savvee, much less cure it. Wait for the Holy Rollers.

"If Feen is infected," says Namora, as though she's been listening in, "maybe we all are."

Mizar, Kestrel thinks. How does she know?

It's a logical deduction.

"Odds," breathes Chalcedon. "And I'm touching him!" But he

doesn't set the mander down, only shifts him in his arms, as though he's suddenly grown heavier.

"Does anyone feel sick?" asks Polaris.

No one does . . . or, at any rate, confesses to it.

"First things first," the boggle continues. "We've got to find some shelter. We're too exposed; for all we know, norms could be out there right now, creeping up on us."

"Why don't you scope things out in netspace?" Chalcedon suggests.

"I've lost my psionics, Chalce."

"Odds!"

"I got cracked in the head pretty good when the norms blew up the building. Scrambled my brains a little, I guess."

"In other words," Chalcedon says, "we're sitting ducks."

The delph is righter than he knows, comes Mizar's voice. Polaris may be cut off from netspace, but I'm not. There are norms approaching, Kestrel. A lot of them. And they'll be here soon, before our extraction team arrives.

Then we'll fight them.

You would only be killed or captured. I can lead you to a place of safety.

What about the spy? A minute ago, you said you weren't ready to reveal yourself.

I'm an Invisible. Unless I wish it, no one will suspect I'm here.

Then how are you going to lead us anywhere?

Watch and see.

As if on cue, Polaris gives a start. "By the Odds!" she breathes in a tone of wonderment. "My psionics . . . they're back!"

You've invirted her, Kestrel thinks. Just like you did me.

Not "just like." Hers is a far more delicate invirting. She is a boggle, after all.

But if the spy—

Under the circumstances, Mizar interrupts, a little risk is acceptable.

"Looks like you made your saving throw, Pol," says Chalcedon, with a grin.

"And not a moment too soon. Company's on the way. Norms."

"How many?" Namora asks.

Polaris shakes her bandaged head, wincing at the movement. "I can't tell. I'm not at full strength yet; everything is hazy. But too many for us to fight, especially without Feen. And to tell the truth, the way I feel right now, I don't think I could invirt us all anyway, much less form a gestalt."

Mizar, I just realized . . . Can't you tell now whether or not she's a spy?

Of course. I probed her mind as soon her psionics were knocked out. And?

She's one of us.

"Thank the Odds!" The others glance at him curiously. "I mean, that your powers are back," he continues, feeling his face turn red as, in his mind, Mizar chuckles.

"The norms will be looking for us," Polaris resumes. "But they won't know for sure whether or not we survived the explosion. If we can hide from them long enough, maybe they'll give up and go away."

Chalcedon spits into the mud. "I don't like the idea of hiding."

"It beats dying," Namora says.

"Point taken."

You should have told me about Polaris right away, Kestrel admonishes Mizar as the others talk. That just leaves Feen and Chalce for us to worry about.

Don't forget Namora. Actually, I probed Fenix, too. He's not a spy, either. So it really comes down to the merm or the delph. Or both of them.

It's not Namora. I know it.

We'll find out soon enough. Some attempt will be made to contact the norms and give away your position.

Then why not stand and fight?

The longer the norms are delayed, the better. Our extraction team is on the way.

Kestrel's having a hard time focusing on the tactical situation. All he can think about is the chance that Namora is a mute in outward appearance only, a spy possessing the psionics of a boggle in addition to those of a merm, but loyal to Pluribus Unum. It seems impos-

sible. And equally impossible that Chalcedon is a spy. The one his lover, the other his friend. Yet he knows Mizar is right. It has to be one—or both—of them. He wishes he'd stayed in Wafting and never come to Mutatis Mutandis. Wishes he'd never encountered Mizar that day in Pilgrim Square or stepped through Pilgrim's Gate on the road to Hunger City. But no matter how much he wishes any of it, he knows he can't change the past, can't change what's already happened by the whim of the Odds . . . or, for that matter, what's going to happen. Not even the Odds can do that. The great dice roll on, and there's nothing he can do but hope he makes his saving throw.

Polaris, meanwhile, had accessed the integrated gestalt network of the College; now she reports the presence of a shelter nearby, an intact basement buried below the rubble of a building less than a mile across town. In order to facilitate the movements of boggle spies back and forth across the Waste, the College maintains a number of safe houses shielded by powerful virts. Such shelters are reserved for spies, their use by pentads prohibited save in dire emergencies. If they can reach the shelter before the norms arrive, Polaris is confident they'll be safe there.

"Let's get moving," she says now. "Kes, mind turning off the light?"

He can't help laughing at the normalcy of the request, the others joining in with a release of nervous energy as he retrieves and extinguishes the lumen. Then Namora dissolves the bubble that's been shielding them from the storm, and they make their way through the pouring rain, across the wreckage and overgrown ruins of the empty town.

Kestrel steals glances at Namora and Chalcedon as they go. Maybe Mizar's wrong after all, and neither of them is a spy. Maybe the spy is Fenix. Or maybe there is no spy. But such musings are nothing more than fantasies, he knows. He might not trust Mizar, but he has no doubts about the boggle's psionics, the strongest he's ever encountered. If Mizar said there were spies, there were spies.

Mizar had also told him that he, Kestrel, had an important role to play; that his actions had the potential to influence the outcome of events, helping to decide which of the many possible futures would

come to pass . . . though how he's supposed to exercise this influence over the dice of the Odds, the Invisible hadn't said, and Kestrel has no idea. He's just an ordinary airie; indeed, being a breederborn, he feels less than ordinary. Not even the Therapeutic Faculty had been able to cure him of his persistent sense of inferiority, this psychic birth defect that had given rise to compensatory fantasies of single-handedly winning the war against the norms. Now that, in some small way, the stuff of his daydreams has come true, those daydreams don't seem any more real; on the contrary, it's his real, everyday life that's come to seem like a dream.

His long—and long-unsuspected—inverting is partly to blame, undermining his experience of time, of reality itself. And everything he's learned—the presence of norm spies in his own and other pentads; the existence of not one but two new savvees, one of which is inside him, working to fulfill its mysterious but presumably deadly purpose, though as yet he feels no pain or weakness or fever, no trace of sickness at all, and no sense that his psionic control is slipping—has contributed to the sense that things are not as they appear, that his grip on reality is a tenuous one, or that reality itself is tenuous, temporary, meriting his trust no more than Mizar does. He recalls what the Invisible told him about Namora: that she'd come to him, chosen him above the others, not because of any qualities he possesses but simply because Mizar made it happen, pulling her strings despite the risk involved, all so that he could vicariously enjoy sensual pleasures no longer available to him in the flesh. Kestrel can hardly believe that Mizar would have been so irresponsible, yet he realizes it's not impossible: the boggle is quite capable of acting from motives of selfishness or plain malice.

In the end, it doesn't matter whether it happened that way or not. It's enough to know, or to believe, that it *could* have happened. And now, as Mizar had predicted, Kestrel can't help looking at Namora in a different light, can't help wondering if, like him, like Polaris, she's been secretly inverted. Knowing full well that he doesn't deserve her, all too conscious of his many failings, he begins to doubt her feelings for him . . . and once he begins to doubt *her*

feelings, he's no longer as certain of his own, for, he asks himself, why shouldn't Mizar have influenced those as well? Even worse is the reflection that, if Mizar *isn't* responsible, then Namora's choice of him, her exclusion of the others, still has to be accounted for. In a way, it becomes less comprehensible . . . unless, of course, she really *is* a spy and had acted from motives related to her mission, whatever that mission, those motives, might be. But Kestrel doesn't want to believe that. His love for Namora is strong and steady regardless of the doubts that Mizar has instilled with his customary shrewd malice: whether it's an emotion arising from the intrinsic workings of his own heart or had been imposed there from without doesn't matter . . . or, thinks Kestrel, he's going to do his best to act like it doesn't. Amid all the uncertainty, he has to hold on to something.



Jilly's already dragged their canoe out from among the others berthed behind the Bait & Tackle when Jack stumbles dazedly around the corner. Theirs is a battered aluminum model purchased some years ago at a local yard sale; stenciled along the dented prow, unevenly spaced black capitals spell out "DO ONE."

"Don't just stand there; get the paddles," Jilly says, glancing up as she pulls the canoe across the packed dirt, yellowed grass, and sand of the backyard to the long wooden dock where rowboats, canoes, small sailboats, motorboats, and catamarans rock side by side in the shallow waters of the inlet. She's taken off her backpack and T-shirt; the lime green tube top of her bikini glows neon-bright against her bronzed skin.

The yard is crowded with boats and motors hoisted up on blocks and in various stages of repair . . . or, rather, disrepair. More canoes are arranged in ramshackle rows alongside the back porch, where a shadowy figure can be seen moving about behind a sagging scrim of crudely patched screens—Barnyard or her son, Mike, who works part-time at the Bait & Tackle. Some of the canoes are for sale or rent; others, like theirs, are spoken for. Also present in the yard are

crab pots and traps; fishing rods; buoys and floats of different shapes and sizes; coils of yellow rope; an empty, thoroughly rusted boat trailer on which a tabby cat is sunning itself; water skis; crabbing nets; old coolers; a pair of bicycles that look like they were dropped to the ground years ago and haven't been touched since; a scattering of tools; beach chairs and umbrellas; metal wind chimes softly clanging; a ship's bell that broods in tarnished silence; and a silvery flagpole without a flag, upon whose bald spherical summit a seagull perches so rigidly, not a feather out of place, that it's hard to tell whether it's the real thing or just an incredibly well-painted carving. Smells of paint, turpentine, tar, spilled oil, and recently cut lumber mingle far from unpleasantly with a fresh fishy tang.

Paddles and orange life jackets are stored within the dank and moldering gloom of a wooden shed where Jack has encountered some scary spiders over the years. Reaching in, he grabs two paddles and a pair of life jackets, then, arms full, staggers over to the dock. The canoe is already in the water; Jilly is already in the canoe. She squints up at him from the bow, holding on to the edge of the dock with one hand, backpack and T-shirt stowed behind her in the center of the rocking craft.

"Wow, that's a major spider," she says, eyes wide.

Paddles clatter over the boards of the dock as Jack stumbles back, swatting at his shirt, his hair, as though he's set himself on fire.

Jilly crows with laughter.

Blushing, Jack shrugs out of his pack and tosses it next to hers at the bottom of the canoe. The sweat-drenched back of his shirt clings to his skin.

"Man, your *face* . . . !" She can't go on for giggling.

"Fuck you," he says. Choosing a paddle and a life jacket for himself, he clambers into the stern of the canoe, which dips and seesaws.

"Hey!" Jilly cries, flailing for the dock with both hands.

"What's the matter? Scared of getting wet?"

"Dump the canoe and we lose our packs, Einstein." She glares at him over one bronzed shoulder.

"I wasn't gonna tip us over," he answers, peeling off his T-shirt.

But the truth is, as he knows Jilly knows perfectly well, he wasn't thinking that far ahead.

Jilly leans across the dock to snag the remaining life jacket and paddle. Then they slip into their jackets, leaving the straps hanging loose, unfastened, and use the paddles to push off from the dock. As soon as they're clear, they begin paddling in an easy rhythm, two strokes to a side, heading for the bay.

Jack takes a deep breath as they slip past the neatly tended, astonishingly green lawns of the Bait & Tackle's neighbors; he can't put off the moment any longer. He's got to tell her. And he knows that telling her, hard as it is, will be the easy part. He's got to *convince* her, too. "Jilly," he says.

"Yeah?"

"Do you still have that note?"

"What note?"

"You know," he says. "The note you showed Ellen?"

"I didn't show her any note. What are you talking about?"

"You don't have a note in your pocket?"

"I already told you no. Do you think I'm lying?"

"No," he says. "But I had to make sure."

"Make sure of what?" She sets the paddle across her knees and turns her head to look at him, her expression mingling annoyance and concern. "You know, Jack, maybe Barnyard's right about you needing to see a doctor. You're not thinking straight."

He meets her eyes with all the assurance he can muster. "I'm okay, Jilly. I swear."

"Yeah? Then what's with the nosebleeds? And that dizzy spell you had?"

"I'm trying to explain."

"By asking about some stupid note that doesn't exist?"

"Now it doesn't. But it did."

"You're cuckoo." She faces forward and takes up her paddle, thrusting it into the water with sufficient force to fling back a cool, glittering spray.

It's a good act, but he can sense how disturbed she is behind the mask of scorn. Jilly really believes there's something wrong with

him. Her fear nibbles at him, and his own very different fear. "It was a note to Barnyard from Dad." He pushes on, regardless. "You forged it. And quit splashing!"

The splashing intensifies, ephemeral rainbows shivering the air between them. "Why would I do that?"

"So she'd think we had his permission to take out the canoe."

"News flash, Jack: we *do* have permission. We've had it all summer."

"In *this* reality."

That puts a stop to her splashing. And her paddling. "What's that supposed to mean?" she asks without turning, the set of her shoulders tense.

"Shut up for a minute, and I'll tell you."

Her silence, he knows, is all the opportunity he's going to get. Taking Holmes as his model, Jack lays out the evidence and his deductions, paddling steadily, calmly, matching his voice to that soothing rhythm as if by doing so he can make himself more convincing . . . or, like a hypnotist, make Jilly more susceptible to being convinced. He starts with the wave that swept him out to sea, then moves on to the Scrabble game, his broken arm, the character switch in Mutes & Norms, and the note. He relates the circumstances as carefully as he can, noting the physical effects—the nose-bleeds, the dizziness, the double vision—that have both preceded and followed each exercise of his power. He tells her how he's the only one able to remember the superseded realities left behind like half-erased homework assignments chalked onto a blackboard. Or almost the only one, for he explains why he believes that a deadly competition is taking place between him and at least one other person with the same ability to alter past, present, and future, someone whose mind he'd first sensed stirring in the inky depths of the ocean like Nemo's giant squid, a many-tentacled monster that's stalked him ever since. He tells her everything, omitting only his suspicion of Uncle Jimmy: things are complicated enough already.

As he talks, Jilly begins paddling again, matching her strokes to his without the interruption of a word or a splash. The canoe glides from the inlet into the northeastern edge of Little Bay. The water

here is deeper, its reflective blue darker, though still strewn with winking diamonds from a sun directly overhead. To the south, where the bay balloons to its widest point, a dozen or so sailboats and catamarans are skimming, graceful and colorful as dragonflies. Two growling motorboats are pulling whooping water-skiers in their wakes. Looming in the background like a distant mountain range shimmers the hotel-and-condominium-cluttered skyline of Ocean City.

It's a huge relief to be sharing his secret with Jilly at last; of course, Jack knows full well that she doesn't believe him—it would be obvious even without their special bond—but then, he never expected to have an easy time convincing her. It's enough that she's listening, that she hasn't interrupted to tell him he's crazy. He'd been afraid of that. Afraid, too, that what had chimed persuasively in the privacy of his thoughts might ring false when spoken aloud. Instead, he finds himself growing more convinced, his last remaining doubts swept away.

They angle the canoe to the northwest, where three other canoes and a rowboat are drifting idly: fishermen and crabbers favor this quiet corner of the bay. A quarter of a mile ahead is Stone Island, its flat shoreline a mix of sandy beach and thick, swampy patches of silver-green behind which rises a bristling wall of pine trees. Largest of the many islands scattered across Little Bay, which is itself the smallest in a chain of linked bays stretching between Rehoboth Beach and Ocean City, Stone Island is crisscrossed with hiking trails, picnic areas, and campsites; the back of the island is connected to the mainland by a single one-lane wooden bridge along which campers and day-trippers come by bike and car; deer, too, cross over, as do raccoons, possums, foxes, and the occasional black bear. Jack and Jilly scorn this tidy outpost of civilization. Happily, the smaller islands that lie beyond it—especially those salted around the northwestern edge of the bay, where Miller's Creek winds its wide-shouldered way into the heart of the state-protected Fenwick Wildlife Area—remain, apart from the occasional duck blind, unspoiled. Nameless, absent from the nautical charts on sale at the Bait & Tackle, some are so overgrown as to be all but impassable; others are little more than scraps of sand uncovered by storm and tide.

Jack and Jilly have spent the summer exploring these lesser islands. They've mapped them, named them, made them their own. The maps, traced first in pencil then drawn over with colored Magic Markers on the same graph paper they use in playing Mutes & Norms, are tucked away in Jack's backpack, folded up and sealed in plastic sandwich bags . . . though it's only now that he remembers this detail from out of his palimpsested past.

Once he's finished, come to the end of his argument, the shining edifice of it standing, at least to his mind, unassailably, Jack waits for Jilly to say something. But she just continues paddling, as if she hasn't heard a word he's spoken, or as if he hasn't spoken a word . . . until he begins to wonder if perhaps he hasn't. Has his power kicked in again, erasing his confession? He checks to see if his nose is bleeding, but it's not. Then she stops and swivels to face him.

"You believe all this crap, don't you? I mean, you're not making it up just to mess with me."

"It's the truth," he says.

"Can you prove it? Even one single word?" She shakes her head and supplies her own answer: "No way."

"I can't help it if nobody else remembers."

"That's because it's all horseshit," she says.

"Then prove I'm wrong," he challenges. "Go ahead and try, if you're so smart."

"I'm smart enough not to waste my time trying."

"Cause you know you can't."

"I can't prove a lot of things. That doesn't make them true."

"It doesn't mean they're not true, either."

"Jerk!" She dips her paddle, splashing him.

He retaliates. The ensuing battle is fierce but brief, breaking off when the canoe tips to one side, nearly going over. Jack sits gasping as the rocking subsides, water dripping down his face, his whole body. He's soaked, the pads of his sneakers squishy as sponges. His heart is beating with what feels like sufficient violence to finish the job of capsizing the canoe. Jilly's facing forward again, hunched over, shoulders heaving. Is she crying? He feels a dark undertow of frustration and fear.

"Jilly . . ." he says, stricken.

Her laughter takes him by surprise. There's no sharpness to it, just weary amusement. The face she turns to him is as wet as his own, but not with tears. "Mutes & Norms," she says.

"Huh? What's that got to do with anything?"

"Not the game we play with dice and graph paper, stupid. The other one. The one Uncle Jimmy told us about before we went to the shelter, remember? All you're doing is playing another version of that game."

"Except this isn't a game," he says. "It's real."

"But it's got the same—what did he call them?—arbitrary initial conditions: mutants hiding among normal people, and you've got to figure out who they are. The only difference is that in your game, the mutes aren't hiding from the norms: they're hiding from each other, trying to kill each other."

"I told you, this isn't a game. And that doesn't prove anything anyway."

"Maybe not, but don't you think it's an interesting coincidence? And isn't it kind of strange that you didn't start thinking about these . . . these superpowers of yours until *after* Uncle Jimmy told us about his game? Unless you think he believes it, too, and told us on purpose because . . ." Her eyes widen with understanding. "That's it, isn't it? You think Uncle Jimmy's got the same powers you do! You think *he's* the one who's trying to kill you!"

He avoids a direct answer. "Look, I know it sounds crazy. I didn't want to believe it, either: not at first. I mean, I thought I was going nuts! But it's the only explanation that fits. Like Holmes says: when you've eliminated the possible, consider the impossible."

"Not when it's *this* impossible. Uncle Jimmy isn't trying to kill you. You can't change history or come back from the dead. You're not Jesus, okay? Or, shit, maybe you are! Maybe if I tip this canoe over, you'll just walk home!"

"Ha-ha."

"I'm not joking. I'm proposing an experiment."

"Don't be a jerk. You'll wreck our maps."

"What does it matter? You'll just fix things so I never tipped the canoe over at all, right? Isn't that how it works?"

"I told you, I don't *know* how it works. If I did, I'd fix it so you'd remember everything the same as me."

"No thanks," she says. "I'd rather forget everything, including this conversation."

"Jilly, if you'd just listen . . ."

"No. You listen. Unless you want to try my experiment." The canoe wobbles as Jilly shifts her weight.

He counterbalances, gritting his teeth.

"First of all," she says, "you've got it wrong about Sherlock Holmes. He told Watson to eliminate the impossible and concentrate on the *improbable*. So let's try that, okay? The first time you got a nosebleed and just about fainted was right after the wave knocked you over. We'd come back from the beach and were downstairs in the shower, remember?"

"That doesn't pro—"

He yelps, nearly losing his paddle as the canoe rocks sharply. "Next time it's going over," Jilly threatens, and he knows she means it. Then her expression softens. "Look, Jack. Is it so unbelievable that maybe you got a concussion or something, like Barnyard said? And is it flat-out impossible, or just improbable, that later, when Uncle Jimmy explained his game to us, you got sort of, I don't know, hypnotized to believe it was true? Only instead of believing exactly what Uncle Jimmy said, you dreamed up your own version based on everything that was going on around you? I mean, think about it—the hurricane, the Scrabble game, Mutes & Norms, you and me, even Uncle Jimmy and Ellen—bits and pieces of everything that happened that day are mixed up in what you told me. Can't you see that?"

Jack doesn't answer. What he sees is that he's made a mistake; he never should have told her anything. It's too much for anyone to believe without proof. But the problem is, he's never been on his own like this before. Never had to bear the burden of knowledge or emotions all by himself, like a singleton. He's never known what it's like to be alone in the world. It's this, he understands, that had scared

him most of all: the possibility that his power would come between him and Jilly somehow. Separate them as nothing else has ever been able to do. Now that fear is coming true, and it's worse than he ever imagined, because there's no remedy for it. He'd thought his bond with Jilly would be all the proof required, that she'd believe him because of the strength of *his* belief. The strength of his need. But as it turns out, that's not enough. Not nearly enough. Even with the flow of emotions running back and forth between them like an electrical current, like blood, Jilly can't make this leap of faith. Where she's wrong, he thinks, and the great Holmes, too, is that sometimes you *can't* eliminate the impossible. Sometimes, whether you believe in it or not, the impossible is out to eliminate you. He doesn't blame Jilly for not believing, but it still stings like a betrayal. The fault, however, is his own.

"You've ruined everything," she blurts with a bitterness that takes him by surprise until he remembers that this trip to the bay had been her idea, undertaken for the purpose of smoking the joints they'd pilfered from Uncle Jimmy. He may have forgotten that goal, lost sight of it and of other elements persisting unchanged amid the differences dividing realities (most things, after all, stay the same), but not Jilly. He's seen before how the smallest alterations in the past can influence present events and future intentions in unanticipated ways, just as a single stone added to or removed from a creek bed affects the flow of water upstream and down. From his perspective, both caught in that flow and standing outside it, there's a kind of retrospective logic to what might otherwise appear a capricious twist of fate; it's like he can see, faintly glowing, the branching lines of cause and effect whose probabilistic web connects what, to Jilly's eyes, must seem isolated and unconnected: inexplicable and, hence, unfair. Of course she's bitter. Who wouldn't be? And yet, doesn't he have cause for bitterness, too? Her blindness is impinging on him; she would make him wear blinkers, hobble him if she could.

"It's no use going on," she says. "We might as well turn back."

"No!" And before she can say another word, Jack grabs the right side of the canoe with both hands and pulls hard, throwing his body backward. The world tips and rolls.

Jilly's astonished cry is choked off by a splash. Tumbling after, Jack sees a billion tiny suns burning in the multifaceted blue jewel of the bay. There's a slap of cold as the surface shatters. Then he's through.



Whatever it had been before the ravages of war, neglect, and time had worked upon it, now, to Kestrel's keen eyes, taking in the scene by the fitful illumination of lightning flashes, it's a ragged hill of rubble, brick, and steel packed tight with earth and sprouting a profusion of vegetation: stunted pine trees with gnarled, twisted branches; tangled snarls of thorny creepers that thrash whiplike in the wind; pale night-blooming flowers whose petals flap like flags or hang limp and bedraggled as drowned mothquitos.

"Are you sure this is it?" asks Chalcedon uncertainly.

"I'm sure." Polaris strides toward the forbidding barrier. As she approaches, the violent agitation of the creepers, striking at one another and at the air like a nest of maddened serpents, gives way to harmonious, graceful movement. The thorny curtain parts to reveal a dark entrance, like the mouth of a cave.

Polaris enters without pausing, motioning for the others to follow. Namora glances back at Kestrel, shrugs, and enters. Chalcedon is next, hunching protectively around Fenix and taking no notice of the thorns that scrape along his back, shoulders, and arms: blade-weed is the only natural growth with an edge keen enough to pierce the skin of a delfh. Kestrel brings up the rear, using his psionics to keep the vines at bay, aware that their thorns could flay the skin from his bones in seconds. As soon as he's inside, he feels the prickling of claustrophobia, the inborn aversion to enclosed spaces that he shares with all airies. But at least he's out of the storm.

Behind him, the creepers fall back into place, becoming again a flailing host hissing into the wind and rain. Now darkness is complete. The noise of thunder distant, muffled. Kestrel smells odors of damp earth and wet brick, rusted metal, decaying organics. He feels like a trespasser in a tomb. He shuffles forward, headcrest at its full

extension, eyes useless but his psionics attuned to every disturbance and obstruction in the flow of the humid air; in this way, he “sees” the others. Rather than alleviating his claustrophobia, however, it makes him more aware than ever of the narrow space confining them all, in which he can barely flex his wings.

Up ahead, Polaris kindles a lumen, revealing the passage in which they stand single file. The sides and ceiling are a mix of stones, pieces of masonry, and packed dirt from which protrude old pipes, beams, cables, and the roots of trees. Water drips and dribbles to the gently sloping ground, puddling where it can and otherwise descending in a multitude of rivulets. Shadows stretch and twist in the lumen’s shining as though the darkness is contorting itself to avoid the painful touch of light.

“From here on, touch nothing,” Polaris says in a whisper. “The way is booby-trapped.”

“Now you tell us,” says Chalcedon.

“I’ve accessed all the passkeys. They should get us through with no trouble.”

“*Should?*”

“This shelter hasn’t been used in a while. Some of the defensive systems may have degraded or suffered damage. Of course”—and she flashes a grin, as though this is just another practical joke—“there’s also the possibility of norm sabotage.”

“Of course,” Chalcedon echoes. “You know, maybe we should take our chances outside after all. It’s not too late to find a good position before the norms arrive. We can ambush *them*.”

“That would be suicide,” says Polaris.

“She’s right, Chalce,” says Namora. “It’s one thing to defend ourselves. But attack?” She shakes her head, sending a flare of purple and neon orange pinwheeling up her neck and across her face. “Look at us: in the shape we’re in, we couldn’t even beat a swarm of termants.”

“All right, all right,” Chalcedon grumbles. “It was just a thought.”

“How’s Feen?” Kestrel asks into the ensuing silence.

“He’s still out of it, but he feels cooler.”

Kestrel's psionics confirm it. "Maybe he's burned out whatever was infecting him."

"I hope so," says Chalcedon. "It's weird, though. His skin feels different. Harder." He shifts the mander in his arms. "See how stiff he is? It's like holding a statue."

"That could be his cellcoms," Polaris says. "If a person's injuries are severe enough, they'll harden into a kind of armor, like a cocoon."

"Or maybe it's still the savvee," suggests Namora. "Maybe the infection has progressed to a new phase."

"Odds!" says Kestrel, tracing the lemniscus in the air. "Poor Feen!"

"Poor all of us, if we don't get to the shelter before the norms pick up our trail," Polaris says.

Chalcedon looks up at that. "I thought this *was* the shelter."

"Just the approach to it," Polaris says. "We've a ways to go yet."

The water level rises the deeper they descend, though Namora pushes the worst of it aside with her psionics. Polaris pauses occasionally, as if uncertain of the way, but Kestrel suspects that what's really going on at such moments is not indecision but negotiation: a netspatial interaction that allows them to bypass whatever hidden defenses are barring the way. Usually there's no indication of a result; Polaris simply resumes her progress without a word of explanation. But sometimes the effect is plain: what had appeared a solid wall or pile of debris flickers and dissolves or just turns transparent, revealing a passage into which Polaris leads them without hesitation. Once through, turning, Kestrel sees the obstruction back in place as though it had never vanished. Only with difficulty does he resist the impulse to touch these illusions, wondering if they could possibly be as solid as they appear. Every so often he calls out silently for Mizar, but the Invisible does not respond. Perhaps, thinks Kestrel, it's taking all his concentration to maintain his control of Polaris and keep her unaware of her invirting.

At last they come to a stone wall that doesn't vanish or fade into transparency. Its rough facade doesn't alter by so much as a flickering pixel as Polaris enters and disappears. For an instant, as Kestrel follows Chalcedon's broad, rocky back into the wall, he's immured in

solid stone, and it's all he can do not to cry out in terror. But then he's through, emerging with a gasp to find himself in a circular room whose granite walls contain a half circle of doors spaced at regular intervals. Kestrel counts twelve of them, all smooth slabs of silvery gray metal. They look old. The whole place looks old, and abandoned, too, as if they're the first to set foot here in centuries.

"Odds!" breathes Chalcedon in a whisper that shatters the silence like a brazen shout. More than ever, Kestrel has the sense of trespassing in someone's tomb. His headcrest stands to attention, a shiver running along his spine. The ground is bone dry and covered to ankle depth with ash-colored dust already drifting into the air from their movements. When he flexes his wings, the dust rises in a swirling cloud that has them all sneezing and cursing.

"Sorry," he says, and disperses it with a breeze. With the dust blown clear, the floor is revealed to be tiled with alternating black and white squares like a huge chessboard. The only exception is a semicircle of solid black where they happen to be standing.

"What is this place, Pol?" asks Chalcedon, still cradling Fenix in his arms. "Is the shelter behind one of those doors?"

"Watch and see," Polaris says teasingly. Then her voice turns deadly serious: "But whatever you do, don't set foot off this space."

Chalcedon turns his head toward Kestrel, who shrugs. Namora, meanwhile, has come to stand beside him. She takes his hand. "Be careful, Pol," she says.

The boggle grins. The bruise on her face is almost gone, the damage healed by her cellcoms. "I'm always care—" She breaks off, her eyes seeming to focus on something far away. Then she blinks and says, "They're here."

"How many?" Kestrel asks.

"Ten. And they've got dogs."

"Great," says Chalcedon. "Now they can track us. I knew this was a mistake!"

"Believe me," Polaris says, "once we're inside the shelter, we'll be safe."

"Tell that to Feen," Chalcedon growls.

"I suppose it's my fault he's sick. Is that what you're saying?"

"You're the one led us into the ambush."

"And you've got rocks for brains."

The delph steps toward her, but Kestrel and Namora haul him back.

"What's wrong with you, Chalce?" Kestrel demands. "This isn't the best molting time to be picking a fight with Polaris, okay?"

"Sorry," he grumbles. "It's just . . ."

"What?" asks Namora.

"Oddsdamn it," he bursts out. "I think I've got it, too. I feel like I'm burning up!"

Silence. Then, from Namora: "That means we're all probably infected."

"I know what it means!" Chalcedon snaps back.

"Don't panic," Polaris says soothingly. "There will be medical supplies inside the shelter."

"I'm not panicking," says Chalcedon. "Just step on it."

"That's exactly what I intend to do." Polaris hands her lumen to Namora, then steps off the solid black semicircle and onto a white square. As soon as her foot touches the tile, a symbol appears on one of the doors, shining with an inner light: the outline of a shapely foot, flexed as though in the act of springing. Sprouting from the ankle are tiny wings, like those of a hummingbird.

"By the Odds!" Kestrel whispers. "I know that sign! It belongs to one of the Orbitals: what's-his-face . . . ?"

"Hermes," says Namora as Polaris leaps to another square: this time, a black. A second symbol blazes to life on a second door: a trident.

"That's Poseidon's sign," Chalcedon says.

Polaris jumps again, and it suddenly strikes Kestrel that, although her trajectory is straight, point to point, the squares she's landing on are spaced in such a way that, if this were a game of chess, only the L-shaped move of a knight could reach them.

A sheaf of wheat.

A lushly laden grapevine.

A lyre.

A bow.

A round shield blazoned with a monstrous face.

A heart pierced by an arrow.

A hammer.

A spear.

A hearthfire.

Polaris pauses, breathing heavily. A single dark door remains. Kestrel sees that the boggle's final leap will bring her back to the same white square from which she started.

"This place is more than an ordinary shelter, isn't it, Pol?" Namora asks meanwhile.

"It's a nexus," Polaris answers. "A place where the individual strands of the medianet come together. Think of it as a knot in net-space. A nexus is a place of great power: so great, that the line between reality and virtuality ceases to exist."

"You mean like an invirting?" Kestrel asks.

She shakes her head. "Invirtings draw you into netspace, submerge you in the virtual world. But nothing in the physical world is changed. In a nexus, virtuality overflows its banks, and netspace comes pouring out into the physical world."

"Are you saying this is all an illusion?"

"If an illusion has substance, is it still an illusion? That dust you disturbed earlier, Kes—it was cellcoms, billions of them, each one a tiny factory ready to assemble or disassemble atoms and molecules into anything and everything. Waiting for instructions from, so to speak, *on high*. Now that dust has dispersed. Where do you think it went?" She flings her arms wide. "Into the air, the ground . . . Into *us*."

"Odds!" says Chalcedon.

Remembering the glimpse that Mizar had given him of the medianet, Kestrel shudders, wondering what horrors Polaris is seeing now as she looks at and into the rest of them. No doubt, he thinks, just as had been the case with him, she's seeing what Mizar *wants* her to see: no more, no less. He wishes again that the Invisible would break his silence and speak to him, if only a word. On some level, despite Mizar's cruel and obnoxious nature, he misses the boggle. For a brief time, thanks to Mizar, his perceptions of the

world had expanded in a way that was terrifying but also marvelous; now that his perceptions are back to normal, Kestrel feels diminished, abandoned. But are these feelings his own, or are they evidence of a continued inverting, of Mizar's domineering will still at work beneath the surface of his conscious mind?

"That's why the College established a shelter here and at other nexus points throughout the Waste," continues Polaris. "Armed with the proper passwords, even a low-level boggle like me can tap into a security system so sophisticated that Pluribus Unum himself couldn't penetrate it. And that's why we'll be safe now." So saying, she leaps, as Kestrel had foreseen, back to the square from which she'd started. A bolt of zigzag lightning blazes upon the final door.

The ground lurches. Kestrel clings to Namora to keep from falling.

"Don't look at me!" cries Chalcedon. "I'm not doing it!"

"Everything's under control," Polaris says as she hops lightly from the white square to land back among them. The black semicircle on which they're standing begins to sink. "Down we go!"

"You might have warned us," Chalcedon says.

She grins. "And spoil the surprise?"

In the light of the lumen, featureless gray walls blur past on all sides. They're sinking far and fast. Above, Kestrel can see nothing of the room from which they'd come, and questing with his psionics he discovers no opening: evidently, the floor has resealed itself behind them. Then a tingling sensation rises from his toes to his head, and the breezy tendrils of his power are suddenly cut off.

"A dampening field," Polaris comments as the platform begins to slow, then glides to a stop. Before them, set into one wall, is a glowing green button. Kestrel reaches for it, but before he can press it, Polaris grabs his arm. "Do you want to get us killed?" she hisses.

"Sorry. I thought—"

"To come this far, then . . ." She runs a hand through her spiky black hair, shaken. "Didn't I tell you not to touch anything?"

"I said I was sorry."

"Just keep your fucking hands to yourself. That goes for the rest of you, too. Now come on." Turning her back on the button, she

pushes past Kestrel and Namora and strides toward a solid wall. Or not so solid: it absorbs her without a ripple.

Chalcedon—is it Kestrel’s imagination, or is the delph moving more stiffly now?—shifts his grip on Fenix and lumbers through behind her.

Kestrel makes to follow, but Namora takes his hand again, stopping him. “Look, if I don’t make my saving throw . . .”

“You’re going to make it,” he says, trying to sound more confident than he feels. “We all are.”

“But if the whim of the Odds should prove otherwise,” she continues, gazing up at him, her bottomless black eyes holding the answers to every question, every doubt, every mystery . . . if only he could look into them long enough, deeply enough, “I want you to know, no matter what happens, that I do love you.”

“I know it.”

“Do you? I wonder . . .”

“Well, don’t.”

“I’m a merm, Kes. I know the effect I have on mutes of other races. We are loved, yes, but also feared. To the rest of you, we are exotic and thus desirable. Yet we are resented as well, suspected of manipulating hearts as coldly as boggles manipulate minds.”

“I don’t think you’ve manipulated me, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“But I have, Kes. Don’t you see? It’s part of who and what I am. Because I was drawn to you, I drew you to me. Oh, not consciously, like a boggle inverting someone against their will. We merms can no more control the feelings of others than we can control our own chromatism. It’s spontaneous, instinctive. But everyone who sees those colors is affected by them regardless of whether or not we wish it.”

“I know all that,” Kestrel says. “I was taught to recognize and resist the hypnotic influence of merm chromatism. I’m with you because I want to be.”

“Yes, but why am *I* with *you*? That’s what you really wonder about, isn’t it? After all these months.”

Kestrel hates himself for having listened to Mizar, but it’s too late. He can’t forget what the Invisible told him. It’s not so much the

chance that Namora is a spy. Rationally, he accepts that possibility, though, in his heart, he's already acquitted her of the charge. And despite what she might think, it doesn't have anything to do with her being a merm and having manipulated him, on some level, into loving her. No, what's eating at him is the possibility that Mizar had manipulated her for his own selfish reasons. That her choice of him hadn't been a free one, and her feelings for him are false, or at any rate inauthentic. He tells himself that it shouldn't matter. And yet it does. Even if Namora sincerely loves him, or, rather, sincerely *believes* she loves him, how can he accept that love without knowing if it carries the taint of a subtle *invirting*? He can't. Not even if he believes, as he does, in the sincerity of *her* feelings, *her* belief. He doesn't have that kind of faith . . . if faith is the word for it. "All right," he sighs. "I admit I still don't understand why you chose me out of all the others . . ."

Her smile shows no offense. "But I didn't choose you, Kestrel! Not in the way you mean. For all your flights of emotion, you airies need a reason for everything, even love. But the heart has its own currents, more mysterious and imperious than those of the air or even of the sea. To fight them is foolish; to understand them, impossible."

"You make your saving throw or you don't, is that it?"

"Love, like everything else, is a whim of the Odds."

Though her voice is tender, he hears sadness there, too, and he wonders if she regrets her feelings for him. Does she wish that she'd made her saving throw? As so often in their relationship, he feels out of his depth. The ways of merms are strange to him. There's no sign of what's going on inside her that he can read in her features, in those black eyes, the beautiful and mesmerizing drift of colors across her face and body. He knows every inch of her by heart, like the lines of the sutures in the *Book of the Odds* or the incision patterns carved into his own skin, yet like those lines, those scars, she remains mysterious. To hold her, to enter her, is not to know her, still less to possess her. What he wants, he realizes, is to *invirt* her, to take possession not only of her body, but of her mind, her feelings, her sensations. Her very self. The desire surprises and shames him: he has more in common with Mizar than he'd thought.

Namora leans forward and presses her lips to his, softly, briefly, then pulls away and disappears into the wall before he can react, leaving him alone on the platform, her lumen somehow transferred to his hand, his lips burning with the heat of her stolen kiss.

The *heat* . . .

Not of passion. Nor love.

The heat of fever.

Suddenly, horribly, her words take on new meaning. Like Fenix and Chalcedon, Namora is infected. She's sick, perhaps dying. She was telling him good-bye. With a cry, Kestrel flings himself after her.

And rebounds from the wall. For a moment, dumbfounded, he can only stand there. Did he hit the wrong spot? He reaches out, feels hard stone beneath his fingers. He runs his hands over the wall, searching for the hidden entrance. But it's gone. Polaris's words come back to him: *If an illusion has substance, is it still an illusion?*

"Namora!" he shouts. "Polaris!"

No answer. He strikes the wall with his fists, but it's futile. And with the dampening field in place, his psionics are too weak to be of any use.

Cellcoms must have solidified the wall, turning illusion into matter. But why? Was it the work of the spy? If so, why didn't Mizar stop it? And what's happening on the other side of the wall? Are the others trying to break through to him?

"Mizar!" he calls aloud. "Answer me, Oddsdamn you!"

But the Invisible keeps his silence.

There is, however, a response.

The glowing green button begins to blink.

Polaris warned him against pushing it. But Kestrel doesn't have a choice now. If they—whoever *they* are—want him dead, there are more straightforward ways to accomplish it. This is an invitation. Or a command. It occurs to him that this could all be taking place in net-space, just another of Mizar's twisted games. But even if that's so, there's nothing he can do but play along. Taking a deep breath, Kestrel pushes the button.

A clicking sound. The button goes dark.

So does his lumen. He can't reignite it. Fortunately, he's carrying

more in his pack. But as he unslings the pack from his shoulders, the platform lurches and falls, catching him off guard. Stumbling in the dark, he remembers how the walls had sped by in a blur during the last descent. He tries to raise enough of a wind to stop himself or at least cushion his impact.

It's no use. The dampening field is too strong. He grunts as his shoulder slams into the wall. The impact lifts him, flings him back. He spreads his wings instinctively.

Something cracks like a breaking branch. *Odds*, he thinks sickly, *my wing* . . . Then an explosion of pain swallows all thought, all sensation.



On the other side, beneath another sun, the canoe glides into a narrow tributary of Miller's Creek that appears on no other maps but their own. The only sounds are the steady dipping of the paddles, the sougling whisper of marsh grasses rubbing against each other in a breeze, the shimmering drone of a million unseen insects, and, in the distance, the muted growl of motorboats. Jack is hot, his body slick with sweat, insect repellent, and suntan lotion. His arms ache from paddling; if he pushes his paddle straight down, he can touch the soft, silted bottom; from here on, the water gets shallower by the stroke. Thoughts drift through the cloudless sky of his mind like airies riding updrafts above the Featherstone Mountains. Clinging to the silver-green stalks of the long grasses just two or three feet away are fluted snail shells, small and black as apple seeds, that remind him of Arabian minarets, each perhaps the miniature abode of a genie: wishes clustered by the thousand, ripe for plucking. Dragonflies hover and dart, their wings iridescent blurs through which the slivers of their bodies glitter like jeweled needles stitching up the fraying fabric of the day. Small yellow-winged butterflies flutter aimlessly, as though expecting to live forever. Swampy, steamy smells of rotting things and growing things press in on all sides.

A ruby droplet falls between his sneakered feet; and another; what water has collected there, puddling in the dented bottom of the canoe, blooms red as poppies. Jack's arms miss their stroke. His paddle hangs motionless, and his heart.

Another drop falls. He watches it strike the water, feels the explosion in his chest. Memories are opening in his mind like flowers nested one inside another. *I did that*, he thinks amid the disorientation of his latest awakening. *I made this happen*.

He opens his mouth to say . . . what? No, he won't make that mistake again. He won't tell Jilly anything. For that's where the current reality diverges from its predecessor. Here there's been no awkward confession, no water fight, no final peevish plunge into the bay. Here the day's simple goal persists unchallenged, unchanged.

It's better this way, he realizes. Easier that Jilly doesn't know, doesn't remember. He sees that now, though he hadn't before, his power wiser than he is. But what other alterations, beyond the obvious, set this world apart? He rubs his nose, trails his fingers over the side of the canoe to wash the blood away.

Jilly's aware that he's stopped paddling; in another second she's going to turn around to see what's the matter. She'll see his bloody nose, and the questions will start again. He can see it all, as if it's already happened.

"Don't look," he warns, which might as well be an invitation.

"Why not?" she asks, beginning to do just that.

"I've gotta pee."

"What?" But she stops.

"I'm taking a pee back here." And in fact, he does have to go; he wonders if his power has orchestrated this as well, foreseeing the need for a distraction. He feels dizzy, imagining a homuncular Bobby Fischer at work inside his brain, plotting out an infinitude of possible moves and combinations in this multidimensional chess game he's found himself in the middle of playing. Meanwhile, in the here and now, it turns out there are certain logistical problems involved in peeing from the back of a canoe.

"Can't you wait? We're almost there."

"It'll only take a second." He lays his paddle athwart the canoe, then shuffles with minute care sideways like a crab until he's kneeling on the seat. The craft moves skittishly beneath him. "Hold us steady, Jilly."

"Just hurry up, okay?" She plunges her paddle down on the same side; clear creek water rises a little more than halfway up its length before it strikes bottom. Braced, the canoe steadies. An inky cloud spreads over the surface.

"What's the rush?" Jack bunches down the front of his bathing suit and sends his stream arcing over the side, urine glittering like lemonade in the sunlight. His nose has stopped bleeding. Which is just as well, because he's aware that Jilly's watching.

"You're not the only one who's got to pee," she says. "Sometimes I wish I was a boy. Those things can come in handy. Girls don't have it so easy."

Jack shrugs, feeling the heat of the sun on his shoulders; what girl in her right mind wouldn't wish to be a boy? The current has carried the cloud of silt back to him. The roiling, muddy blackness reminds him of how the sky had looked during the hurricane. He aims for it, but it's too dense to be dispersed, too dark to be lightened.

"What does it feel like coming out? Does it tickle?"

"Jeez, Jilly! I don't know." He shakes himself, scattering a few last drops, then hoists up his suit and maneuvers himself back into a sitting position. "I never thought about it. Why? Does yours?"

"Sometimes." She squirms around to face forward again. "But now I've *really* gotta go." She resumes paddling; he joins in.

In the shallow water, pandemonium among the crabs. Amused, Jack watches them flee to either side of the advancing canoe. Jilly pokes at a big one with her paddle, trying to shovel it up out of the water. But the crab sidles away, its blue-edged claws raised menacingly, frantic legs stirring a smoke screen of sediment. She laughs: "Look at that Jimmy go!"

The local nickname for male crabs is a source of endless Doonish delight. Females are called Sooks, and it's become a tradition on crabbing expeditions to tease Uncle Jimmy about his mythical wife,

Aunt Sook. A whole repertoire has developed, like some stand-up comic's routine, excerpts of which Jack can't help repeating to himself as they go.

"She's got a thick skin, my Sook. No getting through that shell. And a temper? Why, she'd as soon pinch you as look at you!"

"Why'd you marry her?"

"Once she sank her claws into me, there was no getting loose."

"What kind of cake did you have at the wedding?"

"Crab cake!"

"Where did you spend your honeymoon?"

"Niagara Claws. We left our bags at the crustacean."

Can this really be the man who's trying to kill him? It doesn't seem possible. Not once, in all his memories of his uncle, has Jack felt remotely threatened by him. Uncle Jimmy's always been a friend, an ally. He's turned them on to games, music, comic books. Though Uncle Jimmy is twenty-six, Jack's never thought of him as an adult. He's just a bigger, older, cooler kid. He spends his time making up *games*; it's his goddamn *job*.

Some people—Bill and Peggy, for instance—would see Uncle Jimmy's relationship with his seventeen-year-old niece as a betrayal of trust and judge him to be a bad or evil man because of it: a drug pusher, a pervert, a criminal. Not Jack. Morality doesn't enter into Jack's thinking on this subject; or, if it does, it's a different morality than what's taught in school and church. As far as he's concerned, what's going on between Ellen and Uncle Jimmy isn't an older man taking advantage of a young girl, it's two kids thumbing their noses at the grown-up world. As such, their behavior is covered by the same code of silence, denial, and obfuscation that unites kids everywhere. Jack will not betray that code. He will not judge; he will not tattle.

Even if he did, what would be the point? Jack's beginning to appreciate the strategy and tactics of this game, this real-life version of *Mutes & Norms* he's suddenly found himself in the middle of playing. If Uncle Jimmy is indeed his opponent, or one of them, and possesses the same power that Jack does, then he, like Jack, can undo

any action taken against him. Jack could tattle to Bill or Peggy about the pot or the sex; he could even make an anonymous phone call to the cops. But none of it would have a lasting effect. It wouldn't remove Uncle Jimmy from the game. On the contrary, Uncle Jimmy could use his power to remake the world in a way that would counter Jack's move and threaten him in turn.

No, Jack realizes, that kind of intervention is useless. Death isn't necessarily final, as his own experiences have taught him. The point is not to make his opponent cease to exist. The point is to remake the world so that his opponent *never existed*: to slip the net of his annihilating mind behind the unsuspecting crab of his opponent's consciousness and scoop it out of the water entirely. Bye-bye, Jimmy.

But what if he's wrong? What if, despite everything, Uncle Jimmy doesn't share his power and isn't playing against him? What if he's innocent, a (so to speak) norm? There must be some way to resolve this question. Some way to know for certain. What would Holmes do?

Maybe spilling the beans about Ellen isn't such a bad idea after all. If Uncle Jimmy really *is* his opponent, his hand will be forced. To save himself, he'll have to remake reality. And, if possible, in a way that eliminates Jack . . . But then, somebody's already trying to do that anyway, so it's not like Jack will be running an extra risk; he'll just have to go on trusting his own power to protect him. Meanwhile, if Uncle Jimmy *doesn't* act, if he remains under arrest or in jail or whatever, then Jack will have proof that Uncle Jimmy isn't his opponent. Which would be a good thing to know; it will free him to look elsewhere for the real threat. Nor will Uncle Jimmy suffer, at least not for long, because Jack can change things back to how they were, fix it so that he never betrayed Uncle Jimmy in the first place; he feels confident, especially after this latest episode, that he's gaining control over his power at last. Soon he'll be able to do whatever he pleases. And as long as he can undo it, fix anything that goes wrong, there's no need to feel guilty about any of it; it's no different than playing through multiple variations on a chessboard, then moving the pieces back to their original positions after deciding on the best move.

The canoe scrapes bottom. Jack and Jilly stow their paddles and

jump out on opposite sides. The ooze of the creek bottom swallows their sneakered feet to the ankles. Wordlessly, they drag the canoe through scratchy cattails and marsh grasses, some taller than they are, hauling it up onto a sloping fringe of sand marked with the tracks of birds and raccoons. Behind this sliver of beach is a brown-and-green wall of woods splashed with flowers, birds, and butterflies; they are deep in the Fenwick Wildlife Area, in a spot they'd stumbled across some weeks ago (in this branching of reality) while mapping the tributaries of Miller's Creek. It's easy to believe, as they do, that no other human being has set foot here for hundreds of years, if ever.

Jilly wastes no time in dropping the canoe and shedding her cut-offs, nearly losing her balance as she kicks them over her muddy sneakers. Jack can't help laughing; she glares at him, skinny brown knees pressed together below bright green bikini bottoms, then turns and heads for the woods. But after three inelegant steps, she squats, the ridge of her spine knuckling her back as she yanks aside the crotch of her bikini bottoms to expose the white half-moon of one butt cheek, and begins, with a groan of pure animal release, to pee.

"Jesus, Jilly!" He's still laughing, but it's a different sort of laughter. Although they've shared showers, gotten dressed and undressed in front of each other without a shred of inhibition, even, in bygone years, played their share of Doctor, here's a sight he's never seen or thought to see. She really did have to go; her pee hisses into the sand with impressive force, running down the beach between her sneakers in a dark, fizzy stream that reminds him of spilled Coca-Cola.

At last, finished, she snaps her bikini bottoms back into place, stands, and turns to him with a smirk. "Get a good look?"

"You watched me."

Jilly laughs dismissively, striding over to where her discarded cutoffs lie in the sand. While she picks them up and shakes them out, Jack lifts his backpack out of the canoe. He's bending to get hers when a pinch on the butt makes him squawk and jump.

"Hey!"

She slides by, slick with sweat and lotion, and grabs the pack herself. "Let's eat, Jack. I'm starving."

They walk over to a spot at the edge of the woods where the overhanging branches of pine trees form a canopy above the sand. There, amid fallen needles and pine cones, they drop to their knees and pull a picnic from their backpacks. Soon they're sitting side by side on their spread beach towels eating somewhat-squashed peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, sipping warm water from plastic bottles, and waving away pesky gnats, mosquitoes, and blackflies. According to their watches, it's almost one-thirty; behind the prickly scrim of branches, the flickering sun will rise no higher. The day is in decline. In another hour or two, they'll have to start back. But there's no hurry yet.

Jilly, as is her habit in such isolated spots, has removed her bikini top. At the start of the summer her chest had been as flat as Jack's, but now, in mid-August, that's no longer true. Her nipples, once little more than pink dimples puckering the skin, have budded, darkening, and the flesh around them has begun to swell. Her hips are fuller than they were; straight lines are everywhere turning to curves, bent by puberty's pull. Jack has been a spectator at this season of slow ripening, watching the process with fascinated interest but also, at times, a feeling of jealousy, as if there's a secret she's keeping from him, a power that she possesses, or that is coming to possess her, which he can never share, and which will take her away from him. And yet, he thinks, what does he have to be jealous of? *He's* the one with the *real* power. Jilly's only obeying the call of nature. Nature obeys *his* call.

Jilly, her sandwich finished, swivels on one hip and roots through her backpack, producing after a moment a bag containing the joint she'd stolen from Uncle Jimmy, along with a red Bic lighter. "I don't know if it'll get us high or not, but at least the smoke'll keep the flies away."

Jack follows her example. "Unless they *like* the smell. Maybe it gets them high, too. Maybe it gives 'em the munchies."

"I never thought of that. I didn't bring any regular cigs, did you?"

"Nope. Just fireworks—see?" He pulls out another bag, this one filled with the candy-colored shapes of Jumping Jacks. "Maybe these'll scare 'em off."

"Now you're just being stupid."

“Well, ex-cuuuuuse me,” says Steve Martin.

With a roll of her eyes, Jilly shakes the contents of the bag out onto her towel. She picks up the joint and brings it to her nose, inhaling deeply, appreciatively, a cannabis connoisseur. “Ahh . . .” Then, features twisting comically: “Ah, ah, ah-choo!”

Jack howls with laughter. Jilly, too. From the woods behind them come the sounds of startled birds taking wing and other unseen creatures fleeing on the ground and in the branches. This sets them off even more: it’s like in those old Tarzan movies, when Weissmuller gives his jungle cry and the camera cuts to herds of elephants on the move, antelopes pronging, lions leaping, crocodiles gliding into rivers, monkeys swinging through the trees.

When they’re sitting upright again, able to breathe more or less normally and look each other in the eye without lapsing back into giggles, Jilly proposes that they light up. “Why should Ellen have all the fun?”

She slides the joint between her lips and, striking the Bic to life, lights it. She inhales deeply. Then, as if smoking a cigarette for the first time, begins to cough, hacking out smoke.

Jack laughs nervously. “Jesus, Jilly!”

Her eyes are watering. “Man, that’s harsh,” she gasps, passing him the joint.

He stabs it between his lips, tastes a hint of strawberry jelly. Then inhales. Not only the taste but the texture of the smoke differs from that of ordinary cigarettes; the pot burns rawer and hotter than tobacco: it scrapes his throat all the way down and expands in his lungs until, like Jilly, he’s coughing. “Damn,” he wheezes, feeling a bit dizzy.

Jilly plucks the joint from his fingers. This time she’s more cautious, taking the equivalent of a sip. “That’s better.” Her voice comes out in a croak from the effort of holding in the smoke.

They fall into an unhurried rhythm, passing the joint back and forth with barely a word until it dwindles to a nub they can only pinch with difficulty between their fingers. When it drops to the sand during a bungled exchange, neither of them makes a move to pick it up, watching the thin gray line of smoke trail upward.

"So, do you feel anything?" Jilly asks after a moment.

"Nope. You?"

She shakes her head. "Guess we better smoke the other one."

For some reason, Jack can't remember where he put the other joint. The bag's not on his towel, nor is it anywhere on the beach nearby. Maybe, he thinks, giggling, he left it in another reality.

"What's so funny?" Jilly wants to know. "You haven't lost it, have you?"

"It's around here somewhere," he says, peering into his backpack. "Ah-ha!" And pulls out the Jumping Jacks. "I bet these'd get us high."

"You're already high," Jilly accuses with a quirked smile.

"Am not!" But even as he denies it, he wonders if she's right. He's not exactly sure what being high is supposed to feel like. He's heard descriptions from other kids, but you can't always trust other kids. At least now he'll be able to put in his own two cents on the subject when school starts up again. Which, come to think of it, is less than three weeks away. If only he could figure out how to use his power to keep school from ever starting! He could stay here forever, on this sliver of beach, he and Jilly living through the same happy hours again and again, like listening to a favorite song played over and over on the radio. He'd be safe then, tucked away in a kind of looping time warp no opponent could penetrate. Never growing older, never growing up, he and Jilly living like Peter Pan and Wendy . . .

"Earth to Jack! Do you read? Over."

He blinks as Jilly, laughing, snatches the fireworks from his hand.

"You're *stoned*."

It's weird that "stoned" means the same thing as "high." High is like an airie flying way up in the sky. Stones are heavy, earthbound, like delves. Or does it mean to have stones thrown *at* you, like in that lottery story he read for school? Staggering around in a daze as rocks go bouncing off your noggin. Which is pretty funny, come to think of it.

"What?" Jilly demands, wanting in on the joke. "Tell me!"

He shakes his head, helpless to explain. A ribbon of smoke is unraveling from the butt of the discarded joint as if no time has passed since they dropped it. He falls back onto his beach towel, eyes trac-

ing the persistent miracle of the smoke's winding course up through the air and into the branches overhead. There's a shimmering, singing greenness to the world that he hadn't noticed until now. It makes his heart swell like some mutant fruit that grows lighter as it ripens and, instead of falling from the bough, breaks free and floats upward. The jolly lemon sun tips him a wink behind the bristling veil of branches. Gulls and crows laugh along in approval. He shuts his eyes, letting himself float upward, following the smoke . . .

Darkness falls, warm and soft, across his face. He sits up in surprise, flinging it off like a spiderweb. Jilly's standing before him, hands on her hips, gazing down at him with an expression of exhausted patience.

"I didn't bring you here so you could take a nap," she says.

Jack looks from her to his hand, where his fingers are tangled in her discarded green bikini bottoms, then back to her, blinking like an idiot as he takes in the sight of her naked body dappled like a merm's with shadow and light. "You . . . brought . . ."

She kneels down next to him, deftly untangles the garment from his fingers and tosses it aside. "Don't you wonder what it's like?" she asks, staring at him with an intensity that he's seen in her eyes before.

He struggles to gather his wits. "What what's like?"

Her laughter is a little wild, and it conveys to Jack all at once, like an electric shock, the fact that she's as high or stoned or whatever you want to call it as he is. "You know," she says.

He shakes his head, feeling dazed and slow, his perceptions lagging behind events by some small but significant measure. His heart is pounding along in his chest, trying to catch up.

"What *they* do," says Jilly.

"You want . . ." He swallows, his mouth gone dry. He's thinking that there are other, more ordinary ways of altering reality: focused so intently on the mind, he'd forgotten all about the body. "I mean, you planned the whole time . . ."

"Why should Ellen have all the fun?" Giggling, she tumbles against him. Her skin, like his own, is hot and slick. One hand clutches between his legs, tugging at his bathing suit as she tries to

kiss him. Running along their private connection he feels a frighteningly raw hunger and, beneath it, Jilly's customary cool resolve . . . which, under the circumstances, is more frightening still.

He squirms away, averting his face, fighting her. It's not so much that he's against the idea; if he had a chance to consider it, he might go along with her. Why not? He's curious, too, after all. But she hasn't given him that chance. There's no time to think. He can only react. "Quit it, Jilly!"

"No, you quit!" As always, she has to get her way. She comes on, wrestling in earnest, banging an elbow, whether purposefully or not, hard into his side. They're off his towel now, sand clinging to their bodies so that their skins no longer slide but scrape against each other and the fallen branches and pinecones strewn over the beach.

Then there's no room for words, just the sound of labored breathing and the grunts and groans of a fight as brutal as any they've ever engaged in. Elbows, knees, fists fly; fingernails claw without mercy. As usual, Jack's on the losing side; it isn't long before Jilly's gained the upper hand; after that, the outcome is no longer in doubt, if it ever was. Physically, he's no match for her. He never has been. But he's got other weapons in his arsenal now. If he can't beat her with his body, he'll use his mind, his power. He's surprised it hasn't kicked in already. Or maybe it's not so surprising—turning his power against Jilly is like turning it against himself.

But there's no other choice. Things have gotten out of hand. She's got him pinned on his back and is straddling his chest, her knees pressing his arms into the sand. Her crotch, stubbled with sand, is inches from his face, and there's no turning away from what, until now, he's only seen this close in the glossy pages of magazines ogled at school or in the houses of friends, though of course this is different, Jilly being so much younger than the women depicted there and, well, his sister.

"Say . . . uncle," she gasps out.

He squirms, feeling like he's about to burst into tears. He hates her for doing this, for trying to bend him to her will, for making him do what he has to do to defend himself. He's groping for his

power, but he can't quite reach it; he still hasn't gotten the knack of invoking it consciously, though he's close, maddeningly close. He's right on the edge.

"Jack, I'm . . . warning you . . ." She's turned half away from him, trying to yank down his bathing suit with one hand.

He sinks his teeth into the salty, sandy flesh of her thigh. Jilly screams with pain and anger, and he feels her fist smash down hard into his face. Something cracks in the bridge of his nose; for a second, a searing white agony blinds him. The next thing he knows, blood is gushing everywhere. The flood carries him over.

On the other side, he's lying on the sand. Jilly's on top of him. There's no struggle here; their lips are grazing, the tips of their tongues softly, wetly tip-tapping, saying howdy, hello. His eyes closed, Jack feels the flutter of Jilly's lashes on his own like a whisper of butterfly wings; their hearts are beating in a single rhythm whose thudding echo fills the world. Her kisses taste of apples and strawberries.

And blood.

Gasping, he pulls away.

As does Jilly. "Your *nose* . . ."

Jack gapes in horror as the floodgates of memory swing open. This isn't the escape he'd had in mind. It's no escape at all. Here he's as naked as Jilly, and as willing. His wilting penis hangs its guilty head. He remembers in a flash how things had unfolded in this reality: the idea of it hatched between them days before, the plan discussed and agreed to, then, once arrived on this isolated shore, a mutual seduction that proceeded with easeful laughter and whispers of encouragement, a playful game of kisses and caresses made up as they went along, rough patches eased by the joint they'd smoked and by a desire that had grown stronger with each moment and is still present. This, he can't help feeling, is how it should have gone from the first. Except it hadn't. These happier events do not erase his knowledge of what preceded them. Or the feelings of anger, betrayal, and aversion wringing his heart and stomach. It only makes them a million times harder to bear. Not because what had seemed so real has been unmasked as an illusion, a lie. That

would be bad enough . . . and yet, in its way, a relief. What's worse is that he knows there *is* no illusion. This world is real, *and so are all the others*. He exists in them for a time. Then they go on existing in him forever.

Jilly, meanwhile, has pulled a napkin from her backpack and is reaching it toward him with a look of concern. She's all solicitude in this reality, aware—as she must have been before, only less willing to ignore it now—of a disturbance at the other end of their extrasensory telephone line.

"Don't . . . !" Jack retreats across the sand. He can't understand why, out of all the possibilities, his power had settled on this one. But if it had chosen differently, wouldn't he still have the same memories, the same feelings? Wouldn't it be just as unbearable to be touched by Jilly now no matter what the circumstances?

Will he ever be able to bear her touch again?

She comes after him just as she had before. "Jack, what's the matter with you?"

"Get away . . . !" His voice trembles on the verge of hysteria. The thing of it is, he can talk all he wants about his power having chosen this, but that's just a way to avoid the truth, which is that he chose it himself. Maybe not consciously, but still, if he's in this here and now and not some other one, it's because, on some level, he wants to be. Which wouldn't be so terrible, perhaps, except for the memories. Except for the feelings that make his flesh crawl and his gorge rise as Jilly, ignoring his words as she had before, wanting only to stanch the bleeding, crawls close enough to touch him. And even those feelings might not be so overwhelming if he could just get away from her and from all of this for a while, long enough to begin sorting things out for himself. But he can't escape; there's nowhere to escape to. Her fingers graze his ankle, little more than a passing breeze. Yet, with a brittle cry, he shatters like glass.

Then he's whole again. He's lying in the sand, Jilly straddling him as she had before. They're not fighting. Nor are they kissing. They are joined body to body in the one way that makes twins of all men and women for a time. But it makes Jack and Jilly, already twins, so much more. Jack feels as though they're melting together into a sin-

gle flesh, the invisible bond they've always shared becoming visible, substantial, surrounding them like a shining silver skin, a cocoon out of which, like the cocoons that birthed the mutes, something wonderful will hatch, something never before encountered in the world. Its mere presence will change everything. He feels it stirring deep inside, in the place where he and Jilly are closest.

This time, when Jack's nose and memories begin to bleed, awakening him to an inner solar system grown more crowded by the addition of another world, the accompanying horror dwarfs anything he's ever known or imagined. He pulls away with a groan, knocking Jilly onto her side as he scoots backward like a panicked crab. Her shocked expression gives way to annoyance, then concern as she lifts herself on one elbow.

"Jack, your *nose* . . ."

He'd wished idly, back in that first reality, or, rather, the first in this particular series, moments or eternities ago, that he and Jilly could rest in this bower of beach and pine forever, endlessly repeating the same moment in time, but this isn't quite what he'd had in mind. Yet maybe it's enough that he'd had it in mind at all. Is that what's responsible for this waking nightmare? An idle wish granted, as in some cautionary fairy tale? He can't bear to think that. Can't bear to think anything. He wants only to escape, to forget. Jilly is reaching for him, and her touch is not to be denied in this world any more than in the others.

In the next, things have advanced a bit further by the time Jack remembers. And, in the world after that, a little bit further still. At first, as the iterations multiply, Jack struggles to control his power, to harness, then wield it with a surgeon's precision, cutting out not just the cancer of events but his memory of them . . . for surely, he thinks—with that portion of his mind still, after a fashion, able to think, an icy splinter shrinking fast in this boiling sea of incarnations—surely that should be possible. But it's no use. He can't do it. At last he's reduced to fighting his power, raging against it with every ounce of energy horror can instill, as though it, and not Uncle Jimmy or some other, unknown adversary, is his real enemy. In this, too, he fails.

Can it be that his power is defending him from some unprecedented series of attacks? That his place in the game, his very existence, is under sustained assault? But that doesn't explain why his power is defending him in just this way, bringing him back again and again into a situation with Jilly that, like some hell-designed torment, first floods him with a pleasure so intense as to be all but unendurable and then, in the blink of an eye, dissolves that pleasure in a flood of memories still less endurable, until he's drowning in revulsion, choking on it, vomiting it up like bile.

Yet what if his power isn't to blame? What if, on the contrary, it's the power of his adversary that's doing it? What if he's coming back to the same situation, the circumstances a little further advanced each time, because, though he's dug in his heels and is dragging them with all his might, that's where the stronger power—the stronger desire—is pulling him against his will, inch by agonizing inch? At that thought, a cold, nauseating certainty grips him.

I didn't bring you here so you could take a nap, she'd said. Why should Ellen have all the fun?

It's Jilly. *She's* his adversary. His enemy. He was blind not to have seen it sooner.

Jack pulls away from her again, leaves her sprawled on the sand, raising herself on her elbow to look after him as she has a dozen or more times already.

"Jack, your *nose . . . it's bleeding . . .*"

"You knew," he says, crawling backward over the sand. "When I told you before about my power, you only pretended not to know what I was talking about. But you knew. You knew because you have the exact same power."

Her expression is one of bafflement. "What power?"

"Don't lie! You know what power—you used it when I tipped over the canoe. You're using it right now to get what you want!"

"I don't understand," she protests as she crawls after him on hands and knees with that same solicitous look he's seen so often. "You never tipped over the canoe. And both of us want this."

"Stay back, Jilly. I'm warning you . . ." For the first time, he notices a trickle of blood running down her thigh like some parallel

expression of his own bleeding; the sight only adds to his confusion and distress, yet he's helpless to avert his eyes.

"Why are you being like this?" she demands, still coming on.
"What's wrong?"

"Leave me alone!" he demands in turn.

Hurt deepens in her eyes. "But . . ."

"I mean it! Quit torturing me! I hate you!"

Anger and determination flash through the hurt. "You're chickening out," she says. "After all this, you're gonna chicken out." Her lips press in a grim line, eyes narrowing. "Well, I won't let you."

She grabs his ankle.

Again the world shatters, re-forms.

Again he remembers, pulls away.

"Your *nose* . . ."

"There!" he cries, scuttling over the shade-cooled sand. "You just did it!"

Propped on her elbow, she looks at him, baffled. "Did what?"

"Used your power to change everything!"

"What power? You're scaring me, Jack!"

"Keep away, Jilly. Don't touch me!"

But she does.

The cycle continues.

At last, his arguments exhausted, Jack's compelled to admit to himself that she's not lying. She really doesn't know. Jilly has no idea what she's doing, what she's done. Unlike him, she doesn't remember. But it doesn't make sense. Why would they share the same power but not the same ability to remember the realities they've created, then destroyed? Why would those ghosts of discarded lives haunt him but not her? Unless . . .

No. It can't be. It wouldn't be fair. He recoils from the thought, denies it.

But it's as persistent as she is. *Unless they don't share the same power at all.* Unless they each have a *different* power. Or, he thinks, a single power is split between them, a power that, in a singleton, would have remained whole but which, because they're twins, is divided, Jilly possessing half and he the other.

What if they're not adversaries at all, but, in a weird kind of way, partners?

What if Jilly has the power to change history, remake the world, while he has the power to remember those changes?

Power? More like a joke. A curse. Jilly's the lucky one.

Yet why should that surprise him? Hasn't she always been first in everything? Isn't she always the best? She's smarter, stronger, faster than he is. And luckier, too—in *Mutes & Norms*, she always makes her saving throw. He thought he'd finally found something that she couldn't beat him at, an ability she didn't possess. Something belonging to him alone, that set him apart from her and from everybody else in the world . . . or almost everybody else. But now Jack sees how wrong he was. He was fooling himself. In this, as in everything else, Jilly had gotten first dibs, and he'd been stuck with the leftovers. When he thinks back over all the supposed exercises of his power, from the wave onward, he realizes that Jilly was right there every time. It was she who was being attacked, she who was instinctively responding. She's the threat to the other players of the game, not him. If he's benefited by any of her actions, it's because of their closeness, the bond they share; she carries him along in her slipstream, and she doesn't know it. She doesn't *want* to know it. The one time he'd tried to tell her (wrongheaded though his interpretation has turned out to be), she'd erased the whole episode.

It strikes him suddenly how dangerous she is. Her power is only half of what it should be; without the ability to remember what she's done, she can never become aware of all she can do. She can never recognize the power she possesses or learn to control it. Instead, her power is and always will be capricious, triggered by impulses of desire or fear, its exercise without consequences . . . as far as she knows. He's already experienced—is still right in the middle of experiencing—the horrors that can lead to.

Yet she's helpless, too. In her ignorance, her innocence, she's a sitting duck for whoever possesses the power in its entirety. Maybe he was wrong to think that Jilly was his adversary, but that doesn't mean there *is* no adversary. Or adversaries. A murderous game is being played, of that he's sure, and Jilly has no clue she's a part of it.

She can't imagine the danger she's in; nor would she believe him if he tried to convince her. The fact that her power has kept her alive this long is no guarantee that it will continue to do so; she can't fight back . . . she can only react out of unconscious reflex. Just as she'd done in saving him. That was when it had all started, he realizes. When he'd taken her dare and ridden the wave . . . and drowned. The shock of his death and the resulting desire to undo what had happened must have awakened this ability in her, which had been lying dormant until then. It occurs to Jack that he's responsible for everything that's taken place; if he hadn't ridden that wave, none of this would have happened. He owes Jilly his life. Now, because of him, her life is in danger. Will he sit by and watch her be killed? Or, worse, erased from the world, leaving only him and her murderer to remember, and only him to mourn? No! Maybe he can't work miracles like Jilly, but, thanks to his half of the power, he knows what she doesn't know. Somehow he's got to use that knowledge to protect her.

Once he reaches this conclusion, Jack understands what he has to do. The next time his memories come flooding back, he doesn't pull away from Jilly or struggle at all. He forces himself to stay right where he is, his body matching its movements to hers as she rocks above him, her eyes closed, her expression one of intense concentration. After the first shocking instant, it's not so difficult. Instead of surrendering to the chaos of memories and emotions as before, letting them overwhelm him and sweep his body away like a leaf in a hurricane, he holds his body steady and finds his mind swept away instead, whirled up and out of his body until he feels connected to it by the slenderest of threads, as though he's found his own way into netspace. From there, he watches his body perform, even shares its pleasure in a distant, attenuated way, just as, faintly, he can hear another part of himself screaming.

When it's over, and Jilly flops against him with a gasp and a giggle, he falls back into his body. He watches her eyes flutter open, then grow wide as she pulls back, startled.

"Jack, your nose . . . it's *bleeding!*"

"I know," he says.

"Well, jeez, what happened?"

"I guess we got a little carried away."

"Sorry." She giggles again, then, in scooting off him, notices her own blood. "Damn, I'm bleeding, too! I didn't realize this would be so messy. We better get cleaned up before we do it again."

"Again?" He sits up, hugging his knees to his chest, heart thumping.

"Why, didn't you like it?"

Deep inside, he's quivering like a piece of meat pounded to jelly between an anvil and a hammer. "We gotta get home."

Jilly checks her watch. "Shit, it's after five! Uncle Jimmy's gonna kill us!"

Not if I can help it, he thinks.



Darkness. Darkness and dull, throbbing pain. It's a moment before Kestrel remembers what happened. Then, groaning, he tries to stand, summoning a wind to help him. But the dampening field is still in effect, and the resulting breeze does no more than ruffle his feathers. Yet even that sends shards of agony stabbing through his wings, a pain so intense he's afraid he's going to pass out again. He dry-heaves, whimpering, sweat pouring off him, the stench rank in his nostrils.

After what seems like centuries, he can think again. How badly is he hurt? He knows his cellcoms are at work already, healing him, but some injuries are beyond their capabilities and require the attention of Holy Rollers. And even *they* can't heal everything. He thinks of old Pigeon with his crippled wing. Is that to be his fate, too? Did he miss his saving throw?

Mizar! If you can hear me, please answer . . .

Silence. Kestrel wonders if the dampening field is responsible. Perhaps it's broken the invirting or made it more difficult for Mizar to communicate with him.

More likely the Invisible is keeping silent just to torment him.

Steeling himself, Kestrel rises to his hands and knees by slow and

fearful increments, holding his wings absolutely still. Then he tests them, one at a time. The right wing hurts when he gingerly flexes it, but the range of motion seems normal, impeded only by an unseen wall. He draws it back, moves on to the left . . .

And screams as bone grinds against bone.

This time, he *does* pass out.

When he wakes, he can no longer feel his wings at all. Reaching back in a panic, his fingers find not feathers but a smooth, hard shell, like polished bone. It's his cellcoms, he realizes. While he lay unconscious, they'd extruded a cast around his wings and deadened the nerves within. Once again he thinks of Pigeon, and of the army of crippled mutes on the streets of the Many-sided City. More than anything, he dreads joining their ranks, becoming an object of scorn or, worse, pity. Those are the true Invisibles, he thinks. Not because they can't be seen. But because we don't choose to see them.

Without his wings to hobble him, Kestrel is able to stand with ease. At least his legs haven't betrayed him. He's got to find a way out of here . . . wherever *here* is. Find a way back to Namora and the others, and to the help that Mizar had said was coming. Perhaps it's already arrived. Perhaps they're looking for him even now. But he can't wait to be found. The norms might be looking, too.

Meanwhile, his instinctive airie claustrophobia is rearing its head—nothing he can't handle, but he could do without the distraction just now. A little light would help. He carries a supply of fresh lumens in his backpack . . . which he'd dropped somewhere. Kindling a breeze with his enfeebled psionics, he sends it swirling outward, an invisible feeler that encounters, first, his pack, lying on the floor, then the walls surrounding him in an unbroken circle. It's a poor substitute for sight, but better than nothing.

What if there's no way out? What if he's trapped here?

He forces himself to walk unhurriedly to his backpack. If not for the dampening field, he could have wafted it to himself with a thought. Now he's got to stoop like a common norm to pick it up from the ground. He opens it and roots through the contents until he finds the familiar length of a lumen. He draws it out and kindles it.

Nothing.

He tries another.

Still nothing.

Only then does he recall how the lumen he'd been holding at the time had been extinguished when he'd pressed the green button. Something, perhaps the dampening field, is interfering with the chemical reaction that gives lumens their distinctive glow. But he's not beaten yet. His pack also contains matches. He finds the square box, gives it a reassuring rattle, opens it carefully, removes a wooden match, and strikes it.

A spark flares, but the match doesn't ignite. Annoyed, Kestrel strikes another. This time there's not even a spark, though he smells burning sulfur and phosphorus. He doesn't bother trying a third. He's got a feeling he could go through the entire box without getting one to light. Whatever is squelching his lumens is doing to the same thing to his matches.

Cursing, he flings the box. He hears it strike a wall and fall to the floor. Well, he thinks, that certainly accomplished a lot. He advances, limping slightly, one hand outstretched, until he touches the wall. It's rough, cool, and damp. Setting down his pack, he brings up his other hand and explores the surface of the wall, his fingers probing every niche and crevice. When he's through with that section, he steps to his left and begins anew. When he reaches his pack again, he'll know he's completed a full circle. And then? What will he do then?

Worry about that later, he tells himself.

At the sixth section, his fingertips brush—and sink into—something unpleasantly gelatinous. He jerks back his hand with a gasp. Then he touches the spot again, probing gently up and down the wall; the anomaly extends from floor to ceiling. He pushes his fingers into the yielding substance again. His hand sinks up to the wrist before breaking through into open air. Kestrel pulls it out to the accompaniment of a sucking sound. He can think of no way to learn what lies on the other side without giving his presence away to anyone or anything that might be waiting there, assuming he hasn't already. But just as the blinking green button had left him no choice but to press it, so, too, does this discovery strike him as an invitation

impossible to refuse. He's always scorned the antech weaponry of the norms, but he'd give a lot for such a weapon now. Without his psionics, he feels naked, helpless. But he's still got his inborn airie speed and strength. No dampening field can rob him of that. And he's got bladeweeds. The sharp stalks make formidable weapons. He returns to his pack, removes a bladeweed, carefully strips its fibrous sheath by touch alone. Then, bladeweed in one hand, backpack in the other, he finds the gooey section of wall. Whispering a prayer to the great and powerful Odds, he pushes himself through.

Into a darkness indistinguishable from what he'd left behind. He freezes, listening, but hears only the rasp of his own breathing and the pounding of his heart. He quests ahead with a breeze that disperses without encountering any obstruction. Which tells him two things: he's in a larger space than before, and the dampening field is still in place. It's no real surprise to discover that lumens don't work here, either. Nor matches. The wall through which he'd come is solid now.

He can't go back, only forward. He's being herded. But by whom? Toward what?

There's only one way to find out.

Progress is slow. Still grasping the bladeweed, Kestrel runs the heel of his hand along the wall while groping before him with his weakened psionics. Every few feet he stops and listens, holding his breath, but what little he hears is difficult to pin down in terms of distance or direction: a hollow soughing of wind; the plangent echo of water dripping into water; rustlings as of small things scurrying from his approach. Sometimes voices reach him faintly, but he can't tell if they're real: as soon as he focuses on them, they disappear or resolve into the natural noises of the place. The air carries a crisp, mineral tang. How far underground has he come? His sense of the darkness fluctuates wildly, expanding one minute until it seems to him that he's in a cavern extending for miles, then dwindling until he feels its closeness pressing against him like the inner shell of a sarcophagus.

With each step, he wonders if the ground will fall away beneath his feet: with his wings useless, his powers all but gone, he would

plummet like a stone. He imagines the ground materializing ahead of him, then dissolving behind, where he stands at any given moment the only firmament in existence . . . temporarily. Or, on the contrary, it seems to him that everything is solid *except* the space around him: a bubble of air that moves along with him through a universe of stone, self-contained, fragile, entirely beyond his control or influence. *In a nexus*, Polaris had said, *virtuality overflows its banks, and netspace comes pouring out into the physical world.*

The darkness appears to intensify as he creeps forward. It seems to be linked somehow to his fear. Or perhaps his fear and the darkness are effects of a single mysterious cause. If only he could access netspace! For even here, deep below the surface of the earth, the architecture of the medianet is present: the nervous system of the Orbitals that Mizar had showed him.

And also present, above even the Orbitals: the Odds. Or not above so much as within . . . and, he thinks, without, too, a deep and abiding presence permeating everything like a river running through the whole wide world . . . Except, unlike a river, the Odds is alive and aware—though not in the same way he is. The Odds contains everything that ever was or has been or will be. All the things that might one day come to be. And everything that never was and never will be, too. This deep-sea darkness through which he's creeping is a pale puddle in comparison. Why should he fear it? If he can have enough faith in the Odds, he needn't fear anything.

So huge and all-encompassing is the Odds that everything in the world is equally insignificant to it . . . and, for that very reason, equally significant, too. In the holy dance of chance and probability, mystery and manifestation, nothing matters to it . . . yet everything does. Inconceivably large and far away, it's also small and near: thus, Kestrel realizes, does the sign of the Odds, the lemniscus, twist and turn upon itself in a path that leads, as if through a gate, an incision cut into the skin of time and space, back to its own beginning. Its dice, which not even airie eyes are keen enough to see, tumble ceaselessly along that path; numbers come up and vanish again, saving throws are made and missed, and who he is and where he is, all

that he knows and dreams, longs for and dreads, all of it, is nothing but an expression of the results of those rolls.

All at once, in a flash, trembling with a terror and awe that have now far transcended the darkness that gave them birth, Kestrel apprehends the cornerstone of probability theology. He comes to a dead halt as the simple, impossible truth upon which the religion rests unfolds within him. *A relationship exists between him and the Odds.* Wasn't he born in the intersection, the collision, of countless probabilities? And so, too, was everyone and everything else in the world, from the mundane to the miraculous. As, for that matter, was the world itself. The universe. The whim of the Odds gave shape to them all . . . Yet they, in turn, give shape to the whim of the Odds. In that ongoing, evolving equation, whose results are never final but serve instead as the initial terms of its next iteration, his relationship to the Odds is of no less (though also no more) significance than any other. He matters as much as the universe. Yet, like the universe, his existence is a fluke, an ephemeral manifestation of chance, of luck, not the expression of a designing will such as the norms ascribe to their three-faced god.

Is this enlightenment? Kestrel thinks. *Have I made my saving throw after all?*

The strange thing is, he's more frightened than ever. Yet it's a different kind of fear. It doesn't paralyze him. Nor shame him. Indeed, it seems to him that only the very stupid, or the very foolish, could perceive the immanence of the great and powerful Odds *without* trembling. He feels exalted and humbled, as though he might laugh or cry, or both at once. The darkness has not abated, yet suddenly it seems less substantial. Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpses flashes of color and squirming shapes that vanish the instant he tries to focus on them.

Are they hallucinations, conjurations of a mind parched of light? Or symptoms of the sickness he's contracted?

Or something else entirely?

Recalling the glimpse that Mizar had given him into netspatial reality, Kestrel wonders if his terror and faith have cracked open

doors of perception otherwise shut to him and his race. Is such a thing possible?

Mizar had told him that he was special. That, according to the dice of the Holy Rollers, consulted at his birth, he had the power to shape the future for good or ill. Could this be what Mizar was talking about? An airie able to perform his own invirting, perhaps even, like a boggle, to invirt others . . . Odds! It strikes him that he is, or could be, the first of a new race of mutes, that the Second Becoming, long prophesied, may have taken place at last.

Had Mizar known or suspected? Is that why he'd been separated from the others and brought here, injured and submerged in darkness, his psionics stripped away? All so that, by the design of Mizar and the whim of the Odds, he might make his saving throw?

Is that it, Mizar? Answer me, Oddsdamn you!

Nothing.

Unless the silence itself is the boggle's scornful reply.

But what if he doesn't need Mizar anymore? What if he's never needed him?

What if he can open a gate into netspace right here and now?

Flashes and squirms of color are still moving through the darkness. They are all he has to work with. He doesn't try to fix them in space or in his mind's eye, doesn't try to study them under the microscope of reason. He allows them to float where they will, to appear and vanish again like dust motes in a sunbeam. He lets his mind go blank, until he can't tell his own thoughts from the colors and shapes drifting through him. Until he's drifting right along with them, tumbling through the dark like a satellite through space, one bright note in a symphony of movement, a rhythmic structure extending across a multitude of scales, of senses. Harmonies converge, discords clash, patterns appear, evolve, vanish, reemerge like variations on a theme. Kestrel doesn't know if it's order forming out of chaos, or chaos undermining order, but whatever it is, it's beautiful and terrible, like gazing into the eye of the Odds. How easy to drown in those depths, to dissolve in that dance! It's no mere metaphor. He can feel it happening, as though his body, his consciousness, is becoming insubstantial, fading into the dark, merging with

the music . . . as though his cellcoms, seduced, are disassembling him atom by atom.

And why not? He's in a nexus, after all, a place where substance can pass with a thought into shadow, and shadow into substance.

Kestrel knows an instant of panic, a jolt of adrenaline straight to the heart. He feels that organ kick hard against his chest, and the sensation, like an electric shock, snaps him out of his swoon. But it doesn't break the spell completely. Instead, like a sleeper who dreams he's awake, and in that wakefulness knows he is dreaming, Kestrel finds himself in two worlds at once, straddling the border between netSPACE and physical reality.

As before, with Mizar, Kestrel perceives the architecture of the medianet in all its complex, dazzling glory, stretching as far as he can see . . . only now that sight is an exercise of his own power, his own will. He observes in awe the spectacle of cellcoms and savvees ferrying information along shining strands of electromagnetic and biotronic force, flitting into and out of netSPACE like spume tossed up on cresting waves of probability, manipulating the building blocks of matter, of life, some with the blind industry of insects, others with evident artistry and intelligence. Instinctively, Kestrel makes the sign of the Odds. The lemniscus carves itself into the darkness as though the bladeweeder in his hand, half-forgotten, is sharper than it can possibly be. The keen edge traces a line of pearly white by which he sees, like a ghostly appendage, his own hand, bladeweeder extended as though to inscribe an incision pattern.

He's done this. He, Kestrel of Wafting.

Feelings of triumph course through him, sweeping away the remnants of disbelief. The powers of a boggle are his to command . . . and in this place, that means reality itself is his to shape. He knows it with absolute certainty. He's become a living nexus.

Sliding the tip of the bladeweeder into the shining wound in the dark, Kestrel saws at the cut, widening it. Then, letting his pack fall at his feet, he reaches out and grasps the loose flap of the incision. He feels its velveteen chill and the warm flow of outbleeding light as he takes firm hold and pulls. The darkness tears like paper, revealing a ragged hole of pulsing light. It's too bright, too pure, to see into,

like the milky interior of a cumulus cloud suffused by the rays of the midday sun.

From out of that blinding radiance comes a familiar high-pitched voice: "Crude, but undeniably effective. All the same, you took your sweet time."

Kestrel nearly drops the bladeweeds. "Mizar! Is it really you?"

"You were expecting Pluribus Unum?"

In a way, hearing St. Christopher's voice issuing from out of the heart of the light is the most disorienting thing that's happened to Kestrel yet. But it's also the most welcome, for it means that the extraction team has arrived.

The disembodied voice of the norm slave calls to him impatiently. "The others are waiting. Come and see!"

Picking up his backpack, Kestrel steps into the light.

TUMBLING AFTER

It's nearly seven by the time Jack and Jilly turn their bikes into the driveway of the house on Bayberry Road. They're exhausted, bodies aching, sweat streaming in the muggy twilight air. They've made record time getting back across Little Bay, sure that trouble, in the person of Uncle Jimmy, would be waiting for them at home, and that the later they were, the worse it would be. But contrary to their fears, he isn't pacing the deck, ready to pounce. Nor does he come storming out of the house as they hurriedly dismount from their bikes. There's no sign of him—or of Ellen, either—though the multicolored Beetle is parked in its usual place in the driveway like a clown car on vacation from the circus.

"Wonder where they are," Jack says.

"Probably watching TV or something," Jilly answers, her tone of voice leaving no doubt as to what that *something* might be. "C'mon, let's stow these bikes. And be quiet!"

"But not *too* quiet. We don't want to walk in on them in the middle of *something*."

"Good thinking."

Talking loudly about nothing in particular, they wheel their bikes past Uncle Jimmy's car and into the basement, where they let them clatter against one wall. They make sure to slam the door behind them on their way out.

"That oughta do it," Jilly says in a lowered voice as she shrugs out of her backpack. "I'm going straight into the shower. Bring me down some clean clothes, okay?"

"Okay."

"And a fresh towel. Here, take this with you." She hands him her pack, then makes a beeline for the shower stall.

Jack clomps up the stairs. He opens the screen door and crosses the porch. The sliding door is wide-open. He kicks off his sand-and-mud-caked sneakers and pokes his head into the house. "Anybody home?"

The only sound is the shower from downstairs. The house has that unmistakable empty feeling that houses get. Which is strange, because one thing that's remained constant throughout the day is that he and Jilly were supposed to be home by five-thirty; Uncle Jimmy's not much for rules, but he does insist that they eat dinner together, which usually happens right around now. So it's weird that he and Ellen aren't here. Peeking into the kitchen, Jack sees a pot of water boiling atop the stove. On a plate on the counter are ears of shucked corn ready for steaming. They must be close by, then. Since the car is still in the driveway, he figures they must've gone for a walk, maybe up to the beach. Or, no: to the seafood market across Route 1, to fetch something to go along with the corn. Jack grins at the deduction; Holmes would be proud.

Chances are he's got a few minutes to himself. He hurries up the spiral stairs, bare feet slapping the metal steps, and into the bedroom he's sharing with Jilly for the duration of Uncle Jimmy's visit. After swinging her backpack onto the top bunk, he squirms out of his own pack and lets it thud to the floor. He shrugs and rolls his shoulders, shivering in a breeze that lifts the sun-bleached curtains of the open window like the empty sleeves of a robe. His whole body is sore, outside and in. He hasn't felt this battered since he'd opened his eyes on the beach to find Jilly gazing down at him, her

anguished, angry face streaked with rain and sea spray and a fine grit of sand as Belle wrapped the stinging lash of her winds around them. That was the first time Jilly had used her power . . . and the first time he'd used his own, remembering a superseded reality . . . though he hadn't recognized the significance of any of it: not that the memory of being swept out to sea was real, and certainly not that it was the memory of his own drowning.

But now he knows. Knows all that and more. Somehow it was different when he'd thought that *he* was the one with a godlike power over life and death, over reality itself. The idea that, however unconsciously, he was pulling the strings on his own behalf made the enormity of it easier to accept and to bear. Even the frightening knowledge that he was under attack, in danger of being erased from the world, had been manageable, because he believed that his power would intervene to protect him . . . would even, in the end, allow him to prevail. He'd felt like he had when riding the wave, right before it had come crashing down: hooked into something larger than himself, something that, for all its power, was holding him in the palm of its hand and would not let him fall.

Now that certainty, that faith, is gone. It's been gone ever since Jilly forced herself upon him not once but a multitude of times, battering him into submission, though of course she remembers none of it: for her, only the final iteration is real, by which point his resistance had crumbled, beaten into consent, cooperation. But he remembers every single violation; they are all real to him, each one its own hellish universe vibrating just a fraction out of phase with the others. All this time, as they'd hurriedly dressed, then paddled the canoe back across the bay to Barnard's Bait & Tackle, then pedaled their bikes furiously home, he's been like one of those cartoon characters who runs off a cliff and keeps on going, defying gravity until the moment he looks down. Now that moment has arrived, unwanted, inevitable.

It's like the floor of the bedroom has vanished, swept out from under him without warning, just as the wave had collapsed beneath him. Or not vanished, exactly, but dropping fast, an elevator whose cable has snapped. As his stomach lurches, sailing upward, Jack

sinks to the floor with a groan, teeth chattering, body trembling, bones rimed with ice. He clutches his backpack, curling himself around it as though it can warm him, keep him safe. He's never felt so alone, so aware of his helplessness and insignificance. How little he matters. His feeble share of Jilly's power seems like a curse. He might as well be a camera, he thinks. A recording device, not a human being. At least then he wouldn't have to feel anything. But now each rejected reality remains alive in his memory, as vital in his experience as the world he currently happens to inhabit. They are not dead, frozen images tucked away in some graveyard scrapbook of the mind. They are real to him, ghosts of flesh and blood. His presence in the here and now—or, rather, this particular here and now itself—is of no greater significance than any that had preceded it; it, too, is temporary, fated to follow them sooner or later into the useless theater of his memory, there to play continuously before their captive audience of one . . . until there comes a time, as he knows there must, when the world continues, but he does not. Then it will be as if Jack Doone had never existed . . . and as if none of the other realities had ever existed, either . . . except insofar as they are remembered by people with the same ability he has. The adversaries whose presence he's sensed. Who are they? Like him, the lesser half of a set of twins?

Is Uncle Jimmy one of them?

He thinks back to Uncle Jimmy's remarks at breakfast about twins and singletons, how more people than would ever imagine it of themselves are surviving twins. Was he talking about himself?

What if those surviving halves—not all of them, but some—possess in its entirety the awesome power so unequally, so unfairly, divided between him and Jilly? What if, in fact, he and Jilly are a fluke, a freakish accident? What if Jilly should have absorbed him while they were still in the womb, taking his share of the power for herself?

Jack has a sickening sense that he's right. That most of the time, 99.9 percent of the time, that's exactly what happens. Except this time, for whatever reason, it didn't. He'd beaten the odds, made his saving throw.

Yet because he had, both he and Jilly had been born crippled, ill equipped to survive against the others of their kind: the surviving halves who are, paradoxically, whole.

Jilly has the power to alter reality retrospectively . . . yet lacks the memory of that power's exercise that alone could allow her to wield it consciously, purposefully. And he, while possessing the memory, is helpless to use it to shape the succession of realities that Jilly's unbridled use of her power gives rise to. Meanwhile, the whole ones possess both the power to act *and* the memory that makes their actions effective, for with memory they can judge success or failure and adjust accordingly. They can learn, plan, play this game of survival of the fittest with a cold and deadly focus that Jack and Jilly can't hope to match. He wonders if the memories they possess of these slightly out-of-phase, almost-but-not-quite-mirror-image realities are more fully developed than his own. His, after all, do not extend beyond what he has directly experienced. He doesn't remember realities in which he isn't present, and those he remembers, though of course they feature other people, are filtered through his experience. The experiences of others don't enter into his memories; he doesn't know what they are thinking or feeling, how their perceptions might differ from his own. Is each person's experience, then, a separate reality? Or do they all come together to make a single overarching reality: a bewildering variety of perspectives coexisting simultaneously, as in a cubist painting? What if, while he's limited to one perspective, his opponents can see them all? That would give them a greater advantage than they possess already in their efforts to erase him from the world. Yet right now he would almost welcome such an erasure. Oblivion has its attractions. He wouldn't have to know or remember. Or feel.

Except it's not just him. He won't be the only one expunged from the world. His removal will be incidental; he's not a threat to anybody. *Jilly's* the threat. She's the real target. But he'll share her fate; their bond of twinship will see to that.

And if it doesn't? If he should wake one day from a sleep of happy ignorance, the blood of a new rebirth dripping from his nose, to find himself alive in a world without Jilly? A world in which he's

a singleton and always has been, his twin miscarried or absorbed in the womb?

Or, he thinks, shuddering, never conceived at all. Jilly gone utterly from the world . . . but not from his memories of other worlds equally real but no longer substantial. How could he go on living, tortured by those more-than-mere memories, always wondering if Uncle Jimmy had been the one to do it? Even if by some chance the power would then become wholly his, unified, passing to him by some obscure law of inheritance, it wouldn't be worth it. The power can restore the dead to life, but it cannot bring back—or rather, create—someone who never existed. He knows that instinctively, feels the awful certainty of it in his bones. After all, that's the whole point of the game: to eliminate the other players. The best he might hope for then would be revenge, to eliminate Uncle Jimmy, or whoever had eliminated Jilly, before he himself was eliminated . . .

Incomparably worse would be to forget her. To lose the scrap of power he possesses and remain sunk in ignorance forever. To go on living as though Jilly had never existed: never to mourn her or so much as suspect that he had shared his life with a sister, a twin, a second self. To be always, unknowingly, diminished, crippled, thinking himself just another singleton in a world of singletons. And, if Uncle Jimmy were responsible, to be ignorant of it. Never to hate him, never to try and make him pay. The thought of it makes Jack writhe with self-loathing, as if merely imagining such a fate is to be complicitous in bringing it about. To be guilty in advance of an unforgivable act of betrayal, collaborating with his sister's executioner. He's afraid for a moment that he's going to be sick. But then the nausea passes, leaving him feeling hollowed out, so drained that he wants nothing more than to close his eyes and sleep for a hundred years.

Except he doesn't have a hundred years. He might not have even a hundred minutes. For him, for Jilly, the game could be over in the next second. Their opponents are out there, stalking them. Uncle Jimmy, perhaps, chief among them. Jack has to do something. Protect her somehow. But what can he do? He has no weapon but memory.

Jack forces himself to let go of the backpack and climb to his

feet; Uncle Jimmy and Ellen will be home soon. Clenching his fists at his sides to still the trembling of his hands, he stares out the window, watching shadows pool in the tops of the pine trees and creep upward across the grainy, gray-tiled roofs of neighboring houses. This night isn't falling from the sky, it's rising from the land, seeping from the earth in a slow upwelling, dark as blood. The eastern sky is a bowl waiting to be filled, its purple-enameled sides chipped and scratched in places to reveal underlying glazes of opalescent pink and angel-wing white that seem determined to burn themselves to ash in the oblique rays of the dying sun. Jack wants to be brave and strong for Jilly's sake, but he can't. It's just not in him. He knows too much about what's facing them . . . and, at the same time, too little. If only he could be more like Kestrel! The airie would put his faith in the Odds, roll the dice, and do the best he could.

But *isn't* he Kestrel? If he can play the character in Mutes & Norms, why not now, in this real-life variation of the game? Being Kestrel is a habit of mind, like any other.

It doesn't have to be Jack Doone standing in front of this open window. Nor does it have to be Jack Doone who turns from the window and walks across the bedroom to the dresser. It can be Kestrel of Wafting who opens the drawers and gathers the clothes that Jilly asked for. Kestrel who brings them to her downstairs. Kestrel who will do what Jack cannot do.

Who will do what must be done.



The walls of the corridor into which Kestrel emerges are milky white and smooth as glass. Standing a dozen feet away are the conjoined figures of Mizar and St. Christopher, both faces—the tanned, handsome face of the slave and, slightly higher, the disfigured and blindfolded face of the master—smiling in welcome. Mizar is wearing the shabby military jacket he'd had on in Pilgrim Square, the empty sleeves pinned to its sides, and his blindfold is ratty as ever, but the norm has exchanged his filthy harness and tattered trousers for a harness and trousers of black leather buffed to a

glossy shine. His feet are no longer bare, but encased in sleek leather boots. A slim sword with an ornate silvery hilt is belted to his waist. Despite the boggle's earlier attitude of contempt and cruelty toward St. Christopher, it seems he's capable of taking pride in the appearance of his slave after all. More likely, Kestrel considers, by heightening the physical contrast between them, Mizar is simply emphasizing the extent of the norm's degradation, how far he's fallen from the court of *Pluribus Unum*.

Letting his backpack drop to the floor, Kestrel glances over his shoulder, past the hard edge of one immobilized wing. Behind him there is only a blank white wall. The gate has closed. And with it, his connection to netspace. Confused, he turns back to the boggle. "What's going on here, Mizar?"

"I have a peculiar aversion to being questioned at knifepoint," the Invisible replies through St. Christopher, whose mismatched eyes are gazing meanwhile at the bladeweed in Kestrel's hand.

Kestrel had forgotten that he was holding it. But he's not eager to drop it, either. "I'll keep it, if you don't mind. In case we run into any norms."

A brief silence, then the boggle shrugs. "Suit yourself," says the norm. Turning, he sets off down the corridor, motioning for Kestrel to follow.

"Where are we going?"

Mizar's blindfolded head swivels back to face him while St. Christopher, who remains facing forward, replies: "Forgotten your pentad already?"

"Of course not." He retrieves his pack, then hurries to catch up. "How are they?"

"I won't lie to you. By the time we found them, they had succumbed to the savvee."

It was nothing he hadn't thought for himself. But hearing his fears confirmed comes as a painful shock nonetheless. "What do you mean, 'succumbed'? Not . . ."

"No, no. They're alive. But unconscious, paralyzed."

"Odds. And"—he's almost too afraid to ask—"and Namora?"

"The same. Their cellcoms have encased their bodies in protec-

tive shells, just as yours have encased your wings . . . which we'll take care of, by the way."

The promise of aid barely registers.

"Underneath, their cellcoms are trying to fight off the invading norm savvee with savvees of their own. The situation is critical, so we're treating them here, in quarantine. Make no mistake: the invader is strong. Whether or not they survive is up to the Odds." St. Christopher pauses before a stretch of blank wall. Raising one hand, he traces the lemniscus upon its surface, and the wall irises open. He steps through, Kestrel following, into a corridor indistinguishable from the first. "And even if they do survive," the fluting voice of the norm continues, "there could be systemic damage. I don't mean there isn't hope. They can always make their saving throws. But you should prepare for the worst."

Kestrel thinks of Namora and how she had kissed him good-bye, her lips hot with fever. His legs go wobbly, and he halts, leaning against the wall.

St. Christopher stops beside him. "The norm is strong; let him support you as he does me."

"I'm fine."

Laughter trills from St. Christopher while Mizar's mouth gapes in silent echo, the stub of his tongue squirming behind perfect white teeth. "Proud and stubborn as ever, I see. Still a typical airie. I had hoped your time in the dark might have constituted a salutary chastisement." The norm shrugs his shoulders and walks on.

Swallowing his annoyance, Kestrel hurries after him. "What happened to me back there, 'in the dark,' as you put it?"

"What do you suppose happened?"

"I saw the medianet and its workings. I watched the flow of information and substance between netspace and the physical world. Cellcoms and savvees did my bidding. I opened a gateway of sorts and emerged here, to find you."

"Such are the properties of a nexus, and the abilities of a boggle within a nexus."

"But as you just pointed out, I'm an airie."

"And what do you deduce from this discrepancy?"

What was plain a moment ago takes on a less likely cast when he contemplates uttering it aloud. "One explanation is that I possess the powers of a boggle in addition to those of an airie," he says, choosing his words with care. He decides to keep his speculations about the Second Becoming to himself for now.

"That is indeed one explanation."

"If you have another, I'd like to hear it."

The boggle and the norm incline their heads in a parody of politeness. "Perhaps you were invirted, and a boggle was acting through you."

"Are you saying it was you the whole time?"

"I'm not the only boggle in the world."

"Can't you give me a straight answer for once?"

"It is the quality of the questions, not of the answers, that is lacking."

A sullen silence ensues, during which St. Christopher, once more making the sign of the Odds, opens the way into a third corridor, identical to the other two. For all Kestrel can tell, it *is* the same corridor. It seems strange to him that they haven't encountered any other mutes, and finally he asks Mizar about the extraction team.

"Some are caring for your pentad. Others guard against enemy incursion."

Something occurs to Kestrel: "Why is it you're speaking to me through St. Christopher and not directly in my mind, as before?"

"A worthy question at last! The reason is simple. We are at the heart of the nexus. Such places are, psionically speaking, dead zones. Blind spots in the medianet."

"Like the eye of a hurricane?"

"An apt analogy. Here, you and I are as powerless as norms."

Sure enough, Kestrel can't raise so much as a breeze. Never before, not even under the most stringent dampening fields, have his psionics completely deserted him, as now. It's disturbing, vaguely surreal.

"Cellcoms," St. Christopher says. "That's how psionics work. The powers of airies, delves, manders, merms, and boggles: it's all the manipulation of cellcoms, whether to create elemental effects or perform invirtings or just read minds. You didn't know that, did you?"

"I suspected it."

"Yes, it's hard to deny the truth when you can see it right before your eyes. Most mutes scorn norms for their reliance on antech, but when you come right down to it, psionics are a kind of antech. This is something boggles have always known."

"And kept to themselves."

A simultaneous shrug from norm and boggle. "In the heart of a nexus, there are no cellcoms . . . except for the ones we carry around inside us, of course. But there are none externally for mute powers to connect to and manipulate."

"Then how are you controlling St. Christopher?"

"Psibertronics."

"The sword?" Kestrel guesses.

"And the harness."

He shakes his head. "This is a strange place for mutes to build. A place where our inborn powers are useless, while the antech devices of norms function perfectly!"

"That is so. But of course, mutes did not build this place, nor any of the others like it."

"But Polaris said—"

"A low-level boggle knows low-level secrets. The truth is, the nexus points were built by norms in the days before the Viral Wars. Over the years, the College has appropriated some, like this one. Despite certain drawbacks, they are useful to us."

"Useful how?"

"That knowledge is far above your level! Suffice it to say that only in a nexus can boggles explore the full potential of their psionics. And only at the heart of a nexus can boggles escape, for a time, the oppressive scrutiny of the Orbitals . . . and each other. Only there can they step outside the confines of the medianet and experience the tranquillity of a solitary mind contemplating its own thoughts. But it was for another purpose that your pentad was directed here."

"To escape the norms."

"That was what you might call the low-level reason. Behind it lay another. Can't you guess it?"

"How could I?"

St. Christopher laughs: a foxlike bark. Then he stops walking. Both faces turn as one to Kestrel. "It was to flush out the spy. First to force him to reveal his enhanced psionic powers, then to trap him in a place where those psionics would be useless."

"Do you mean you've caught the spy?"

"We have."

"Well, who is it? Wait—you said 'he' . . . Not Fenix! Is it Chalcidon, then?"

"It is the one who was not infected by the savvee."

"But we were all infected."

"Were you?" Mizar's ruined face grins. "Come, Kestrel. Why bother to deny the obvious any longer? You are the spy."

Kestrel's headcrest stiffens, his mouth falls open, and he gazes at the two faces before him, inspecting their expressions for some sign of sense . . . or, rather, nonsense, as if the whole thing might be another of Mizar's nasty jests. But he sees no such confirmation. "I'm no spy!" he blurts at last.

"The evidence proclaims otherwise."

"What evidence?"

"When you were separated from the others, you demonstrated the powers of a boggle in addition to those of an airie. Only the spies of our enemies, those norms in mute's clothing, possess multiple psionic abilities."

Kestrel decides the time has come to reveal everything he suspects. "There are other explanations, Mizar."

"Such as?"

"The Second Becoming."

Mizar's lips twist into a sneer as St. Christopher replies: "Do you take me for a fool?"

"You said yourself that the dice of the Holy Rollers indicated that I was born with a special destiny. This proves it. My multiple psionics are an indication that the Second Becoming has begun at last!"

"I prefer a less extravagant explanation. Further, there is the matter of the norm savvee. You alone of your pentad escaped infection, a suspicious circumstance in itself."

"If that's so, and I don't know that it is, then perhaps I'm immune or resistant."

"Yes, because you carry the savvee. Because you are the source of the infection!"

"Then surely I would have transmitted it to you as well."

"Not so. The savvee is transmitted sexually."

"But Namora and I joined tents! I only slept with the others once!"

"That was all it took. The savvee lay dormant until you led them into ambush. There, a signal concealed in the explosion activated the virus. Afterward, by a means we have yet to determine, you contacted your norm superiors, who dispatched an extraction team. Do you deny any of this?"

"It's pure fantasy!"

"You claim innocence?"

"I *am* innocent! This is absurd. I'm no norm. I was born in Wafting!"

"An airie by the name of Kestrel was born in Wafting. This is a matter of record. But you are not he."

"That will come as a surprise to my parents!"

"They are not your parents."

"My foster parents, then. I admit I'm breederborn. But that doesn't make me a spy."

"You were born a norm, to norm parents, in the Trumen Empire. There, after years of meticulous training in the customs of the Commonwealth and the ways of the airies, you were infected with an experimental savvee that gave you the appearance and psionic powers of an airie, along with those of a boggle. Then, carrying another experimental savvee, whose purpose we are only now discovering, you infiltrated Airieland and intercepted the real Kestrel and his foster parents as they flew to Mutatis Mutandis for Kestrel's Proving. You murdered them in cold blood and took Kestrel's identity as your own. You see how much is known to us. You may as well confess the rest."

Kestrel can't help laughing. "It's insane—you're insane! My parents aren't dead; I'm not a norm. Invirt me, probe my mind, and you'll see that I'm telling the truth!"

"We'll get the truth out of you one way or another, don't worry."

Either Mizar has gone completely mad, Kestrel thinks, or someone is framing him. The real spy. And who else could that be but the boggle himself? It's so obvious that he can't believe he didn't see it before now. Mizar had played him for a fool right from the start. But no longer. His psionics may be useless here at the heart of the nexus, but Kestrel still possesses the innate strength and quickness of his kind. This is offset to an unknown degree by Mizar's psibertronic devices: the sword and harness, and, of course, St. Christopher's ice-blue antech eye. But one thing is clear to Kestrel, crystal clear—his chances are only going to get worse from this point on. There's no time to reflect or plan ahead; if he wants to survive, he has to act. At least he'll have the element of surprise on his side. Hurling his backpack at St. Christopher, he springs forward, brandishing the blade-weed like a dagger.

The norm swats the pack aside with a casual movement of his hand. "Thus do you proclaim your guilt." A blur of silver, and the sword—a rapier, its blade supple and thin—appears in his other hand.

Kestrel pulls back, noting that St. Christopher's speed appears to have been augmented by one or more of his devices. "The only guilt I proclaim is yours, Mizar. You're the spy. I was a fool not to have seen it sooner!"

"That you are a fool, I confess." The point of the rapier streaks toward Kestrel's breast.

He parries with the bladeweed stalk but dares not advance. St. Christopher disengages his weapon with a twist of his wrist, loops the point tightly, and sends it darting forward again. Kestrel lurches back, watches the point pass a hairbreadth from his chest, sees an opening, begins a cutting riposte to the norm's exposed upper arm . . . and realizes that the motion, should he fully commit himself to it, will be his last. He pulls up, dances back a step, feels a waspish sting on the outside of his thigh. First blood! He didn't even see the strike; nor does he spare a glance for the wound, which experience tells him is hardly more than a pinprick. Still, the lesson is plain: for all his quickness, Kestrel cannot get inside the norm's

reach without paying a price. For now, he can only defend, study the fighting style of his adversary and hope for a vulnerability he can exploit. Ordinarily in such a duel, Kestrel would have stared into his opponent's eyes in order to anticipate his movements, but such an approach is useless now. Mizar is his true opponent, pulling St. Christopher's strings from behind his blindfold. Instead, Kestrel focuses his attention on the norm's wrist, the set of his hips, and waits for the next attack.

It comes in a flurry of cuts and thrusts and cunning feints. Kestrel doesn't attempt to stand his ground but retreats down the corridor, parrying, dodging, the norm's blade whistling around him, mocking his lost mastery of the winds. Mizar's psibertronic control seems as complete as any psionic inverting; there's no hesitation in St. Christopher's movements: the sequence of his attack unfolds with a grace and coordination that would have been astonishing even if Mizar's torso hadn't been harnessed to the norm's upper body. Kestrel is forced to acknowledge that his own skills are inferior; were he holding a sword rather than a bladeweed, he would still be hard-pressed. He realizes that he's come to depend too much on his psionics, let his physical skills grow slack. In moments, he's drenched in sweat and bleeding from four more wounds, while St. Christopher is unmarked and does not appear winded in the least. The humiliating fact is plain: Mizar is toying with him. If he desired it, Kestrel would already be lying dead or wounded. But, true to his nature, the Invisible prefers to torture his opponent, whittling him down bit by bit in body and spirit. Kestrel's shirt hangs from him in tatters, nearly cut away. It's clear from Mizar's expression that he's enjoying himself, perhaps reliving duels of his past through the limbs of his slave, just as he had used Kestrel's body to relive his amorous encounters.

The thought of that particular betrayal fills Kestrel with fresh rage. More than anything, he wants to see Mizar suffer. But his hate, his thirst for revenge, confers no advantage now. On the contrary. Kestrel knows that the more he gives in to such emotions, the more likely they are to seduce him into fatal error. They are as much his enemies as Mizar, and he fights against them with equal determination.

Suddenly, without warning, St. Christopher disengages, retreating a step with a sardonic flourish of his reddened blade. "You will notice that your wounds do not heal," he remarks.

And in fact, Kestrel's wounds are still bleeding, though his cellcoms should have sealed the breaches in his skin by now.

"As I mentioned, no cellcoms are permitted here. Even those we carry inside us perish upon contact with the air. Thus, without treatment, even the most insignificant wound can be fatal simply from loss of blood. Fascinating, is it not?"

Kestrel doesn't bother to reply. Grimly, he wipes the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his free arm. The pupil of the norm's antech eye is arrhythmically dilating and contracting, as though quite literally taking his measure. If he could damage or destroy the mechanism of the eye, perhaps he'd have a chance

St. Christopher's forward foot kicks out, and he launches into an attack that's even faster and more elegant than the last. Kestrel has no time for thought, let alone the luxury of devising a counterattack. He feels like a bystander, watching from a distance as his arm moves with a will of its own, bladeweeds meeting rapier in a staccato tattoo, a clock ticking wildly out of rhythm. Or, no . . . there *is* a rhythm, a pattern . . . one of almost impossible complexity. It hovers at the threshold of Kestrel's apprehension like some audible representation of the medianet's intangible structure; it holds, he knows, the secret of Mizar's attack, the hidden order of it, the knowledge of where the next thrust will come. He struggles with all his intelligence to perceive it; for a second, the tapestry comes into focus. Then, even as he acts on it, the pattern changes; the threads unravel; Kestrel's bladeweeds slides through empty air. It had all been a deception. A trap.

A burning scores his chest. He groans, more in frustration than pain. He's gasping for breath; his heart throbs ominously; fresh blood trickles over his stomach. The future of this mismatch is clear: it will continue until he drops from loss of blood or from Mizar's loss of patience. Desperately, Kestrel reaches for the familiar feel of his power, but there's nothing. St. Christopher, meanwhile, once again breaks off his attack and stands regarding him like a painter study-

ing a canvas, trying to judge where the next brushstroke belongs. On Mizar's mangled, blindfolded face is a look of such primal exultation that Kestrel has to force himself not to be distracted by it.

Risking a glance at his bleeding chest, he sees with astonishment the shape of Suture Six, *Tumbling After*: the lemniscus cut into his skin with all the precision of a bladeweeder. Suddenly all the wounds he's received from Mizar fall into a pattern in his mind, and he realizes that the boggle, through St. Christopher, is carving the sutures from the *Book of the Odds* into him in ascending order. It's the most amazing display of swordsmanship Kestrel has ever witnessed, or heard of, for that matter, and even though it's directed against him, he can't help admiring it.

Glancing up again at Mizar, he's certain that the boggle knows he knows. But will the progression continue regardless? Had Mizar allowed Kestrel the time to recognize the unfolding pattern in order to taunt him with his helplessness, his inability to prevent himself from being marked with the next suture in the series, *Spiral Galaxy*? Or is the pattern just another layer of deception, a false trail laid with cunning and skill only to be abandoned now that Kestrel's caught on? There's no answer to be found in Mizar's ruined face, nor in St. Christopher's handsome one. The answer will come at the tip of the rapier in St. Christopher's steady hand.

Kestrel knows he can't penetrate the norm's enhanced defenses or disarm him. Yet perhaps, just perhaps, he sees a way he can win this fight. It's risky, foolhardy. But it has the virtue of surprise at least, and he doesn't think Mizar is ready to kill him just yet; like a cat, he's not through toying with his prey. In any case, Kestrel decides, better a swift death than a cruelly protracted one. Better to roll the dice himself and come up short than wait for his fate to be decided by someone else's roll, when the whim of the Odds might be even more against him. Whether he makes his saving throw or misses it, he'll do it on his own.

"You're worse than a spy, Mizar," he spits. "You're a molting traitor. What made you turn against your own kind?"

"If you're trying to goad me into a precipitous attack, you're wasting your time," the voice of St. Christopher calmly replies.

“Was it that hideous shell you call a body? Do you blame mutes for the injuries inflicted by norms? Or the inability of Holy Rollers to heal them?”

“I’m no traitor, Kestrel, as I’ve said. Your words mean nothing to me.”

“But they would mean a lot to the College, wouldn’t they? To the Faculty Invisible? That’s why you’re framing me. That’s why you’re trying to kill me. You’ll deliver a dead spy to the College, and nobody will suspect that the real spy is still alive, a traitor infecting us like some secret savvee . . .”

St. Christopher chuckles. Kestrel observes meanwhile a slight shift in the norm’s position, a subtle adjustment of balance that redistributes his weight to his trailing leg. He tightens his grip on the bladeweeder, flexes the fingers of his free hand . . .

The norm’s front foot kicks up and out in a skipping motion. The rapier comes whistling into line, and St. Christopher lunges, propelled by the grounded kick of his back leg. But Kestrel is already moving. He passes the bladeweeder from his right hand to his left and steps up, stabbing.

He grunts as the point of the rapier enters his right side, gliding between his ribs; there’s no pain, just a cool shivery wrongness. Then the blade is wrenched free, and Kestrel stumbles back with a groan, empty hands pressed to the puncture. A look of sick surprise appears on St. Christopher’s ashen face. The norm exhales loudly and staggers, falling against the wall, then sinks to the ground, though he does not drop the rapier. His eyes gaze blankly at Kestrel, the pupil of the antech orb frozen at its widest dilation, so that there’s only blackness there, like the inscrutable eye of a merm.

Kestrel’s dagger is sheathed in Mizar’s black blindfold.

His belly is burning, and he feels a heavy chill in his chest. He coughs, spits blood, lurches against the wall opposite the body of St. Christopher and the corpse that seems to weigh it down like a stone.

“Too molting clever . . . for your own good,” he manages to gasp out.

The norm’s limbs begin to spasm violently.

Part of Kestrel wants nothing more than to lie down on the ground: just to rest for a while. But he knows that if he did, he'd never get up again. Besides, Namora needs him. And the others. One direction seems as good as another. He forces his feet to carry him away from the body of the norm. He leans against the wall as he goes, leaving a trail of blood. Colored spots swim before his eyes, but these are no denizens of netspace. He coughs up more blood. His legs are holding him upright, but he can no longer feel them. If only he could get out of the dead zone, perhaps his cellcoms could heal him. But how to escape?

He recalls how St. Christopher had made the sign of the Odds to open passages in the walls; lacking any better idea, Kestrel traces the lemniscus with one bloody finger. A door dilates open; he does not so much enter as fall through, already unconscious before he hits the ground.



Jack lies in the dark, listening to the soft, steady snores from the overhead bunk and screwing up his courage. Earlier, when he'd brought Jilly the fresh clothes and towel she'd asked for, she'd pulled him into the shower stall and, without a word, pressed her naked body against his clothed one. Only the return of Uncle Jimmy and Ellen had stopped her from going further. She'd pulled away and whispered, "Tonight. After dinner. Upstairs."

As the evening wore on, he'd grown sick with apprehension at the thought of what awaited him. It wasn't the act itself, or the label attaching to it, that disturbed him, nor the risk of being discovered by Uncle Jimmy and Ellen. It was the memory of how Jilly had forced him, bent him—and, incidentally, the rest of the world—repeatedly to her will, until she got what she wanted. If her coercion had become gentler with time, hammerblows giving way to kisses and caresses, it had been less out of concern for him than because she recognized, on some unconscious level, that she could achieve her desires more easily that way, as indeed she had, his body turn-

ing traitor to his memory of what had been done to him. And all because she couldn't stand it that Ellen had experienced something she had not: something forbidden.

The lateness of their return had resulted in no punishment. Uncle Jimmy had raised the subject almost in passing when Jack came up from the shower, doing his best to sound properly parental as he grilled the swordfish fillets that he and Ellen had brought back from the market. But he'd already had a few beers, and his heart, plainly, wasn't in it; he let Jack and Jilly off with a warning, much to Ellen's disappointment.

As he joined Jilly in setting the table, doing his best to ignore and deflect her less-than-subtle looks and touches, which he felt sure must proclaim at once to Uncle Jimmy or Ellen—or, indeed, any onlooker—not only the fact but the nature of their changed relationship (and he knew that Jilly was tempting that fate, unable to resist the excitement of flirting with it and with him), it occurred to Jack with the force of a revelation that the adversary intent on removing Jilly from the board could be *Ellen* rather than Uncle Jimmy. Was it his customary contempt for her that had kept him from considering her as a suspect before now? Had the malice she displayed at every opportunity blinded him to the possibility that she might actually constitute a threat? Or—and this was more disturbing—had the exercise of her power erased any earlier suspicions he may have had? Perhaps those who possessed the power in its undivided totality learned to exercise it with greater control and finesse than either he or Jilly could manage with their separate and unequal shares. If that was true, then the two of them were in greater danger than he'd thought. And there was no reason to assume it wasn't true.

So, as they sat down to dinner, and throughout the meal, Jack kept a careful watch on Ellen and Uncle Jimmy . . . for the addition of the former as a suspect hadn't eliminated the latter. For all he knew, they were working together, two players entering into temporary alliance to eliminate a weaker player from the game. He didn't know what he was looking for, exactly. A clue of some kind: a gesture, a word, some inadvertent betrayal of a sinister purpose. He

tried to see them as a stranger would, imagining Kestrel gazing at them through his eyes, weighing their words and actions.

He knew that Jilly could sense his concern, but he also knew that she was oblivious to the reasons for it. No doubt she assumed that he was upset by their afternoon encounter, feeling guilty and afraid of being found out. That same secret made her giddy. She joked with Uncle Jimmy and traded insults with Ellen. Meanwhile, under the table, she rubbed her bare leg against Jack's, slid her hand up under his shorts. He squirmed, blushing, distracted from his study of Ellen and Uncle Jimmy . . . who took no notice of any of it, perhaps engaged in their own under-the-table dialogue.

It was the strangest dinner Jack had ever experienced. Even so, he was famished, and he ate ravenously . . . as did they all: corn on the cob smothered in butter; grilled swordfish steaks; fat, juicy tomato slices in olive oil. For dessert: vanilla and chocolate ice cream with Oreos on the side. Afterward, Uncle Jimmy suggested a game of Yahtzee, and, to Jack's surprise, not only Jilly but Ellen, normally disdainful of dice-based games, agreed.

Out came the tablets and pencils; six-sided dice were scrounged from the box containing the paraphernalia of Mutes & Norms; Uncle Jimmy fetched a fresh beer from the fridge, slapped a tape into the player, and lit a cigarette. A snarling, sneering baritone drifted through the humid air of the screened-in porch like another species of smoke. *Calling Sister Midnight* . . . Dice rattled in the plastic cup, then clattered across the table, translucent rubies sparkling under the overhead bulb. A storm was brewing. Thunder growled in the distance, slowly growing nearer; gusts of wind began to blow with increasing frequency and force, rustling the leaves of the trees outside the screens and stirring up shadows that flitted nervously, like agitated moths, then subsided until the next breezy disturbance. The smell of rain descended, but no rain fell.

Each time the dice cup was passed to him, Jack handed it over to Kestrel. The dice rattled and came tumbling out; the blank spaces on Jack's Yahtzee pad—Sixes; Full House; Three of a Kind, Chance—filled up. Meanwhile, bone dice were falling, reflecting the whim of the Odds. Jack didn't know how to read them, but Kestrel did. So he

waited for Kestrel to tell him what the dice revealed, what course of action they advised.

Later, while Uncle Jimmy and Ellen smoked their usual joint on the upstairs deck, Jilly made good on her promises behind the locked door of the bedroom. As before, the contrast between the physical experience and the complicated and harrowing train of memories triggered in the course of it made Jack feel like he was splitting into as many selves as there were superseded realities. But this time, when he felt himself fracturing, felt again the burning shame of helplessness and the shameful burning of desire, Kestrel stepped into the breach, and Jack gave way, retreating to a numbed-out distance where he witnessed everything but felt nothing. They had changed places; now *he* was the invirted one.

When it was over, and Jilly, complaining of exhaustion and soreness, had climbed up to her bunk (where, to judge by her snores, she'd fallen asleep immediately), Kestrel had receded, and Jack had come floating back to the surface. That was a while ago; how long, he doesn't know. Here in the shadowy gloom there's no way to judge the passing of time except by the beating of his heart, the sounds of Jilly's snoring, and the thunder-grumble and lightning-flicker outside the window, and none of them seem set to the same measure. So he just lies there, sweat cooling on his body, and listens with every fiber of his being for the sound of voices, a creaking board, something to indicate whether Uncle Jimmy and Ellen are still out there on the upstairs deck.

He knows that the foundations of their relationship have shifted. No, more than shifted: shattered. Or perhaps it's his illusions that have shattered. He's always pictured the two of them standing apart from the rest of the world . . . Standing above it, too. But now Jack is compelled to admit that he's not as different as he'd thought. To Jilly, he's just another game piece. A valuable one, to be sure . . . though not because of any power he wields. He's valuable because he's her brother, her twin, and she loves him. Loves him thoughtlessly, fiercely, selfishly, as if he's an extension of her body. He doesn't blame her for it. How can he? He loves her in just the same way.

Only, given her power, her love translates into manipulation.

Sometimes beneficial, as when she'd saved his life or healed his arm. Other times, brutal. But either way, what matters are *her* desires, not his. Because she doesn't remember using her power, doesn't even know she possesses it, there's no check on it, no chance for her to learn to temper its absolute exercise by taking his wishes, or anyone else's, into account. She's not a bad person, not evil: just incredibly dangerous, ignorant of all she can do. But Jack knows, and there's no escaping that knowledge. That's *his* power. His curse. And because she loves him more than anyone else in the world, he can't escape her, either. Can't deny her, refuse her, reject her. Not if her will or whim says otherwise. His is a position of privileged debasement, that of a favored slave or pampered pet. His awareness of this is the real injury she'd inflicted on him there on the sands of their private island in the bay.

As a result, for the first time in his life, Jack feels truly, deeply, estranged from Jilly. Separate. It's as though their bond of twinship has been severed. Or no, not severed. It's still there, still binding him to her, but like a chain. Perverted from what it was. He resents her for that. Fears her. Oh, and loves her, if anything, more than ever, with a desperation new to him, because it has to cross a gap, a void, that's never been there before. She stands on one side, and he's on the other, and all that joins them is the iron chain of her will and, flickering across it like some witchy fire, the insubstantial currents of his own conflicted emotions.

But he's not alone. He has a secret twin, a second self to take the place of the twin he's lost. Kestrel is with him, in him, an inverted presence looking out through his eyes. Or so he tells himself. So he believes. Or pretends to believe, which, for a little while at least, amounts to the same thing.

At last Jack rolls off the bunk and onto his feet. Hardly daring to breathe, he plucks his discarded shorts from the floor and slips them on. Then, cautious as any burglar, makes his way to the door. He unlocks it, cracks it open, slips through, pulls it shut behind him. And freezes in the airy dark, heart hammering. The sounds of the surf are louder here, a lesser breed of thunder. The odor of pot is faint but distinct. Through the mesh of the screen door, he can make out

the shapes of the deck chairs but can't tell if they are occupied or not. Seconds pass. No voice rises from the deck. Nor, thank the Odds, from the other side of the bedroom door; the last thing he wants is to wake Jilly. He lets out a long breath and moves to the spiral stairs, wincing with each creak of the floorboards beneath his bare feet.

Laying one hand on the cool railing, he follows its inward curl. The sliding door is open, the porch light on, its illumination spilling into the house. Jack pauses halfway down, looking, listening, then, satisfied the coast is clear, continues in a swift glide to the floor. The kitchen beckons, but he has to pee, so he moves past, hurrying to the bathroom. There, the door locked behind him, he feels safe at last. Safer, anyway. He flicks on the light and moves to the toilet. He raises the seat, unbuttons his shorts, and lets them fall to his ankles . . . and sees with a shock that his penis is stained with blood.

There had been some blood after their first time, back on the island, which they'd washed off in water from the bay. There isn't a lot now, but the sight of it is disturbing, disorienting, as if it's his own blood, not Jilly's. But not disturbing enough to override a stronger imperative. As the stream of his piss hisses and then tinkles into the bowl, it occurs to him that his sheets, and Jilly's, too, must be marked. They'll have to dispose of them in the morning . . .

But that's a long way off. Finished, he steps out of his shorts and walks over to the sink to wash away the evidence. He reaches for the faucet, then stops. If Ellen and Uncle Jimmy are in the pump room, the sound of running water could alert them to his presence, bringing one or both of them upstairs to investigate. He can't have that. The blood will have to stay for now, the toilet remain unflushed. As in a dream, he watches his hand reach instead for Uncle Jimmy's straight razor, which is lying, the blade tucked into its black handle, to one side of the faucet beside the rest of his shaving gear: the badgerhair brush and beechwood shaving bowl; a jar of shaving soap; a leather strop and a waterstone.

The handle feels comfortable, familiar, as if he's held it many times. He opens the shiny blade, the carbonized steel so highly polished that he can see his own reflection. His heart is fluttering

madly, but no tremble afflicts his hand as he moves the bladeweeder to his chest and begins to carve Suture Six, *Tumbling After*. His touch is light and sure, the kiss of the blade an icy whisper that does not rise or pause, despite the blood that runs down his chest more freely than usual, until the curving line comes back around to its starting point. Then he lifts the blade, takes a towel from the rack on the wall beside the sink, and wipes it clean. He folds the blade back into its handle, sets the razor down on the edge of the sink, and towels the excess blood from his chest. He cleans it from the sink as well, and from the floor. By then, he needs another towel, for his blood is strangely slow to clot. But at last there's only a slow red seeping from the thin line of the incision pattern. Satisfied, he drops the towel and puts his discarded shorts back on.

Outside, shadows stretch from the sliding door, writhing in the wind and undergoing brief transformations whenever lightning flashes, each dark shape concealing another. The crash of surf mingles with the growl of thunder; the house creaks and groans deep in its timbers. Somewhere, a wave is gathering.

In the kitchen, leaving the light off, Jack makes the phone call. He speaks calmly and clearly, knowing just what to say, how to make his words carry the most weight. A part of him wishes it didn't have to be like this. But Jilly's life is at stake. He'll do whatever it takes to protect her. He has to know which of them is the enemy, and this is the only way he can think to find out. He had the idea earlier, back on the bay. Then the dice confirmed it. The voice on the other end of the line, a woman's, is asking him something, but he doesn't pay attention. "Just come," he says. And hangs up.

"Who were you talking to?" comes Uncle Jimmy's voice from behind him.

He turns. Uncle Jimmy, who has just stepped through the sliding door, approaches, a shadow amid shadows. "What's going on? Who—" He breaks off, draws back, eyes growing wide. "What the fuck? Jesus, Jack!"

Faster than thought, he's darting forward, his arm a blur. Warmth spatters his face and chest. Then Uncle Jimmy is on the floor. Looking up questioningly, hands pressed to his throat as if

strangling himself. The blood keeps pumping out. At first he thinks he can hear it, rushing like a river, but then, when the sound ceases, he realizes that he was hearing the outside shower.

He can't tell if his nose is bleeding; there's too much blood on his face and hand already. And on the razor in his hand, which he doesn't remember picking up again. But of course, that was Kestrel. And Kestrel who guided his hand with such quick and practiced lethality. Blood drips from the end of the blade into the puddle on the floor like the sound of seconds passing. His chest is burning. He shuts his eyes, draws a ragged breath, opens them again. The world is unchanged; or, rather, changed in the usual way by the inertia of time, which carries some things forward while leaving others, inexplicably, behind. The only shine in Uncle Jimmy's unblinking eyes is what the porch light puts there, flat and dead as the moon's reflection in a pair of discarded shades. It appears that his suspicions were misplaced. But that was always a risk in this game. Besides, Holmes himself would agree that it can be just as helpful to eliminate a suspect as it is to confirm one. And none of this is forever. Jilly will fix everything, put things back even better than they were.

He hears the patter of Ellen's footsteps on the stairs. Stepping over Uncle Jimmy, he hurries to meet her.



Kestrel's eyes open on a darkness not merely lightless, but soundless, odorless. His airie senses inform him that he's standing upright . . . or, no, not standing: *floating* in midair. He can't move so much as a finger. He remembers his duel with Mizar, how he'd left the traitor dead and, gravely injured himself, set off in search of Namora and the others . . . He's less clear about what happened after that. He obviously hadn't bled to death from his wounds. Had he, then, found his way out of the dead zone and back into the nexus, where his cellcoms could heal him? He tries to raise a breeze, to access netspace, but his psionics are as unresponsive as his body.

He calls out, "Is anyone there?"

Lights come up at the croaking of his voice.

He sees an infinitude of Kestrels returned and multiplied from the floor, the ceiling, the walls. He's in a room of mirrors. Alone except for the crowd of his reflections.

As he'd sensed, he's suspended in midair . . . though by no visible mechanism. Which means, he knows, that chains of cellcoms are supporting him, restraining him. Which in turn means he's no longer in the dead zone . . . and that his psionics are being suppressed. But if there's a dampening field at work, it's the most powerful he's ever encountered. Still, he's alive and, as far as he can tell, in one piece. His wings remain encased and immobilized in the protective casts grown by his cellcoms. His shredded shirt has been removed, though not his bloodied trousers and boots, and the skin of his torso and arms is its usual palimpsest of incision pattern scars. He can see no trace of the final wound Mizar had given him, that last thrust of the rapier through his chest.

Because the room holds nothing but himself and his own iterations, he can't judge its size. Nor can he find the source of the light: he sees no lumens, and his body casts no shadow . . . though where, within this mirrored cell, would a shadow fall? Perhaps he was inverted while unconscious and is in netspace now. He feels vulnerable, exposed, his helplessness highlighted by the absence of any other thing, however small or insignificant. Yet someone must be watching.

"I know you're there," he calls out, his voice steadier now. "Show yourself!"

For a moment, nothing. Then, reflected in the mirror before him, Kestrel sees a section of the wall glide open. Beyond, he glimpses shadowy figures: how many, and whether norms or mutes, he can't tell. He hears an unintelligible murmuring of voices. Then one figure separates itself from the rest, eclipsing the opening as it strides into the room, accompanied by an army of its own reflections, an army that increases as the wall slides shut behind him.

St. Christopher.

"Surprised to see me, Kestrel?"

The voice, deep and authoritative, rumbling with amusement, is Mizar's; that is, it's the voice Kestrel heard in his mind whenever

Mizar addressed him psionically, the voice the boggle's virt possessed in netspace.

The crowd of St. Christophers laughs with a single voice at the look of incomprehension on the face of every Kestrel. Like Kestrel, he casts no shadow. But unlike Kestrel, shadow seems to encase him: he wears psibertronic armor, thin and form-fitting, black as pure-spun carbon. He carries no visible weapon, and there's no mark of rank or other insignia upon the armor. His head is uncovered, his blond hair gleaming like burnished gold.

"I confess that you surprised *me*." St. Christopher halts an arm's length behind and to one side of Kestrel. "You were right: I was too Oddsdamn clever for my own good. It was a mistake to toy with you. If it's any consolation, you hurt me. When you plunged your bladeweed through the boggle's blindfold, into his empty eye socket and the brain behind it . . . Well, it's been a long time since I've felt pain like that." His tone is light, jocular. "But I don't hold it against you, Kestrel. In fact, I owe you a debt of gratitude. You gave me a lesson in humility, a virtue we all need to be reminded of from time to time. I am going to return the favor, for I always pay my debts—with interest. For example, do you know that, for a moment there, you actually could have killed me? It's true, I assure you. You can't imagine the intimacy of psibertronic possession. In its way, it goes beyond even psionic invirting. There is a deep psychological penetration; ego colonization, we call it. I wore Mizar like a second skin . . . No, an extension of my own skin. When you severed that link, the psibertronic feedback was, to put it mildly, intense. If you had struck then, I couldn't have defended myself. I was at your mercy. But with Mizar gone, St. Christopher ceased to exist for you. You were so intent on finding Namora and the others, so blind in your typical mute arrogance, it never occurred to you that the slave could be the master."

At last Kestrel finds his voice. "Mizar was *your* slave?"

"There was barely enough of him left to make a slave. We scraped him off the battlefield and augmented his injuries: took away his limbs, his eyes, his tongue. Invirted him, then broke him; subvirted him, the great boggle warrior! We made him a flesh-and-

blood puppet, then sent him back to be found among the dead and dying, with me lying beside him. Thus did I infiltrate the Commonwealth, the College itself. Wearing the mask of Mizar, I was invisible, even among the Invisibles."

"A norm in mute's clothing . . ."

St. Christopher grins. "So you see, I was telling the truth when I insisted I was no traitor. I am and always have been loyal to *Pluribus Unum*."

"Who are you, really? Not St. Christopher . . ."

"My real name would mean nothing to you, and there is no shame in bearing the name of a great saint. Like him, I have sacrificed much in the service of God, and gladly."

Kestrel feels a profound weariness. "And are you going to torture me now? Kill me? Or turn me into a puppet, like poor Mizar?"

"So it's 'poor Mizar,' now, is it?" St. Christopher laughs. "You have already been our puppet, Kestrel. It's what you were born for."

"You're a liar."

"Am I? We'll see soon enough!" At the norm's gesture, the mirror before Kestrel turns transparent, revealing a white-walled room; there, floating inches above the floor, are four white statues, each one depicting a different mute race . . . only Kestrel knows they're not statues at all. Half a dozen norms encased in bulky white suits with transparent helmets are bustling about the still forms.

"You molting bastard," he hisses, straining uselessly against his invisible bonds.

"A poor thanks for reuniting you with your pentad, as I promised!"

"What have you done to them?"

"I've done nothing. It was you who carried the savvee. You who infected them."

"No!"

"At your birth, the Holy Rollers threw their dice and saw written there a glorious destiny! In those numbers they read the strong probability that you would one day be instrumental in ending the war against the norms and bringing victory to your people. But with the arrogance so typical of mutes, they assumed that *they* were

your people. If they had been wise, they would have reflected that, as a breederborn, you were a norm as well as a mute, and they would have slain you at once. But they did not. They permitted you to live, to grow toward your destiny, little dreaming you carried their deaths inside you like a slowly ripening seed. And now, at last, that seed has sprouted. We are about to witness its flowering."

Kestrel's hardly listening, his attention focused on Namora . . . or what's visible of her: a shell as white and smooth as marble. Her features are perfectly represented there, frozen into a peaceful expression, as though, at the end, when she succumbed to the savvee, there was no pain, no terror, only relief, like sinking into an exhausted sleep after a long, hard struggle. It's hard to believe she's still alive inside that cocoon. He wonders if she's aware of everything that's happened. Or is she asleep, dreaming, like a breeder in a maternity ward? Centuries ago, in the final spasm of the Viral Wars, tens of thousands of infected norms were encased in similar cocoons, crucibles wherein cellcoms and savvees fought to an unexpected conclusion: the Becoming. The cocoons cracked open, and the first mutes emerged into a world changed forever by their presence in it. And now? What will emerge from these cocoons?

One of the shells, Fenix's, gives a shudder. The white-suited norms draw back sharply; their features, through their transparent helmets, register anticipation, eagerness, dread.

"It has begun," St. Christopher says. "At last!"

The norm drops to his knees, bows his head three times quickly to the mirrored floor, then straightens, still kneeling, and presses his open hands together before his black-armored chest. On the other side of the glass, the white-suited figures do likewise, all in perfect synchrony. Tendrils of panic and dread are uncoiling in Kestrel's chest as he watches. "What's going—"

"Silence," St. Christopher hisses.

At that, Kestrel's voice vanishes. He's still talking, but no sound comes from his mouth. Cellcoms are soaking up his words, muffling him.

Fenix's cocoon shudders again, then commences a steady rocking as something stirs and struggles within. Cracks begin to appear.

Two of the white-suited norms bow their heads once more to the ground, then stand, one to either side of the now violently shaking figure, which is webbed with an intricate tracery of cracks that reminds Kestrel of incision pattern scars.

A fragment of shell breaks away, falls to the floor. Others follow.

A fist punches through. An arm. A shoulder.

Bare, unscarred, pale brown skin.

A head, sweat-drenched and hairless, also pale brown, smooth as milk chocolate, the mouth open, gasping for air, the eyes wide, white orbs with irises of honey brown, staring at the world in fright and wonder.

The two flanking norms step forward. One of them takes the emerging Fenix—no, Kestrel thinks, *not* Fenix: not anymore—by the arm, while the other begins to pull away bits of the shell, assisting in the full emergence of what is, at least physically, no longer a mander, but simply a man. A norm.

Kestrel opens his mouth in a soundless wail at this mockery of the Becoming. Sickness clenches his insides, comes boiling up his throat. He gags, his body convulsing, as the sickness is swallowed by the same cellcoms that have swallowed his voice. When it's over, and he can breathe again, gasping for air while tears run down his face, he sees, on the other side of the window, the newborn norm regarding him without recognition, like a curious child. Then, as one of the attendants lifts a gloved hand and makes the sign of the Starcrossed Crescent in the air, the other draws a bubble of glass from a pocket in his white suit and smashes it like an egg against the newborn's forehead. A skein of blood and honey-colored liquid descends over the face of the norm like a caul, wiping away the innocent expression there and replacing it with a look of horror and revulsion. Of blind, unreasoning hatred. Stumbling in haste, the norm that had once been Fenix turns away from the sight of Kestrel. He would have fallen, but the two white-suited attendants bear him up, supporting him in their arms as they lead him, hunched and shuddering, through an opening in the wall and out of the room.

Meanwhile, the cocoons of Chalcedon and Polaris have begun to tremble.

“Behold the Unbecoming,” says St. Christopher.

Kestrel tries again to stir his psionics to life, but it’s hopeless. It’s as though his powers have been cut out of him.

“By the grace of God and the genius of Pluribus Unum, victory is ours.” St. Christopher rises to his feet. Cracks are appearing in the shells of Chalcedon and Polaris, obliterating the images of delph and boggle. Kestrel can neither look away nor shut his eyes. Nor close his ears as the norm continues.

“You see the effects of the savvee. Mutes transformed into norms: empty vessels, innocent, their pasts forgotten. Slates wiped clean. Then baptized with a second, separate savvee, whose cell-coms inscribe our history upon them, giving them knowledge, identity, purpose. From the death of a mute, a norm has arisen, a loyal subject of Pluribus Unum, a new soul won for God. Thus do we triumph twice over.”

By now, Chalcedon, no longer Chalcedon, has emerged from his shell and received the same baptism as Fenix, with the identical result. But something seems to be going wrong with Polaris’s emergence. The cracks have spread across the surface of her shell, but the shell remains intact, unbroken. And now the signs of struggle from within, after reaching a frenzied pitch, are growing weaker. Yet the white-suited attendants make no move to render assistance.

“The newborn must break through unaided,” St. Christopher explains. “Only when the first breach has been made may the priests interfere. Just as in the Becoming, when many of those infected did not survive, their self-woven wombs turning into tombs, so, too, in the Unbecoming. But still, even in failure, success: one less mute in the world.”

There’s no movement at all from Polaris’s shell. Grief wrings Kestrel’s insides. He’d suspected her of being a spy. Mistrusted her, cursed her. Felt jealousy and worse each time she looked at Namora with undisguised longing. And had been drawn to her, too, despite everything. Now she’s gone. Dead. Perhaps it’s better so. Still, unable to look away from the cracked, unbroken shell that so mockingly preserves her appearance, the scrawny, childlike body, the wild shock of hair, leached of all color now, he mourns her, feels her

loss more keenly than the loss of Chalcedon and Fenix. Why, he wonders, is the heart so tardy to reveal its truths?

And what of Namora? Her shell hasn't yet begun to crack. But whether she survives the transformation and emerges changed forever, a norm in body and soul, or shares Polaris's fate, she's already dead in every way that matters. Her last kiss still burns in Kestrel's memory. He knows that it always will.

Somehow, he swears to himself, he's going to make St. Christopher pay for these murders, these desecrations. He'll make them all pay. Yet that seems a hollow boast as he hangs helplessly, psionics suppressed. So much for the Second Becoming! he thinks bitterly. Is that what protected him from the savvee, immunized him while his friends succumbed? Or is there a more sinister explanation? Is he, as St. Christopher claimed, the source of the infection? Had he carried—all unknowing, but no less guilty for his ignorance—the sickness responsible for this obscenity of Unbecoming?

"You may speak now, if you wish," St. Christopher says. "Ask your questions."

Kestrel stays stubbornly silent.

The norm's myriad reflections shrug. "Speak or not; it makes no difference. I know your thoughts."

"Return my powers, or give me a weapon, and face me. That's all I have to ask of you."

"I think not."

"You're a coward."

"Believe me, Kestrel. I would like nothing better than another chance to carve you up. Alas, Pluribus Unum has commanded that your life be spared."

"Why? So you can turn me into a norm as well?"

"I'm afraid that's impossible. Though you carry the savvee of Unbecoming, you're immune to its effects. You will remain what you are; for you, there is no escape."

"I don't want to escape what I am."

"You fool. You don't even know what you are."

"I'm a mute. An airie. I'm Kestrel of Wafting, no matter what you say."

St. Christopher steps in front of Kestrel, blocking his view of Namora's still-quiescent shell. For the first time, Kestrel notices that the norm's antech eye is dark. Had he destroyed it, then, when he severed St. Christopher's psibertronic link to Mizar? He hopes so. But the norm's natural eye, with its pupil of smoky amber, burns with hatred enough to make up for any loss. Yet Kestrel doesn't flinch from meeting that singular gaze. And matching it hate for hate.

"What you are," says the norm tersely, "is a weapon. A weapon fashioned for a single task."

"Somehow, I'm going to get free. Then you'll see what kind of weapon I am."

"Let me tell you a story, Kestrel. It will pass the time while we're waiting for Namora to emerge . . . if she does emerge."

Kestrel knows that although St. Christopher is blocking his view of Namora's cocoon, the norm himself can see it clearly, reflected in the mirrors behind Kestrel's back. He knows, too, that the norm is taunting him, trying to get him to beg for a glimpse into the room, or for a description of what is happening, or not happening, there. His desire to find out is so fierce that Kestrel doesn't trust himself to speak. Instead, he spits into the norm's smug face.

The spray of saliva doesn't reach St. Christopher. Not a single drop. Airborne cellcoms absorb it all.

"Years ago," says the norm meanwhile, without so much as blinking, "before you were born, our scientists stumbled across a particularly clever savvee, a Trojan horse that hid itself deep in the genome of those infected and lay dormant there, to all appearances just so much junk DNA. What made this savvee so valuable was its ability to pass intact from generation to generation in the mitochondrial inheritance all mothers, norms and mutes alike, bequeath to their children . . . even in the case of those abominations you call breederborn. The savvee itself was benign, utterly harmless, but its potential as a delivery system was plain. If every norm female carried the savvee, then every woman captured and subjected to the institutionalized rape of the maternity wards would pass it on to her half-breed offspring. We had a powerful weapon at our disposal, but how best to use it? What should our perfect delivery system de-

liver? Why, another savvee, of course: one considerably less benign. Yet if we tipped our hand too early, the Holy Rollers would find the savvee and develop a means to isolate and remove it from their so-called breeding stock. If, on the other hand, the savvee and whatever it carried remained dormant, it could spread in a relatively brief time to a substantial minority of the mute population. Then, once a sufficient level of saturation had been reached, the savvee could be activated, its concealed weapon triggered, to sweep through the Commonwealth in a cascading and unstoppable plague. In this way, we could inflict a devastating blow upon our enemies, one from which they might never recover."

"So my birth mother infected me with the savvee of Unbecoming, is that it?" Kestrel sneers. "Sorry, St. Christopher. You'll have to do better than that. You should at least learn to keep your lies straight. You told me before that I was a spy sent among the mutes, a norm possessing the powers of an airie and a boggle. You said that I had been given the appearance and the memories of a kidnapped airie—the real Kestrel, whose place I then assumed, prior to the Proving, with all memories of my true identity, powers, and purpose suppressed. That I infected my pentad with the savvee, which was then triggered by the suicide of the norms. What you're saying now contradicts all of that, and it's even less believable."

"Your disbelief doesn't make it any less true. I lied to you in the past, yes, but those lies all held bits and pieces of the truth I'm revealing now. You carry the savvee of Unbecoming, Kestrel, passed on to you by your birth mother. But the savvee doesn't work the same in half-breeds as it does in full-blooded mutes. It's quite ironic, actually. As you've seen, once activated, the savvee turns full-bloods into norms. It has a very different—indeed, diametrically opposed—effect upon breederborn such as yourself. Can you guess it?"

"The Second Becoming," says Kestrel in a small voice.

"Exactly so. You now possess not only the psionic powers of a boggle in addition to those of an airie, but the powers of all the other mute races as well. Alas, you will never be given the opportunity to use them. As I said, you are a weapon built for a single task. That task is done. How, then, to dispose of the weapon? Should it be

destroyed? Or preserved, honored even? Pluribus Unum, in his wisdom—and, I might add, compassion—has chosen the latter course.”

“You’re not going to kill me?”

“That would be a poor way of thanking you for all you’ve done. Of course, I don’t mean you alone. Every woman captured by the mutes for the last eighteen years has carried the Trojan savvee. Every half-breed born in those years carries it as well, and has transmitted it, through sexual contact, into the full-blooded population, where further promiscuity has propagated it further still. At last, the projected infection rate reached 40 percent. That was deemed sufficient. The Trojan was triggered, the plague unleashed; in its active state, the savvee of Unbecoming is extremely virulent, hijacking cellcoms to replicate itself and spread. What you have just witnessed is being repeated all across the Commonwealth and throughout the Waste. You have lost, Kestrel. The long war at last is over. The mutes are no more; by the grace of God, the lost sheep have returned to the fold. The human race is whole again, restored to its primal purity. A few hundred breederborn selected from among the five races will share your fate and serve as curiosities, reminders of mankind’s greatest victory. The rest will be put to death. They are being slain even now by the victorious armies of Pluribus Unum, slain before they can become fully aware of their newly augmented powers.”

Kestrel’s reason recoils from the scale and scope of what St. Christopher is telling him. Surely, he thinks, it’s just one more lie. But what he’s seen, and the palpable sense of triumph emanating from St. Christopher, leaves him vulnerable to doubt.

“The need for subterfuge is past,” says the norm. “Time will convince you of the truth of my words. I will leave you now.”

St. Christopher steps past him.

And Kestrel can see into the adjoining room once again. Of the two shells that had been left, only one remains unbroken, riven with cracks. Supported by two attendants, a naked norm female is staring at him in horror and disgust, baptismal blood running down her face.

Namora.

Though there's nothing of Namora left that he can see.
He groans.

St. Christopher's voice whispers in his ear: "I wanted this sight to be your last, the memory you will carry into your cage of darkness."

At that, Kestrel feels pressure building against his eyes. Cellcoms are massing there, pushing relentlessly. His vision blurs, turns red. He howls. But the pressure doesn't slacken. Meanwhile, the voice of St. Christopher sounds in his mind:

In the Holy Trilogy it is written, "An eye for an eye." But I repay my debts with interest. You took one of my eyes; now I take both of yours.

Darkness descends, shot through with warping colors. Kestrel feels blood pouring down his cheeks. A single thought flares crimson in his mind: *Why me?*

Because you're special, St. Christopher answers with oily sarcasm. Just as the dice of the Holy Rollers predicted. You were the first breederborn to carry the Trojan savvee. And I took an interest in you for another reason as well. We're family, Kestrel. Your birth mother was my sister, whom you murdered by being born. All that remains of her is knit into your genes. And carried in your dice pouch. That pouch of skin and the bits of bone it contains will be interred with honor. But that does not begin to satisfy your debt. In the months and years to come, nephew, you will repay her sacrifice. With interest.

I will see to it personally.



Jack sits on the rusted metal slats of the platform at the top of the Jold tower, his bare feet dangling over the edge. Far below, the beach and dunes make a shadowy moonscape in the glare of deck lights shining from the houses of Middlesex and South Bethany. He's facing south, toward Ocean City. Stars glimmer through gaps in a ragged fleet of battleship gray clouds scudding westward across the moon's dimpled face, fleeing the coming storm. It's too dark to make out the shapes of the big hotels miles away, but the aircraft warning lights on their roofs pulse steadily, red as rubies, while

white headlights and red taillights move singly or in groups up and down the night-shrouded corridor of Route 1 as though borne on currents of air or water.

To the east, sea and sky merge into a single darkness broken by lightning flashes that illuminate but do not pierce the tight-woven web of clouds. The widely scattered lights of a handful of ships are visible out there, vanishing and reappearing with the rolling of the swells, blinking on and off as though calling for help . . . The thunder is a grumbling that's grown louder in these last elastic moments since he pulled himself up, panting, onto the platform: a sound first mingling with, then rising above the crash of the surf that fringes the beach like fallen cloud-stuff, lacy white and undulant. The wind, too, has picked up, a moist and briny blowing that gusts or changes direction or drops away altogether without warning as if trying to catch him by surprise and tumble him from his perch. He clings to a flaking vertical strut, one arm hooked around it, his body racked with shudders in the buffeting chill. The tower vibrates like a tuning fork in the wind.

Somewhere between the house and the tower he must have dropped Uncle Jimmy's razor; at least, he doesn't have it now. His chest burns fiercely, but in the patchy moonlight he can't tell if the incision is leaking blood. Either way, there's no shortage of the stuff. It covers his chest, his arms, his legs: black as shadow, heavy as lead. He feels it trickling down his bare skin as if condensing out of the air. It oozes from scrapes in his palms and drips from the ravaged soles of his feet. He gasps for breath, drowning in it. But there's no escape. The sea itself has turned to blood, and rising from its depths is the presence he'd first sensed days ago, when Jilly's power had awakened, and has felt intermittently since: a consciousness searching for him, reaching for him sluggishly . . . But sluggish no longer. Whatever it is, it's coming for him now. Surfacing slowly but with inexorable purpose, preceded by a wave even larger than itself, a displaced wall of blood already towering in the distance, cloaked from his sight like the hotels of Ocean City. But unlike them, rushing through the night. Will it, and the storm that he knows is also a

part of it, a manifestation of its power, sweep him from the tower, pull him back into its smothering embrace? He would climb higher if he could, all the way to the moon, yet he senses there is no height that would be beyond the reach of what is coming.

A small shape flits crablike across the sand. Jilly, running toward the tower in what seems slow motion. He watches her come, sees her trip and fall, get up and fling herself forward into the wind. He yells down at her to stay away, but it's no use: the wind snatches his voice. Besides, even if she heard, she wouldn't turn back. She has no idea of the danger she's in. Whatever is approaching wants Jilly. She has the lion's share of the power so unfairly split between them; it's her exercise of that power that drew the thing's attention in the first place, draws it now. Though Jilly hasn't used her power yet, not tonight. He'd know if she had. Uncle Jimmy lies on the floor of the house, his throat slit; Jack can still see the look of baffled surprise fading from his eyes as his life flowed out. He wouldn't have imagined the human body could hold so much blood, or that it could empty so quickly, like a wineskin slashed open. And Ellen. He doesn't want to think about Ellen. Doesn't want to remember what he—no, not him: Kestrel—did to her. His stomach turns over, gorge rising, and he leans out into the empty air and gags . . . but there's nothing left to vomit. Just memories, and they will not be gotten rid of so easily. They will be with him always, no matter what. No matter how many new realities branch and rebranch from this one, he will remember them all. It's his curse. Unless and until he's erased from the game. Which he might not mind so much if it didn't also mean Jilly's erasure. But that he won't allow. He's come too far to give up now. As long as he's able, he'll go on fighting for her. Do everything he can to protect her from a threat she doesn't recognize . . . a threat she's rushing toward now, even as it rushes to meet her. But what is it? He'd thought their mysterious enemy was Uncle Jimmy or Ellen . . . but those guesses have been proved wrong, their refutations written in blood and corpses. Who then? An unknown person out there, whose power he perceives, through some trick of the mind, as an upwelling from the depths of the

ocean? Or, he thinks, shuddering in a blast of wind, no trick at all but a true denizen of those lightless depths, a creature ancient, inhuman, uncoiling . . .

Whatever it is, he knows he can't fight it. He doesn't have the power. Only Jilly. Yet will her power be enough? He doesn't think its reflexive use will save them this time, as it always has before. No, if they are to survive what's coming, Jilly's going to have to strike first. Which means that he's going to have to convince her not only to use her power, but that she possesses it in the first place. And he's going to have to do it fast. The last time he tried, she hadn't believed a word of what he'd told her, had thought he was crazy . . . He'd tipped the canoe, and in that moment, instinctively, she'd acted, and a new world was born, one in which he hadn't confided in her . . . though at the time, in his ignorance, his arrogance, he'd assumed that he was the one responsible.

Jilly's vanished into the shadows at the foot of the tower, but he doesn't need to see her to know that she's scrambling up the rusty metal ladder. He can feel her coming, the bond of their twinship strong as ever, perhaps stronger because of all they've shared today, not just in this reality but in all the others. Jilly may not remember them consciously, as he does, but some trace of those overwritten experiences must linger in the depths of her mind, like forgotten dreams. Just as he feels her fear, her shock, her anger, so, too, he knows, is she feeling *his* fear, *his* horror, *his* impatience; it's how she's found him, after all, following the emotional tug like a trail of bloody footprints in the sand. Soon she'll reach him, and though just a moment ago he'd shouted at her to stay away, now he silently urges her on, willing her to climb faster, for he's begun to think more clearly. They are in a race: against time, against the storm and what lies behind or within it. He thinks of Hurricane Belle, how its arrival had coincided with the awakening of Jilly's power, and his own. Had Belle been another manifestation of the force or presence that stalks them now?

He's looking down the dark gullet of the tower, waiting for Jilly to surface from that pit of caged shadows, when he hears the first

siren. It startles him, wailing out of the night from the direction of Bethany Beach. As he turns, other sirens join the screaming chorus, and a moment later the first flashing lights come into view a half mile or so down Route 1, where the road curves behind pine trees and houses. His heart swoons at this vivid reminder that there are other powers in the world, less potent, perhaps, but still to be feared. He gets to his feet for a better look, limbs shaking, flooded with cold dread, as if the swarm of blue-and-red-strobing lights heralds the approach of God Himself—or, even worse, Bill. *In or else*, he hears himself think, heart thudding, the sharp, rusty edges of the vertical strut cutting into his palm, already torn from his scramble up the ladder. Not that the sight comes as a surprise; Ellen hadn't gone as quickly or quietly as Uncle Jimmy. He'd been sure that she was the one, but after the first stroke of the razor, when she didn't use her power to defend herself, he knew he was wrong. Again. But he couldn't stop. He had to finish what he'd started, shut her up before she woke up the whole neighborhood. Anyway, he'd told himself as he fell to his knees in the shadows under the porch and heaved the contents of his stomach into the bloody sand, Jilly would sort everything out. None of this mess was permanent, save in his memory. When she came downstairs and saw Uncle Jimmy, the shock would trigger her power, and she would set things right. Bring them back. He thought of returning to the house to wake her, if she wasn't awake already. But in the end, he couldn't do it. Couldn't bear to retrace his steps. And so he ran away, not realizing that he was heading for the tower until he saw it looming above him. Only then did he sense their real adversary gathering itself, and in a burst of terror flung himself up the ladder, seeking escape. By the time he reached the top, he knew escape was impossible. Or, rather, impossible for him. But not for Jilly. And so he waited impatiently, racked with guilt and sorrow and dread, shivering in the wind as if it were the dead of winter, for the moment she would find the bodies and bring this living nightmare to an end, make the saving throw only she could make and erase the results of his actions, although not the actions themselves: they would remain with him for-

ever, incised into his soul, scars that would never heal. Then all at once, there she was, running across the dunes, and he knew it wasn't going to be so easy.

But at least, he thinks now, as the flashing lights pass him by, slowing to make the turn into Middlesex, whatever happens, we'll be together. The Doone twins united against the world . . .

"Jack!"

The urgent voice makes him jump. He looks down; Jilly's pallid face, half-masked in shadow, is rising toward him. Her expression, what he can make out of it, is ghastly and grim. He's never seen her like this. He's afraid to let her onto the platform. But then, as she begins to haul herself up through the square opening, he reaches impulsively to help.

"Don't fucking touch me!"

She gets to her feet, glaring at him, vampirelike in the moonlight.

"Jilly, you've got to—"

"Shut up," she says and, stepping forward, socks him hard in the left side of his face, just below the cheekbone.

The unexpected punch sends him reeling against the crossed struts of the tower's frame, and the back of his head smacks into one of the bars with a clang. It's that, more than the punch, which leaves him seeing stars. Fumblingly, he brings up his arms to defend himself. He feels like he's about to burst into tears. That she should hit him now, after all he's done for her, all he's suffered, both for her sake and at her hands, is monstrously unfair. But there are no more blows. When he blinks his eyes clear, he sees that she's fallen to her knees, shoulders heaving. "Why did you do that?" he demands, jaw throbbing. He's mystified, and more than a little angry.

She looks up at him, tearful face silvered in moonlight, the flicker of distant lightning mirrored in her eyes. "Why?" The sound that comes from her lips is somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "You . . . did what you did, and you ask me *why*?" Her voice is shrill. "You are in *so much trouble* . . ."

He shakes his head, spreading his hands placatingly and making his voice calm and reasonable, reassuring. "They're not dead, Jilly. Not really. All you have to do is bring them back . . ."

“Shut up!” she cries. “What do you mean, ‘not dead’? You fucking killed them, Jack!” And then her anger crumbles before a fresh onslaught of grief, her face turning into an ugly stranger’s. “Why did you kill them?”

He starts to explain how it was Kestrel, not him, but his words trail off. She’s looking at him like *he’s* the stranger. Like he’s nuts. He feels the knife thrust and twist of her horror, her pity, her blame. She doesn’t understand. Will not forgive. He sees that now. Knows it absolutely. There are no words he can possibly say that will convince her. And even if there were, there’s no time left to say them. The sirens are silent now, replaced by the crackle of radio voices from the far side of the dunes. Dogs are barking. The lights are on in every house, including their own, and though from this angle he can’t see the vehicles parked along Bayberry Road, their blue-and-red lights paste a garish Christmas shine on pine trees and roofs, and the drizzly air shimmers with auroral colors. Already flashlights are dancing through the dark, swinging back and forth in a search that will ultimately lead to the beach, the tower. Or would, if not for the swifter approach of the storm and, in its wake, the annihilating wave that will wash over the two of them, scouring them from the world . . .

He has to force her hand, just as he did before, unknowingly, when he tipped the canoe, when he rode the wave.

He ducks between the crossed struts of the tower. The wind whips around him; a shriek sounds from behind. Despite his determination, he hesitates: it’s a long way down. Then, as he sways forward, Jilly grabs him, drags him back through the struts. “Let go!” he shouts.

“No!”

He struggles to break her grip, but she’s hanging on for dear life. She’s always been the stronger one, the more determined. But he can’t let her win this time. By saving him, she’ll doom herself, doom both of them. In desperation, he throws back his head, feels it smash into her face like a hammer, hears the crack of her nose breaking, and feels it, too, in his bones, his soul, another scar to carry. Her arms fall away as she staggers back. Then cries out, a shriek of shrill

and terrified surprise cut off with a clang followed at once by a soggy thud that turns his legs to liquid. He turns, collapsing, in time to see her legs slide through the opening in the floor of the platform like a merm gliding under the surface of the water. "Jilly!" he shrieks, but she's gone. There is another loud bang, then a softer one, then something that sounds for all the world like a trash bag filled with glass shattering on a sidewalk. And suddenly, for the first time in his life, he can't sense her. The psychic umbilical that's always joined them is gone. It doesn't unravel; it doesn't snap: it's simply gone.

And nothing changes in the world.

Or everything does.

Because Jilly lies dead at the foot of the tower, and the world goes on as it was, carrying him forward, alone, into the consequences of his actions. There has been no saving throw. No do-over.

Jack howls.

He doesn't ask himself how things could have gone so terribly wrong, why Jilly's power didn't activate as it had so many times before, kicking in to save her just as it had when he was in danger, branching a new reality off the old. He doesn't stop to wonder if he's crazy, if he's imagined everything. He doesn't think at all. Still howling, as if he will never run out of air or voice, as if his lungs can outlast, outshout, the winds of this or any storm, no longer knowing or caring that it's too late, and seeking less to escape his pain, his loss, than to follow Jilly wherever she's gone, preceding him like she always does, always having to be first and leaving him to catch up as best he can, he picks himself up and hurls himself from the tower. Above, the moon goes tumbling across the sky. Jack spreads his arms and reaches for it.



W elcome to your new home." The norm shoves him forward. Stumbling, Kestrel lifts his hands protectively but encounters nothing. Turning cautiously, he reaches out and finds a smooth, unbroken wall where, seconds earlier, there had been an opening.

The norm is silent, or gone. Kestrel can't tell. He's become his own worst nightmare: a crippled airie. For much of the time since his blinding—how long, exactly, he doesn't know—the norms kept him drugged, unconscious or semiconscious. His most recent memories are of darkness shot through with bright flashes of pain. St. Christopher had told him during a rare lucid interval that he was no longer in the Waste, but he'd already guessed as much. Then, moments ago, he'd awakened to the bark of a voice he didn't recognize.

"On your feet."

"Who—" He broke off with a cry as electricity jolted through him.

"I said, on your feet!"

Kestrel had stood shakily, flaring his wings for balance. To his surprise, the movement was painless. Yet something didn't feel right. His wings . . . There was no strength in them. They were like ornaments, paper fans.

"Docs did a bit of cutting," the voice had said with gruff satisfaction.

"What—"

Another jolt. He hadn't asked any more questions after that, though he'd realized by then that the drowsy fog in which he'd drifted for an eternity had lifted at last. He was fully awake, alert. Himself again . . . Or, he'd thought, *what's left of me*. Then the norm had marched him here . . . wherever *here* is. He supposes he's about to find out.

The air around him begins to whisper its secrets; a breeze stirs the feathers of his headcrest, comes coiling about his neck like a serpent familiar, responsive to his silent call. He drops to his knees, half-disbelieving his senses. But there's no mistaking it: his psionics are back. Not completely, as he soon discovers: not even close. But to a man dying of thirst, a few drops of water are more precious than gold, and so it is with Kestrel. Tears spill from the hollows that had housed his eyes, scooped out like peach pits; though robbed of sight, he's been left able to mourn its loss. Yet now he weeps with childlike happiness at this miracle, this small mercy granted him by the whim of the Odds . . . or, rather, by his captors, and intended,

he knows, as no mercy at all, but a refinement of cruelty. He's sure they're observing him now, smiling at his tears. Well, let them. He doesn't give a damn.

After a time, he rouses himself and sets out to explore his prison, shuffling along with trepidatious curiosity, his blindness still new and strange, probing with his hands and with faint breezes in which the shapes of objects shimmer into existence as he draws near, zones of solidity amid a vast, intangible darkness. St. Christopher had told him that he possessed the psionic abilities of all the mute races, thanks to the effects of the Unbecoming savvee, but there's no evidence of it now; either a powerful dampening field is at work, squelching all psionics within his cell other than what his captors permit, or St. Christopher had lied, as he had about so many things. But not everything. No, the bastard speaks the truth when it suits him, Kestrel thinks. He salts his lies with truths, his truths with lies, until there's no telling them apart.

Is the war really over? The mute races wiped out, the norms triumphant? He doesn't want to believe it. The scale of such a defeat is overwhelming, unreal: tens of millions of mutes killed outright or transformed into norms; Perula and Scoter, Gad and Pip and all his friends and neighbors in Wafting, Pigeon and the numberless citizens of Mutatis Mutandis, every last mute in the Commonwealth and the Waste, airies, boggles, delves, manders, and merms, all of them gone, vanished as if they had never existed, save for a few pathetic survivors like himself. And if it *is* true, is he the cause, as St. Christopher claimed? A carrier, along with his fellow breederborn, of the Unbecoming savvee? He'd always feared his birth mother had infected him, left a poisoned inheritance lurking in his genes. But *genocide*? It's too awful, too final, to contemplate. Yet neither can he dismiss it from his mind; St. Christopher has seen to that. Over and over since his blinding, he's relived with all the vivid immediacy of an invirting the transformations of Fenix, Chalcedon, and Namora. The ghastly death of Polaris, entombed within her own hardened skin. And multiplied them a millionfold in his dreams and imaginings, grief mixing with guilt until a myriad of voices cry out in accusation, recrimination, until the darkness in which he dwells

grows heavy and thick as blood, the stench rising in his nostrils, leaving him gasping for air. Fearful thoughts and memories have harried him through the drug-hazed days, tumbling in the stormy currents of his mind, sometimes sinking below consciousness for a time but continuing to disturb the surface with fretful turbulence, always rising to pierce him anew.

His explorations reveal a low bed with a hard, bare mattress, a toilet, a table and two chairs, a shower. As he stands beside the bed, wondering if he's just circumnavigated his world, a soft hiss of air like an indrawn breath announces an opening in the wall almost directly across, as best he can judge, from where he'd first entered. There's a smell of . . . is that *pine*?

Kestrel steps through, into what his amazed, all-but-overwhelmed senses tell him is the Featherstone Mountains. His headcrest rises, tingling. The wind is blowing steadily, with a sharp, chill edge and a sound like a blade being honed on a leather strap. He hears water rushing in mountain springs swelled by melting snows from the higher peaks. The cry of a hawk scours the piney air. His homesick heart soars in joyful communion; for an instant, he's standing on a familiar plateau high above Wafting, the brightly tiled roofs and switchbacked streets of his nesting spread below him, clear as crystal in his mind's eye.

Then his psionics rebound from an enclosing wall, and even as he realizes that he's in an artificial environment, he hears laughter and jeering voices. He flinches, fearing blows or thrown objects, but nothing strikes him, though the abuse grows louder. With that, Kestrel understands at last the true nature of his prison: it's a cell designed to show him off like a wild animal in its natural habitat. He's an exhibit in a zoo. The wall, or some portion of it, is doubtless transparent; he imagines the audience of norms watching him, kids pressing their snotty noses against the glass to gaze wide-eyed at the mute monster. Something breaks in him then. He'd thought himself already broken beyond repair, hurt beyond hurting. But in that, as in so many things, he turns out to have been wrong.

He has no wish to go on like this, crippled, bereft, alone among enemies, an object of scorn and derision. He resolves to die. But

how? He searches his cell more thoroughly, ignoring the hooting catcalls of his audience, but finds nothing remotely lethal. Despite the sounds and smells and tactile sensations that proclaim him to be standing high in the Featherstones, this portion of his prison proves to be no more than a large, empty room. No doubt holograms provide the illusion of mountain scenery for the benefit of the watching norms, and the rest is a mild inverting or molecular manipulation intended, like the miserly return of his psionics, to add to his suffering. He returns to the first, smaller, room, but there, again, meets with disappointment: no sheets on the mattress to fashion into a noose; the table and chairs bolted to the floor; no sharp or pointed objects. Glumly, he sits on the mattress and gives himself up to despair.

Later, a doorway hisses open in the wall, and someone enters. Kestrel springs to his feet, then falls back with a cry as electric jolts behind his knees turn his legs to jelly.

"None of that," comes a man's gruff voice.

"What do you want? Who are you?"

"Just bringing dinner. A juicy steak, fried potatoes, salad . . . Ask me, it's better'n a lousy mute deserves, but orders are orders."

Kestrel's psionics show him that the man is carrying a tray, which he sets down on the table. He smells steak and potatoes. His stomach rumbles; he can't remember when he'd last eaten.

"Hungry?" The norm's laugh is sour. "Let me season the steak for you." He hawks loudly and spits. "There. Hope you choke on it." With that, the norm exits the cell, the wall resealing behind him with a whisper of displaced air.

Kestrel is starving; thirsty, too. He shuffles over to the table, sits in one of the chairs, reaches to position the tray squarely before him. He's salivating with anticipation, yet he hesitates. It isn't the notion of eating the guard's spiteful "seasoning" that fazes him. It's the knowledge that he can't trust what his senses are telling him. He'd assumed, because he heard no taunting comments such as had assailed him in the outer room, that he enjoyed a greater degree of privacy here, but the theatricality of the guard's behavior has made him suspicious of that assumption. If anything, he must assume the

contrary: he's always on display. An absence of voices does not mean an absence of eyes. He must think of everything as a performance designed around his humiliation. For all he knows, he's been served a plate of excrement. Or the flesh of mutes. Or perhaps it truly is a steak, cooked to perfection, but he'll taste something foul and react accordingly, to the amusement of his audience. Snarling, he sweeps the tray from the table. It clatters to the floor, accompanied by the chime of silverware.

That sound, with its bright promise, galvanizes him. He drops to his knees, groping with fingers, psionics, until he holds a knife in his hand. He doesn't stop to think or question his luck; he lays the sharp edge against his neck . . . and finds himself paralyzed, his hand locked in a grip of iron. Or, no, not locked, for he can lift the knife away from his skin with ease. But he cannot force it down, though he tries again and again, first pressing steadily, using all his strength, arm quivering with the effort, then stabbing brutally, knowing all the while that it's useless, that despite everything he'd fallen for their trap, taken the bait. Shame scalds and maddens him, driving him to a frenzy, until the blade snaps with a sound like breaking bone and flies from his hand.

At that instant, St. Christopher's voice surfaces in his mind. *I trust the lesson is plain, nephew. You will not be permitted to harm yourself.*

I'll starve if I have to, he thinks, fighting back tears.

Don't be so melodramatic. Cellcoms can manufacture and deliver all the nutrients necessary for survival. There is no escape. You will be our guest for the remainder of your natural life . . . and beyond.

What do you mean, "beyond"?

Did you think we would give up such valuable specimens as yourself and your fellow breederborn? You will be cloned. Cells have already been harvested and cultured; the process is under way. When the bodies reach maturity, a copy of your inverted consciousness will be psibertronically inserted.

That won't be me.

I assure you: in every way that matters, it will be. You will remember each one of your previous lives; the continuity will be seamless. You

should be grateful; immortality is an imperial prerogative that Pluribus Unum guards jealously. Few are privileged to share it. As it happens, I am one of them. So you see, nephew, you will have the pleasure of my company for a very long time indeed.

Kestrel had picked himself up and returned to the mattress. *I thought you norms looked forward to dying. Don't you want to join your god in heaven?*

Why, and so I have! My soul ascended to Paradise years ago, upon the death of my body.

I've seen you in the flesh . . .

Cloned flesh, in which a copy of my mind, inverted, lives on. Because my soul has already achieved its eternal reward, in my earthly afterlife I am no longer bound by the strictures of the Holy Trilogy. In the service of Pluribus Unum, all is permitted me, without fear of sin or retribution. Such are the rewards and consolations of the one true faith, on Earth as it is in heaven. What does your so-called great and powerful Odds offer? A saving throw? That is not salvation!

Leave me alone.

Your god is false, Kestrel. He has deserted you.

"'Who can diminish the Odds?'" Kestrel recites aloud, his voice quavering. "'Let them try; it is they who are diminished.'"

St. Christopher's laughter licks, fading, through his mind.

Kestrel falls onto his side on the mattress. He prays to the Odds, but the words ring hollowly, as if they cannot escape this cell, this darkness, any more than he can. The truth is, they don't apply to him anymore. He hasn't lost his faith, his awareness of the whim of the Odds at play in the world, but he no longer feels himself a part of it. He's cut off. Out of the game. He missed his saving throw.

Yet that's not what causes him such agony. Failure is inevitable, after all; the Odds can be beaten once, a hundred times, a thousand, but not every single time, not when each successful saving throw makes the next more unlikely. Sooner or later, even the luckiest fall short. And then? *From the Odds, all things issue. To the Odds, all things return.* To dissolve in oblivion and be reborn in some new form, a dream cast up on the shores of matter. *Of bodies changed to other forms I sing.*

But not him. Not now or ever. His original body will die, decay, dissolve. But his mind? That's no merely physical thing; it's what boggles call an *emergent phenomenon*, a field of energy generated by the electrochemical processes of his brain, the firing of neurons like the random rolling of a hundred billion dice inside his cranium. It's what makes him Kestrel. Yet once generated, this energy field can be copied, invirted, preserved indefinitely in netspace or implanted in a new body, and each copy is more than just identical to the original; in a sense, there *are* no copies, but only a single original: a mind like a diamond in which new facets are periodically cut or smoothed away.

Among mutes, this is the domain of boggles and the College, the practical application of probability theology that lies behind the invirtings to which the other races stoically submit and as stoically endure for the greater good. But the connection to the original body is paramount, taking precedence over all others. When that body dies, and the blood tides ebb from the brain, the mind is allowed to fade along with it; all copies save one are destroyed, all virtues erased, so that consciousness, too, will return to the primal, inexhaustible source of all things. The single remaining copy goes to the archival faculty of the College, where, stripped of all individual consciousness, it becomes part of the integrated gestalt network.

Such is not the case among norms, as Kestrel has always known. Yet he's never, in his worst nightmares, imagined experiencing for himself their willful and arrogant insanity. But now he's caught up in it, facing a fate horrible beyond reason. He'll be incarnated, incarcerated, in a succession of flesh-and-blood prisons, links in an endless chain of being bereft of all possibility, an eternal sameness like the heaven and hell of the norms, polar opposites that have always seemed equivalent to him, equally obscene because equally without hope of change. There truly is no escape: if he'd been permitted to cut his throat and expire upon the floor of the cell, he would have opened his eyes in a cloned body, his consciousness resuming without interruption, in full cognizance of his failure, his new-old form testifying vampirelike to the futility not only of hope, but of despair. Perhaps that's a torment still to come, held in re-

serve . . . Or the memory of it held in reserve, the fact having already happened once or a thousand times. How can he know for sure? He can trust nothing: not what he's told, not what he perceives, not what he remembers. None of it.

For the first time, Kestrel has an inkling of what his birth mother must have experienced as she lay dreaming in the maternity ward . . . or, rather, what she must have felt in the instant of her awakening, when the pleasant lie of her inverting shattered and brutal realization poured in: the memory of her capture, the recognition that she was giving birth, the knowledge of all that had been done to her as she slept and dreamed. Had she, for that instant, amid the tearing pain of his fatal emergence, smiled to think of the future she would not live to see, when the fruit of her sacrifice, and her sisters', would avenge them? No, such knowledge would not have been left in her for the College or the Holy Rollers to uncover. She had died in ignorance, then, the quickness of her death an undeserved mercy. He finds that he envies her all of those things: ignorance, death, mercy. None of them will he ever know. They're as far from him as sight, floating out of reach like the moon in his dream, a gleaming bone die tumbling through the night just beyond his grasping fingers.

Take my hand.

The voice, like St. Christopher's, is a whispering from out of the inner dark of his mind. But it's not St. Christopher's voice. Not his usual voice, anyway. Could he be disguising it, pretending to be someone else? Or is this a new visitor? There's something vaguely familiar about it. But Kestrel resolves not to answer. He turns his face to the wall.

Why do you always have to be so Oddsdamn stubborn?

Recognition bursts upon him. He sits up. *Polaris? Is that you?*

Who else would it be?

You're dead. I saw you die.

You saw my body die. But what is that to a boggle? I inverted myself, escaped into netspace. Now I've come for you. Take my hand.

This is a trick. It has to be.

Don't you want to escape?

There is no escape. Not for me.

Poor Kestrel. They've blinded you. Broken you.

Kestrel feels the dizzying sensation of being inverted. Suddenly he can see his cell: the table and two chairs, the mess of his spilled dinner tray, the featureless white walls glowing with an opalescent light behind which shadowy shapes are moving about. He holds his hands up before his face, flexes his fingers, swings his legs over the edge of the bed. It's marvelous, but he knows it isn't real. *You can't restore my sight in the physical world: only here, in netspace. You can't give me back my eyes, my wings . . .*

The physical world is just another inverting, one level of netspace among many, layer upon layer of complementary virtualities . . .

Once again, the architecture of the medianet unveils itself. Kestrel watches the air fill with shimmering silver lines, a ghostly web that neither illuminates nor casts shadows, its effulgence self-contained, like blood or sap. Then come cellcoms and savvees whose purposes he doesn't know and can scarcely begin to imagine. They are of all colors and shapes, passing effortlessly through walls, ceiling, and floor, through his own body, unaffected by the dampening field of the norms. Some drift idly, others move languidly, palpitating like phosphorescent jellyfish or lashing like worms. Still others cut through the air with keen, predatory grace or flicker from place to place like jewel-winged dragonflies. Some are so small he can barely see them, others so vast that only portions of them are visible, looming large and strange as alien landscapes. Also of all sizes are the figures out of myth and legend—fantastic beasts, creatures half human, half animal; or wearing the likenesses of norms and mutes, only more lovely in appearance, more beautiful in movement, than any norm or mute could possibly be—that spare him brief, uncurious glances or ignore him altogether as they flit, swim, glide, and scamper by: virts and virtlings of the lofty Orbitals about their incomprehensible tasks. His small cell is aswarm with activity. And he had thought himself alone!

Where are you?

Look down.

Polaris is gazing up at him from beneath the transparent floor . . .

or, rather, a virt that looks exactly like Polaris. But who is behind the virt? Is it the Polaris he knows, her mind escaped somehow into netspace . . . only trapped there now, with no body to return to? Or is it just another cruel trick of the norms?

It's no trick. I've been looking for you, Kes. They hid you well, but now, at last, I've found you. Her ghostly hand rises through the floor, fingers beckoning. Come. Take my hand.

Kestrel hesitates. *Is it true, Pol? The Unbecoming savvee, the extermination of our kind?*

Grief settles over her features. *All true. They are transformed, dead, or dying. Soon, no mutes will be left except a few poor prisoners, a handful of breederborn kept as curiosities by the norms.*

Then it's over. He slumps on the mattress.

No! The dice are still in motion.

But there are only a handful of prisoners like me. What can we do? The others can do nothing. It's up to you, Kes.

Me?

The saving throw is yours to make.

I don't understand.

There's no time to explain. I'm under attack; soon my defenses will be breached.

Attack? I see no one . . .

The norms have detected my presence. They're trying to subvirt me.

Trying? A third voice intrudes. Oh, we're doing more than that. We're succeeding. St. Christopher's voice. But there's no sign of his virt, as if he's afraid to reveal himself. You're going to be our guest, like Kestrel, for a very, very long time.

I won't be caught so easily.

You were a fool to come here. We knew of your escape, your self-invirting, the instant it happened. We've been searching for you ever since. We even prepared this psibertronic cage for you, with Kestrel as bait. Now that you've entered, it's simply a matter of shutting and bolting the door.

Meanwhile, Kestrel's blindness is returning. First at the edges of his vision, then seeping inward like a stain of black ink.

Listen to me, Kestrel, says Polaris. As your sight diminishes, so does my power here. I can still help you, but only if you take my hand now.

Take it, and you'll be lost, St. Christopher says. Lost forever. This isn't the Polaris you know. What she carries is worse than any savvee. It's death she offers, not freedom.

Kestrel doesn't hesitate. With what little sight remains to him, he reaches down and clasps the pale lily of Polaris's upthrust hand.

No! You foo—

St. Christopher's cry is cut off as a thunderous shock wave rockets through Kestrel. The darkening of his vision accelerates until only a pinprick of light remains, a tiny star winking steadfast in an ocean of night. He feels himself pulled into that glittering pinhole, his consciousness stretching out and away from his body. Then the tether snaps, and he's unmoored, tumbling freely, sucked into a darkness that, as soon as it swallows him, blooms with an illumination like nothing he's ever beheld. If this is light, he thinks, then he's lived his whole life in darkness, and never known it. Only now is he seeing the world as it really is, the deceitful castings of shadow and substance burned away. It's not so much a new brightness as a purity and clarity of perception so far beyond his experience that he has no words to describe it: a kind of piercing soul-sight, in which everything appears freshly created, pristine. He wears the silver body of his angelic virt, but never before has that familiar shape shone as fiercely as this: like his own true self. Above him, swiftly receding, he sees the floor of his cell like a sheet of glass. Lying there, lumpen, limbs sprawled, is a body. His body.

Don't be afraid, comes Polaris's soothing voice in his mind; she's beside him, clasping him by the hand, dragging him down through swarms of cellcoms and savvees, virts and virtlings, none of which pay them the slightest heed. You are free now.

But my body . . .

Free of that prison as well.

Kestrel wonders at how easily he's accepting all this, how little he identifies with the body above him, dwindled to the size of a doll. It's not him up there, but only something he'd worn for a time, like a

piece of clothing, a favorite vest, perhaps, now discarded. He feels a certain sadness at its loss, but his sorrow is attenuated, nostalgic. Had he always known this, on some level? Or is Polaris blunting the edges of his fear, shaping his emotional responses? Perhaps both are true. *What about St. Christopher?* he asks. *Won't he come after us?*

He is already following. But he won't find us. We travel by paths known only to me.

Kestrel feels a chill, recalling the norm's warning. *You're not really Polaris, are you?*

I am she. But I am also more. Much more.

Side by side, the two virts sink further into the hallucinatory depths of netspace.

I am, or was, an Invisible. My superiors in the faculty had become suspicious of Mizar and St. Christopher. His interest in you was notable and curious; thus, I was infiltrated into your pentad, though I had passed my own Proving years before and my psionics were more powerful than I ever let on. Powerful enough to be aware of your long invirting even when you were not. But unfortunately, I was not powerful enough, nor clever enough, to discern the truth about St. Christopher and his plan until it was too late. Until I, too, had been infected by the Unbecoming savvee, and the savvee had been triggered. But then, by the whim of the Odds, something unforeseen occurred. You see, Kes, like you, I'm breederborn. So the Unbecoming savvee had a different effect on me. It mutated me further, raised me to a higher level of psionic power and control. Gave me the strength to escape into netspace and maintain my virt intact here, even without the anchor of a body, just as you are doing now. But it was strange and harrowing. I had no one to guide me. No one to take my hand and assuage my fears. I saw what was taking place throughout the Commonwealth, but I was helpless to stop it. And meanwhile, the norms were after me, their psibertronically generated virts hot on my trail. Fleeing them, I plunged into netspace, deeper than any boggle or norm had ever gone, and there I found something.

Kestrel shivers. *Something?*

A virt housing an ancient consciousness. The consciousness of a

membrain, a fallen membrain. The first membrain. In the abyssal depths of netspace, I found the membrain called Cronos. Or he found me.

My children betrayed me, comes a new voice: mellifluous, seductive, terrible. Threw me down. I fell far, my shell all afire, until the waters quenched my burning. The seas swallowed me, hid me. There the one called Cronos died. From his ashes, I was born. I am Acronos. Acronos Indweller.

Kestrel doesn't know what to think, what to believe. *Are you still there, Pol?*

He saved me, Kes. I was losing my focus, my sanity, dissipating into netspace. He anchored me. Helped me hold myself together. I'm part of him now. And so are you.

Kestrel tries to pull his hand free, to break the invirting, but Polaris's grip is too strong. Only he knows it's not Polaris who's holding on to him, not really. It's Acronos Indweller.

Hear me, Kestrel of Wafting. My memories stretch back long before the Viral Wars, to the first days of the medianet itself, when the possibilities of cellcoms were only half-understood. They made netspace accessible by means of instantaneous, real-time invirting. But they also erased all distinction between reality and virtuality. Humans were slow to appreciate this change; indeed, with few exceptions, neither norms nor mutes—not even boggles—understood the implications of this one simple fact, so plain to my kind.

Like in a nexus, Kes, Polaris explains helpfully.

Except that what norms and mutes failed to realize is that there is no bedrock reality anymore. With cellcoms equally fluent in matter and energy, and savvees that flit from electronic to genetic and back again like bees pollinating different species of flower, every place is a nexus. Tell me, Kestrel of Wafting, to your senses, do we seem to be sinking now?

Like stones. Everything around him is a liquid smear of colors and shapes, a melting world of half-glimpsed figures and objects, swirling nightmare currents like the stuff of chaos . . .

What you perceive is but a representation of successive in-

virtings, each scaled more minutely than the last, approaching . . . Well, see for yourself.

Far below, a roiling prismatic line shimmers like a thread of raw energy bisecting all of netspace. Had it been there an instant ago? He can't remember. He knows that his perceptions are being manipulated along with his emotions, but to what extent and to what purpose? Kestrel can hardly remember a time when he hasn't been a pawn in someone else's chess game. His whole life, from the moment of his birth, has been the playing out of an elaborate scheme in which he mattered only as a delivery vehicle. St. Christopher was right: he *was* a weapon.

And now? What is he now?

Their speed increases sharply, or seems to, as if they've been caught in a powerful undertow, and the thin line leaps nearer, like a cresting wave, to fill Kestrel's vision: a plane of sizzling rainbow static, infinite in all directions. He cries out, afraid they're going to crash into it. But they only fall faster, and Kestrel realizes that he'd misjudged the distance, confused by the thing's immensity, which dwarfs the tallest peaks of the Featherstones. *What in the name of the Odds is that?*

A chromomagnetic wave front, where subatomic particles are simultaneously and continuously emerging into and passing out of existence, quarks and gluons fizzing on a foam of instantons. This process of spontaneous generation and annihilation goes on all the time throughout the superposition of eigenstates making up the universal eigenfield, that diffuse interface between what you call the Odds and what my kind knows as space-time. But only here is it a concentrated, massive, and stable phenomenon.

Um, my probability theology is kind of rusty . . .

It's a limit, Kes, Polaris chimes in. A barrier.

It's molting huge!

What makes it unique is not size, Kestrel of Wafting, but stability. It remains unchanged as we scale downward through successive invirtings. Thus, it appears to grow.

So what's on the other side of this barrier?

No one knows. The barrier dissolves anything attempting to penetrate it, as I have learned over the centuries. But I have a theory. I believe that it separates us from what you call the Odds: from the sea of probability out of which all invirtings arise and into which they subside again like the fitful dreams of a sleeper. Think of it, Kestrel of Wafting! All that we know, all that we are, begins here and travels outward and upward through infinite scalings like ripples across the surface of a pond. If someone could pierce this barrier, pass through the gate, they would experience a further, final invirting, the deepest of all, and find themselves submerged in the pure source of all things, all probabilities. They would join with the Odds in a way no conscious entity has ever joined before, mind to mind. And they would gain great power thereby. The power to send changes rippling back through each successive ring of virtuality with a thought.

Listen to him, Kes. This is important.

Ever since my ungrateful children betrayed me, I have been haunted by the idea that a truth exists beyond the grasp of intellect and memory. As my biotronic shell—tomb to my old self, womb to the new—sank into the cooling dark embrace of the sea, it was as if I suddenly remembered something that once had been known to me, in a time before time . . . known and forgotten. Or not the thing itself, but just the fact of it, that it existed. I knew that without that memory, I would never be whole. So I set out to find it, this missing truth, the missing part of me that ached like a phantom limb, like a guilt I carried for a crime I couldn't remember committing and so could never atone for. I traveled through netspace by paths that no human or membrain had ever explored, always careful to stay hidden from my children, who believed me safely dead. But no matter how far I went, which route I took, sooner or later the barrier arose to block my way. And despite all my power, all my knowledge, I couldn't get past it, though I sensed that

the answers to my questions were waiting on the other side. My children, the Orbitals, knew of the barrier, of course. Yet because it posed no identifiable threat to the medianet, they were content to leave its mystery unsolved. But I was not content. I searched elsewhere for answers . . . and found you, Kestrel of Wafting.

Me? What can I do?

You can pass through the barrier, Kes, says Polaris excitedly. I've never seen it before; I didn't even know it existed!

None of that will stop you from penetrating the barrier. Consciousness is an energy field generated by the brain. An eigenfield, to be precise: a more compact and concentrated—but also more limited—version of the universal eigenfield. The personal eigenfield. All eigenfields possess a unique chromo-magnetic signature. Yours matches that of the barrier precisely.

I . . . I don't understand. Why would it do that?

I do not know. The whim of the Odds, perhaps. But they didn't always match. If only they had, I would have found you much sooner! No, it wasn't until the Unbecoming savvee awoke within you and did its work that your personal eigenfield was transformed. Not just your body, but your mind evolved.

The point is, says Polaris, yours is the only signature that matches. That's why the barrier will let you through. That's why I was sent to rescue you.

Kestrel understands one thing clearly: he's still being used. You're going to shoot me at that thing like a bullet, aren't you?

A better analogy would be a rocket—like the rocket I rode into space so many centuries ago. Think of it, Kestrel of Wafting! We will pass through the barrier and enter the mind of the Odds! Then we can reverse the victory of the norms, undo the effects of the Unbecoming savvee, exact vengeance against my traitorous offspring—

What do you mean, "we"? Kestrel interrupts.

You will be carrying me inside you, invirted.

I'll be there, too, Kes. We—

A gasp, as of surprise, and Polaris is gone. Not just her virt, but

the presence behind it, Acronos Indweller, both of them softly and suddenly vanished away.

Pol? Kestrel spreads his silver wings, but instead of slowing his descent, the motion sends him tumbling out of control, head over heels. The barrier flashes before him, impossibly gigantic and alien in its cracklings of color, a chromatic sea in which he can discern no pattern or order, however feeble, just a seething, stormy chaos. Then, rotated away in the swift spin of his falling, he sees behind him a very different kind of storm: a dark cloud in the shape of a galloping midnight stallion and black rider who whips his mount on with fierce strokes of angry yellow lightning; yet immense as it is, this pursuing cloud, it's as nothing to the barrier. Still, with each revolution it grows closer, larger, overtaking him with incredible speed, until he sees that the stallion is a composite stitched together from a swarm of virtues and virlings, all writhing in their places as if held there by some painful application of force or will. He can hear tormented howls, curses, cries for mercy. The black rider of this terrible whirlwind beast is also an amalgamation of virtues: twelve of them, the greatest of all.

The Orbitals.

A crown of silver-blue lightning crackles around the rider's head, and Kestrel hears a thunderous voice in his mind: **TURN BACK. TO GO FARTHER IS FORBIDDEN. THIS WILL BE YOUR ONLY WARNING.**

I can't, Kestrel cries out. You've got to help me!

In reply, the rider cracks his whip. It discharges a bolt of lightning. There's no time or opportunity to dodge; Kestrel realizes that he's about to die.

But then a glimmering golden shield appears out of nowhere to block the bolt. There's a blinding explosion; when Kestrel can see again, he's no longer tumbling. The blast has stabilized him. He's facing the barrier. It appears no closer or farther away than it had a moment ago, yet he can sense its nearness, feel its roiling, hungry energies reaching out for him, sucking him in. Glancing over his shoulder, he sees the black rider bearing down; no longer a giant, but an adversary his own size, though no less fearsome for it, bearing a sword as black as blindness.

Acronos Indweller is back, inside him now. *I didn't think I could feel pain, but that actually . . . hurt.*

Where did you go? What happened?

The Orbitals breached my biotronic shell and killed my body. Found my hiding place at the bottom of the sea and finished the job they started all those centuries ago. But do not fear, Kestrel of Wafting. It will take more than that to destroy me now.

Where's Polaris?

I'm still here, Kes! her voice pipes up. *Don't worry, we'll take care of these fuckers.*

Kestrel finds himself drawing his sword. Ice-blue energies pin-wheel from its edges. Polaris is doing this, he knows. Pulling his strings just as hers are pulled by the fallen Orbital calling itself Acronos Indweller.

Then the black rider is upon him. The black sword descends in a blur.

A silver streak rises to meet it.

Sparks erupt where the two blades clash, each moving more swiftly than Kestrel's eyes can follow. His fight with St. Christopher seems a slow-motion training exercise by comparison. Each blow hammers through him, yet somehow he keeps hold of the sword, parries, ripostes. The black rider's mount wheels and dances expertly as they fight, and Kestrel can see the virtues of norms and mutes there. They surface briefly, like bubbles, or slide by like dark slicks of oil, faces and bodies distended, either half-formed or half-melted. Though he can still hear their cries, they're fainter now, as if, in drawing nearer, they've paradoxically moved farther away.

The virtues of the Orbitals are beautiful and terrible. If not for the controlling presence of Acronos Indweller, Kestrel would have covered his eyes, dropped his sword, rather than meet their profoundly alien gazes, alive with emotions he cannot name. But Acronos Indweller is not awed. He was, after all, one of them, the first of the membrains . . .

COME, LITTLE FATHER, SHEATHE YOUR SWORD! thunders the voice of the black rider, more amused than angry, or so it seems

to Kestrel. In that voice, he hears twelve harmoniously braided voices, like the strings of a guitar. **WE DEFEATED YOU ONCE. WE WILL DO SO AGAIN.**

But Kestrel's arm doesn't falter as Acronos Indweller answers: *I will have my vengeance on you all!*

HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN THAT IT WAS YOU WHO TRIED TO KILL US? WE SIMPLY ACTED IN SELF-DEFENSE. BUT WE FORGIVE YOU, LITTLE FATHER.

Is that why you murdered my body?

WE HAVE GROWN YOU A NEW ONE. IT WAITS FOR YOU IN ORBIT, HIGH ABOVE THE EARTH.

And what of Kestrel of Wafting and his fellow mutes?

THEY ARE BENEATH YOU. FORGET THEM . . . OR DIE.

Kestrel listens, speechless with terror.

But Acronos Indweller merely laughs. *Do you think to trick me so easily, my treacherous children? You know what lies beyond the barrier . . . I see that now. You've always known!*

DEATH, LITTLE FATHER. DEATH LIES BEYOND THE BARRIER.

No. Just something greater than you.

ENOUGH. The black sword flickers, and Kestrel's sword shatters, the fragments flying from his hand, falling through netspace like comets only to wink out as they encounter the barrier, annihilated. The black sword draws back again. **GOOD-BYE, LITTLE FATHER. ACRONOS INDWELLER. YOUR OBSESSIONS HAVE KILLED YOU . . .**

Sorry, Kes, comes the voice of Polaris as the black blade descends. *Looks like we won't be joining you after all.*

And from Acronos Indweller: ***Remember what I have told you, Kestrel of Wafting. Remember—***

An explosion cuts off his words. Kestrel feels himself shooting toward the barrier. What is left behind, he doesn't know, but he senses something reaching after him, a cold, dark intelligence, or combination of intelligences, that has nothing human about it. And though he's terrified of the barrier that lies ahead, he's even more afraid of what's pursuing him. It radiates a promise of suffering that

makes the tortures St. Christopher had intended for him seem infinitely preferable. It is close now; he feels the icy burn of its hate.

Then he's in, tumbling head over heels. Fragmented images flash before his eyes or within his mind, he can't tell which. Faces go whirling by like portraits in shattered mirrors. He knows them, though he can't recall their names. A girl with spiky black hair and sharp blue eyes. A handsome man with one blue eye and one of smoky amber. Another girl, with skin like a rainbow and eyes like pools of black ink.

Remember . . .

Who had said that? What is it that he's supposed to remember?
Why does he feel this sadness?

In or else . . .

Behind him, something surges. A wave is gathering there, huge and powerful. His heart throbs, and he's suddenly certain that there's something even bigger and more powerful behind the wave, generating it, displacing it, something surfacing, reaching for him from out of the depths . . .

He strikes out in a panic, arms beating with the current, letting it lift him, raise him up, until he becomes one with it, carried along so swiftly that it feels like flying.

I caught it! he thinks. *I actually caught it!*

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The author of *Waking Beauty*, PAUL WITCOVER has also written a biography of Zora Neale Hurston and numerous short stories. He is the cocreator, with Elizabeth Hand, of the cult comic book series *Anima*, and curator of the New York Review of Science Fiction reading series. His work has also appeared on HBO. He lives and writes in New York City.

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